

## STUDENT-RELATED FACTORS IN THE TIMELY COMPLETION OF UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN WESTERN KENYA

Patrick Kibet Riwoing'ole<sup>1</sup> \*, Robert Kati<sup>2</sup>, Sarah Naliaka Likoko<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student, Kibabii University, Kenya

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, Kibabii University, Kenya

<sup>3</sup> Senior Lecturer, Department of Educational Planning and Management, Kibabii University, Kenya.

### Abstract

*Delayed graduation and rising attrition rates among undergraduate students present persistent challenges for higher education systems globally, and particularly within massified public universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Grounded in Tinto's Theory of Student Departure and Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model, this study examined the relationship between student-related factors specifically academic motivation, time management skills, personal struggles (financial, mental health, and family issues), and university entry readiness and the timely completion of undergraduate degrees in public universities in the Western region of Kenya. Adopting a pragmatic research philosophy and an ex post facto (causal-comparative) mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from  $n = 705$  participants, comprising recent graduates ( $n = 341$ ) and final-year undergraduate students ( $n = 364$ ), while qualitative insights were sourced from four academic deans who participated exclusively in qualitative interviews. Survey instruments demonstrated robust construct validity, with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure ranging from 0.72 to 0.87, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielding significant results ( $p < .001$ ). Simple linear regression analysis revealed that student-related factors explained 73.4% of the variance in timely program completion ( $\beta = .863$ , 95% CI  $[-.808, .918]$ ,  $p < .001$ ), displaying a large effect size ( $f^2 = 2.76$ ), while the scale demonstrated high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ). Descriptive statistics revealed a strong perception of individual agency and behavioral impact, with an aggregate mean score of 4.25 ( $SD = 0.818$ ). Specifically, 95.2% of undergraduates confirmed that academic motivation determines timely degree attainment, while 94.0% highlighted effective time management as vital for maintaining academic momentum. Qualitative thematic triangulation corroborated these patterns, identifying entry preparedness and personal resilience as key enablers, while identifying financial shocks as a severe structural barrier forcing course repetition or temporary deferment. The study concludes that student-related attributes are primary determinants of timely degree completion and recommends strengthening institutional mechanisms regarding academic policies, formalizing peer-lecturer mentorship frameworks, and optimizing financial aid disbursement timelines.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education; Timely Graduation; Academic Motivation; Time Management; Personal Struggles; Kenya.

## 1. Introduction

On-time graduation from undergraduate programs has emerged as a crucial metric for institutional efficiency, accountability, and student success in modern higher education systems. Globally, prolonged completion timelines impose severe financial burdens on families, strain state resources, and limit the socioeconomic mobility of youth (OECD, 2025). Within the African subcontinent, and specifically in Kenya, these dynamics are exacerbated by rapid enrollment growth, commonly referred to as the "massification" of higher education. While massification has democratized access to university education, it has simultaneously introduced severe structural bottlenecks. Public universities face increasing student populations without a corresponding expansion in fiscal allocations, infrastructure, or instructional staff (KIPPRA, 2022). Consequently, delayed graduation rates and escalating student attrition have become systemic vulnerabilities.

While scholars have heavily scrutinized institutional structures as primary drivers of academic persistence, contemporary educational research points toward individual student characteristics, behaviors, and personal circumstances as critical co-determinants. Within this domain, student-related factors refer to the personal attributes, behaviors, and socioeconomic realities that directly influence academic progression and program completion. These include academic preparedness, time management, self-discipline, intrinsic motivation, financial stability, and psychological resilience (Baker, 2021; Hughes & Spanner, 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that student-level deficiencies or strengths in these areas significantly dictate whether an undergraduate maintains continuous academic progress or falls into a cycle of remediation, deferment, and eventual dropout (Baker, 2021; Garcia & Rodriguez, 2024).

