

Research Application Summary

Key challenge to timely completion of graduate studies: A case of presentation of satisfactory financial accountability statements by university research teams

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Abstract

Postgraduate research and training programs are viewed as key operational units at universities that are designed to deliver on the advancement of knowledge, scholarship and innovation. Most of the student scholarships and research support for postgraduate level is secured through grants awarded to winning projects/ research teams with a view to generate research outputs as well as increase the pool of trained human personnel. In light of these, several development partners view postgraduate training as a cost-effective approach to delivering desired outputs for building impactful innovation capacity. With the increasing need for human capital to design and guide implementation of research for development, universities in Africa have put in place postgraduate training and research programs. A key challenge that remains for most Masters and PhD Programs at universities in Africa is the issue of timely completion. This has been attributed to several factors but one key aspect that is often under looked is that of the capacity of the university research teams (the Principal Investigator and Co-supervisors of the graduate student as well as the graduate students themselves) to manage accounts and present satisfactory/ acceptable financial statements to grants awarded. In this paper, we analyse this aspect based on data purposively obtained from cohorts of university-based research teams awarded grants for the period 2009 - 2015 under the auspices of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM). The results indicate significant delays with presentation of acceptable accountability statements. While some of the research teams submit on time (these are not captured in the data), the deviations from expected due date are in some cases more than a year (12 months as indicated in the number of days for a submission after eadline with the highest in 2009 being 607 days, 311, 110, 123, 325, and 418, in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2015, respectively). Delayed in accountability are a major cause of delays in project implementation and by implication completion of students' research and training programme. It is important for stakeholders in the postgraduate research and training engagements to make provisions for equipping university research teams to embrace timely accountability.

Key words: Innovation capacity, postgraduate research and training, universities in Africa

Résumé

Les programmes de recherche et de formation de deuxième et troisième cycles sont considérés comme des unités opérationnelles clés dans les universités conçues pour favoriser l'avancement des connaissances, des bourses d'études et de l'innovation. La plupart des bourses d'études et d'appui à la recherche pour les étudiants de troisième cycle sont garantis par des subventions accordées aux projets / équipes de recherche en vue de générer des résultats de recherche et d'accroître le nombre de personnel formé. À la lumière de ces éléments, plusieurs partenaires de développement considèrent la formation postuniversitaire comme une approche rentable pour fournir les résultats souhaités pour le renforcement de capacités d'innovation percutantes. Face au besoin croissant de capital humain pour concevoir et guider la mise en œuvre de la recherche pour le développement, les universités africaines ont mis en place des programmes de formation et de recherche postuniversitaires. Un défi majeur qui demeure pour la plupart des programmes dans les universités en Afrique est la question de l'achèvement des études en temps opportun. Cela a été attribué à plusieurs facteurs, mais un aspect clé souvent sous-estimé est celui de la capacité des équipes de recherche universitaires (le chercheur principal et les co-directeurs de l'étudiant diplômé ainsi que les étudiants diplômés eux-mêmes) à gérer les comptes et présenter des états financiers satisfaisants / acceptables pour les subventions accordées. Dans cet article, nous analysons cet aspect sur la base de données obtenues des cohortes d'équipes de recherche universitaires ayant obtenu des subventions pour la période 2009-2015 sous les auspices du Forum régional des universités pour le renforcement des capacités en agriculture (RUFORUM). Les résultats indiquent des retards importants dans la présentation des comptes financiers acceptables. Alors que certaines des équipes de recherche soumettent à temps (celles-ci ne sont pas prises en compte dans les données), les écarts par rapport à la date d'échéance prévue sont dans certains cas de plus d'un an (12 mois comme indiqué dans le nombre de jours pour une soumission après la date limite avec le plus élevé en 2009 étant de 607 jours, 311, 110, 123, 325 et 418, respectivement en 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014 et 2015). Les retards dans la reddition des comptes sont une cause majeure de retards dans la mise en œuvre des projets et, par conséquent, dans la finition du programme de recherche et de formation des étudiants. Il est important que les parties prenantes dans les engagements de recherche et de formation de troisième cycle prennent des dispositions pour équiper les chercheurs universitaires afin qu'ils rendent compte en temps opportun.

Mots clés: capacité d'innovation, recherche et formation de troisième cycle, universités en Afrique

Introduction

Universities the world over are recognized as institutions established for advancement of knowledge, scholarship and innovation. As indicated in Mutula (2009), postgraduate programmes are considered conduits through which universities develop research capacity and generate the high end skills required for a functional economy and to address the complex issues such adaptation and coping mechanisms to impacts of climate change, food insecurity, natural resources management, etc. It is widely accepted that there is growing need for more African scholars and scientists to contribute to innovation and development on the African continent and to enhance Africa's participation in the knowledge economy (AU, 2014). Many universities in Africa have successfully increased the numbers of Masters and doctoral enrolments and graduates. As a result, the demand for well-prepared supervisors for graduate students has increased to the same degree.