Despite the consensus on individual accountability, there remains a critical gap in context-specific literature analyzing how student-related variables operate within the structurally constrained environments of Kenyan public universities. Many state institutions in peripheral regions, such as the Western region of Kenya, contend with distinct socioeconomic realities, uneven access to financial support mechanisms, and varied student support services (Mwangi et al., 2023). Therefore, this study addresses this empirical gap by focusing on this objective: to analyse the effects of student-related factors on students' timely completion of undergraduate programs in public universities in the Western region of Kenya.

## **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

This inquiry is anchored on two foundational pillars of retention theory: Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1993) and the Student Attrition Model proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985). Tinto argues that student persistence is a function of the level of academic and social integration an individual achieves within an institution. In this study, student-related attributes such as academic preparedness, intrinsic motivation, and peer integration represent the primary drivers of this integration. When a student enters the university with strong foundational skills and high motivational alignment, their capacity for deep academic integration increases, strengthening their psychological commitment to the institution and driving persistence.

Complementing Tinto's framework, Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model recognises that non-traditional and environmentally constrained students are highly susceptible to external and personal support structures. The model highlights how non-institutional factors, including financial stability, time management skills, and personal psychological health, act as direct determinants of attrition. When students lack effective self-regulation or encounter abrupt financial shocks, it introduces cognitive and logistical friction, resulting in course repetition or program withdrawal.

## **2. Literature Review**

The connection between individual student behaviors and graduation timelines is a well-documented phenomenon across diverse global higher education contexts. In Western systems, studies highlight student self-regulation and goal commitment as essential pillars of retention. For instance, Roksa and Arum (2020) established that students who possess effective study habits and adequate foundational knowledge experience smoother transitions into higher education and are less likely to encounter academic difficulties that delay graduation. Baker (2021) observed that students with strong prior academic achievement demonstrate higher levels of persistence and are more likely to graduate within the expected timeframe. In terms of behavioral skills, Garcia and Rodriguez (2024) found that students who effectively organize study schedules and prioritize academic tasks exhibit greater persistence and lower dropout tendencies, while intrinsically motivated students remain resilient when faced with academic challenges.

However, international literature also emphasizes that the positive effects of individual motivation are frequently constrained by broader socio-structural issues. In massified systems, Thomas and

Allen (2023) observe that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience cumulative academic and social disadvantages that hinder timely completion. This institutional and external strain is echoed in various global monitoring reports (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2024), which point out that as the costs of education increase in the developing world, students are increasingly vulnerable to education disruption. Financial strain has been associated with interrupted studies, deferred semesters, and prolonged time-to-degree completion, particularly among students from low-income households who are forced to combine academic work with income-generating activities (Oketch et al., 2020).

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, these structural constraints are particularly pronounced. The rapid expansion of university enrollment has outpaced state funding and student support services, leading to overcrowding and diminished access to counseling. In West Africa, Arubuola (2020) demonstrated that student financial insecurity directly undermines academic focus, leading to delayed completion. In East Africa, Simiyu (2020) noted in Uganda that structural limitations pose a significant challenge to completion in a timely fashion, emphasizing that students are increasingly forced to depend entirely on their personal coping mechanisms and financial abilities to excel.

In Kenya, structural shifts and resource challenges continue to alter the educational landscape. Policy evaluations by KIPPRA (2022) have raised concerns over worsening student-lecturer ratios and inadequate digital teaching resources across public universities. While the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) has made financial access possible through its initiatives, persistent financial gaps and delays in disbursement frequently occur, forcing many learners to engage in income-earning activities that conflict with their school work (Mwangi & Ndegwa, 2022). Furthermore, Achieng et al. (2024) found that anxiety, stress, and depression are increasingly prevalent among Kenyan university students due to performance pressures and financial strains, directly impacting concentration and progression. While local scholars such as Shikokoti and Imonje (2023) have verified that financial constraints, intrinsic motivation, and time management skills significantly impact on-time graduation, there is still a clear need for localized, empirically grounded mixed-methods research. This paper addresses that gap by exploring how student behaviors and personal factors link to completion timelines within the public universities of Western Kenya.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Philosophy, Design, and Ethics**

This study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy, which justifies the systematic deployment of mixed-methods research to unpack complex institutional issues. By merging quantitative patterns with qualitative insights, pragmatism offers a comprehensive view of the operational factors influencing undergraduate completion timelines. The underlying framework used was a causal-comparative (ex post facto) research design. This design was chosen because the phenomena under study had already occurred; the independent variables (student-related factors) and the dependent variable (timely completion) were evaluated retrospectively without artificial manipulation (Kothari, 2011; Sekaran, 2016).

A research permit was officially granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) under License No. NACOSTI/P/25/4182098. Additionally, institutional authorization to conduct the study was secured from the respective review boards at Kibabii University. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, strict data anonymization protocols were maintained throughout the study, and participation was entirely voluntary with the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Data analysis was executed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26.0).

#### **3.2 Target Population and Sampling Framework**

The target population spanned four accredited public universities in the Western region of Kenya: Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), Kibabii University, Alupe University, and Kaimosi Friends University. The overall sampling frame consisted of 6,765 individuals. Following the sample determination principles of Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a multi-stage sampling approach was implemented.

First, a census approach was applied at the institutional level to integrate all four public universities within the geographical region. Second, stratified random sampling was utilized to segment the student population into two distinct analytical groups: Recent Graduates ( $N_1 = 3,140$ , yielding a sample size of  $s_1 = 341$ ) and Final-Year Students ( $N_2 = 3,621$ , yielding a sample size of  $s_2 = 364$ ). The universities served as separate strata, ensuring proportional representation across

institutions. Finally, purposive sampling was used to select four academic deans from the respective Schools of Education (one per university) to capture institutional and administrative perspectives. Deans participated in qualitative interviews only and were completely excluded from the quantitative survey analysis, establishing a final quantitative sample of  $n = 705$  students and graduates, alongside a distinct qualitative cohort of 4 deans.

**Table 1: Sampling Frame**

Category	Target Population (N)	Sample Size (n)	Sampling Technique
Recent Graduates (B.Ed, 2024–2025)	3,140	341	Stratified Random
Final-Year Students (Enrolled 2025)	3,621	364	Stratified Random
Academic Deans (Qualitative Only)	4	4	Purposive
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,765</b>	<b>709</b>	

*Source: Author, based on CUE (2025) documentation*

### 3.3 Construct Validity and Reliability Testing

To confirm the suitability of the data structures for factor analysis and establish construct validity, data from the survey groups were subjected to the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The independent construct, Student-Related Factors, was operationalized using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), comprising survey items measuring academic motivation, time management, personal challenges, and entry readiness.

The KMO values for the student-related factors construct exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, ranging from 0.72 to 0.87 across the sub-groups. This indicates a high concentration of common variance and confirms that the items were well-suited for factor analysis. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded highly significant results ( $p < .001$ ) across both samples, confirming that the underlying correlation matrices were fundamentally different from an identity

matrix. To establish internal consistency, the instrument was subjected to reliability analysis; the overall scale showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Regression Analysis of Student-Related Factors and Timely Degree Completion

To test the predictive strength of the independent variable, a simple linear regression analysis was executed with student-related factors acting as the predictor and timely undergraduate program completion acting as the dependent variable. Prior to running the model, linear diagnostic assumptions were assessed and found to be satisfied; normality was confirmed via P-P plots of regression standardized residuals, while homoscedasticity and linearity were verified via residual scatterplots showing no distinct structural configurations.

The regression model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 703) = 1934.52, p < .001$ , explaining 73.4% of the variance in timely degree completion ( $R^2 = .734$ ). Student-related factors emerged as a statistically significant, dominant predictor of completion speeds ( $\beta = .863$ , 95% CI  $[\.808, .918]$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Under Cohen's (1988) baseline criteria, this represents an exceptionally large effect size ( $f^2 = 2.76$ ).

Based on these inferential outputs, the study formally tested the specific null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ):

**$H_0$ : Student-related factors have no significant effect on students' timely completion of undergraduate programs in public universities in the Western region of Kenya.**

Given that  $p < .001$ , which is well below the standard a priori significance threshold of  $\alpha = .05$ , the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) was decisively rejected. The study instead accepted the alternative hypothesis ( $H_1$ ), concluding that individual student attributes, behavioral self-regulation capacities, and personal circumstances are statistically significant, highly potent predictors of timely undergraduate program completion in public universities in the Western region of Kenya.

## 4.2 Descriptive Analysis of Undergraduates' Perceptions

Data gathered from the undergraduate respondents provided an empirical account of how individual attributes and personal constraints influenced academic progression. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for this construct.

**Table 4.12 Student related Factors and Completion (Undergraduates)**

Indicator	Strongly Disagree		Neutral	Strongly Agree		Mean	Standard Deviation
	Disagree	Disagree		Agree	Agree		
The degree of academic motivation determines whether I will finish my studies on time or not.	4	8	6	158	188	4.42	0.736
	1.1%	2.2%	1.6%	43.4%	51.6%		
My time management skills and prioritization skills determine how well I finish my studies in time.	4	9	9	156	186	4.40	0.756
	1.1%	2.5%	2.5%	42.9%	51.1%		
At times, personal struggles (e.g., mental health, financial problems, or family issues) have an effect on my capacity to keep abreast with my studies.	5	21	52	156	130	4.06	0.924
	1.4%	5.8%	14.3%	42.9%	35.7%		
The amount of preparation that I have when starting my university level work affects whether I will finish on time.	3	21	36	183	121	4.09	0.854
	0.8%	5.8%	9.9%	50.3%	33.2%		
<b>Average</b>						<b>4.25</b>	<b>0.818</b>

**Note: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.**  
**Percentages rounded to 1 decimal place. Source: Field Data (2025)**

The aggregate mean index of 4.25 ( $SSD = 0.818$ ) indicates that undergraduate students strongly agree that personal factors, behaviors, and individual competencies play an important role in enabling timely program completion.

Sustained academic motivation emerged as the highest-rated driver within this construct, achieving a mean score of 4.42 ( $SSD = 0.736$ ), with 95.2% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that their level of motivation directly dictated their graduation timeline. This finding suggests that highly motivated students are better equipped to maintain consistent academic engagement, focus, and resilience through institutional and personal obstacles.

Similarly, effective time management and task prioritization skills were rated very highly, yielding a mean score of 4.40 ( $SSD = 0.756$ ), with 94.0% of the participants acknowledging that structured time management was essential for balancing academic responsibilities and graduating on schedule. This quantitative evidence aligns with Garcia and Rodriguez (2024), who emphasize the significance of self-regulated learning and personal motivation in determining progression outcomes.

Undergraduate academic readiness at entry was also found to be a significant determinant of on-time graduation, achieving a mean score of 4.09 ( $SSD = 0.854$ ). A substantial 83.5% of respondents reported that their initial academic preparation influenced their ability to finish on time. This indicates that students who enter public universities with robust foundational knowledge and established study habits adapt smoothly to higher education demands, preventing initial academic setbacks that cause progression delays.

Personal struggles encompassing financial constraints, mental health challenges, and family responsibilities were also recognized as critical barriers to academic continuity, achieving a mean score of 4.06 ( $SSD = 0.924$ ). A total of 78.6% of respondents confirmed that these personal challenges adversely impacted their capacity to keep pace with their studies. The central role of external economic and personal shocks was strongly reinforced by administrative narratives from institutional leaders. As the Dean of University C observed:

*"Financial support is a bottom line to academic continuity in most of the cases because students have to work part time or take a break on studies which may postpone graduation or performance." (Dean, University C)*

### **4.3 Integrated Discussion of Findings**

By integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings, this study demonstrates strong methodological triangulation. The survey results from undergraduate cohorts confirm that internal motivation, systematic time management, entry preparedness, and the effective management of personal struggles are combined determinants of academic persistence. These metrics were further supported by institutional documentary evidence. Academic probation records showed that students experiencing delays were significantly more likely to be on course failure or progression warnings. Conversely, peer counseling logs and attendance records from student support programs revealed that students who actively sought out time-management training and academic support services successfully overcame progression challenges and completed their studies within the stipulated timelines, matching the patterns identified by Davis et al. (2024).

When evaluated through the lenses of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985), these findings show that within public universities in Western Kenya, individual student attributes interact dynamically with broader structural realities. While individual motivation (\$M = 4.42\$) and time management (\$M = 4.40\$) are foundational for maintaining day-to-day progress, they operate within highly volatile financial and institutional ecosystems. Under the pressures of higher education massification, delays in financial aid disbursement and rising costs of living mean that even highly motivated students are frequently forced into a dual role of balancing work and studies (Mwangi & Ndegwa, 2022). This systemic strain explains why personal struggles (\$M = 4.06\$) emerged as an impactful disruptor. When personal, psychological, or financial support networks break down, individual student agency alone becomes insufficient, resulting in involuntary study deferments, retakes, and prolonged graduation timelines.

## **5. Conclusions, Contributions, and Recommendations**

### **5.1 Conclusions**

This study concludes that student-related factors are primary, foundational determinants of timely degree completion in public universities in Western Kenya. The empirical results extend classic models of student retention by proving that in massified and resource-constrained African higher education ecosystems, individual behavioral attributes specifically intrinsic motivation, self-discipline, and rigorous time management act as the primary stabilizing mechanisms for student persistence. While institutional provisions like teaching quality and scheduling are vital, it is the student's individual capacity to manage personal struggles, utilize academic aids, and maintain goal commitment that ultimately transforms institutional entry potential into an on-time graduation milestone.

### **5.2 Contribution to Knowledge**

This study makes the following contribution to higher education research:

- i. It provides localized empirical data on the behavioral and socioeconomic factors influencing undergraduate completion speeds specifically within the unique structural context of public universities in Western Kenya.
- ii. It extends Tinto's (1993) retention framework by demonstrating how individual student self-regulation acts as a critical counterweight to severe external financial and institutional resource constraints in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- iii. It offers actionable metrics for university registries and dean-of-students offices to design targeted, proactive student support interventions and peer-mentorship networks to de-bottleneck graduation pipelines.

### **5.3 Limitations of the Study**

This study contains some limitations that require acknowledgment. Utilizing Likert-scale questionnaire instruments introduces the possibility of subjective self-report bias from undergraduate participants regarding their personal academic speeds and behavioral performance. While efforts were made to enhance credibility through methodological triangulation combining survey data with qualitative interviews, academic probation records, and peer counseling reports this does not fully eliminate the inherent subjectivity of self-reported data.

### **Recommendations**

- i. **Enhance Student Orientation and Academic Policy Literacy:** Public universities should institutionalize comprehensive awareness programs to ensure every entering student is knowledgeable regarding institutional policies on academic aids, progression requirements, and graduation schedules, allowing them to utilize institutional resources effectively.
- ii. **Expand and Institutionalize Peer Mentorship and Time-Management Programs:** Universities should scale up structured peer-mentorship initiatives and academic advising hours specifically focused on equipping students with time-management, prioritization, and self-regulated learning skills.
- iii. **Strengthen Psychosocial and Mental Health Support Systems:** Institutional management must invest in counseling services and holistic student welfare support systems to provide students with effective coping mechanisms for dealing with anxiety, performance pressure, and family obligations.
- iv. **Optimize Financial Aid Allocation and Student Work-Study Frameworks:** The Ministry of Education, university councils, and financial aid bodies like HELB must streamline funding disbursement timelines and expand internal work-study allocations to insulate vulnerable, low-income students from financial shocks that cause study interruptions.

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