Fortunately, several development partners and institutions have designed and rolled out retooling courses to support the new and growing demand for graduate student supervisors. For example, the

Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at the Stellenbosch University in South Africa is under the Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education (DIES) running an online training program for graduate student supervisors at universities in Africa (Anon., 2018). This effort is supported by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development and coordinated by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the German Rectors Conference (HRK). This and other similar efforts are in response to gaps identified earlier. A number of key challenges have been identified between the supervisor-supervisee relationships in graduate programs at universities in Africa (Mutula, 2009) these include among others:

1. Delays in receiving feedback
2. Lack of guidelines stipulating supervision procedures
3. Poor supervision, i.e., no schedule for meetings, no records of discussions, etc.
4. No mechanisms for redress
5. Supervisors always too busy to meet students
6. Inadequate preparation for postgraduate study
7. Heavy teaching loads for faculty members
8. Engagement in unnecessary administrative assignments

Similarly, a comprehensive study by Pitchforth *et al.* (2012) on “factors affecting timely completion of a PhD: A complex systems approach” revealed several factors (Table 1) that both the supervisors and graduate students should address to secure timely completion.

Two studies (Mutula, 2009; Pitchforth *et al.*, 2012) focused on the student’s limitations that impact on their timely completion of graduate studies. Nonetheless, in a competitive environment for research funds to support graduate studies, we demonstrate in this paper that there are other key factors among these of timely presentation of accountabilities for funds advanced that impact on graduate student’s timely completion. Timely completion is understood as to mean a graduate student finalising their coursework, research and viva voce awaiting and/ or graduated within a period stipulated for the training program.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper were obtained from the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) Grants Unit. RUFORUM operates a competitive grants system as part of a mechanism for attracting and supporting the best research-based training projects. Grants awarded under the RUFORUM Graduate Research Grants (GRG) which is designed to support university-based research teams to design and implement on-farm research leading to training of at least two Masters students were used to obtain relevant data. The GRG projects awarded are expected to be implemented within a period of two years (24 months), with an allowance of 6 six months for projects start-up and wind-up activities. The reporting schedule for both the Narrative reports and financial reports is as indicated in Table 2

Table 1. Selected factors affecting timely completion of graduate students as presented in Pitchforth *et al.* (2012)

Factor	Definition
Time management skills	The ability of the student to plan and prioritise tasks to meet deadlines set by the university or supervisors
Discipline expertise	The knowledge of the student regarding their discipline at the time of enrolment
Writing and research skills	The student's ability to clearly communicate their thoughts in writing and research management skills at the time of enrolment
Domestic circumstances	The living arrangement of the student – this may vary, but whether it is conducive depends on the student
Emotional state	How the student feels about life in general at any period during their degree
Continuity of study	Whether the student is returning to study after a period of time, or continuing on directly after previous degree
Personal circumstances	The family and social circumstances of the student – this is broadly defined as the continuity of study, emotional state and domestic circumstances
Financial circumstances	The financial position of the student – this is defined as the students ability to meet their financial obligations
Attitude	The student's perspective of how to approach challenges relating to their degree
Personal aspects	The collection of all factors related to a student's non-academic life.
Peers and researchers	The presence and helpfulness of other graduate students and researchers collectively
Research environment	The general culture of research and physical environment in which the student exists
Supervision experience	The experience of the supervisor with supervising postgraduate students – this may be judged by the number of students previously supervised or the length of time spent actively supervising students
Research project	All aspects of the student's degree related to the specifics of their research project. This is broadly defined as their interest, written research type, supervisor and topic
Research niche	The specificity of the student's chosen thesis topic. This may be determined by the number of substantive areas in which the student considers their work relevant or the breadth of literature review (as judged by the number of publications and journal included) required to establish a theoretical base.

Table 2. Example of Reporting and funds disbursement schedule for RUFORUM GRG Projects awarded as at 1st November 2014

Report/ Required	Due date of submission
After receipt of signed Grant award letter and a request	Within a period of 2 weeks after for funds endorsement of grant award letter
6 months report: Narrative report + Financial accountability	1st May, 2015
12 months report: Narrative report + Audited financial statements	1st November, 2015
After receipt of 6 months progress report, 12 months narrative report and audited financial statements and a formal request for funds	Within a period of three weeks after submission of reports
18 months report: Narrative report + Financial accountability	1st May, 2016
24 months report: Final report + Audited financial statement	1st November, 2016
30 months report: Project Exit reports	1st May 2017

For GRG projects awarded for the period 2009 – 2015 the number of days for projects that submitted the 12 months reports after the given deadline as specified in the grant award letter was calculated. As part of ethical expectations from granting agencies, the title of the project, project identification numbers, names of the respective research team as well as their departments/ university are not disclosed in the data presented. Similarly, the data presented represent deviations in terms of number of days from the 12 months due date for project reporting timelines but the focus of interest in the results and discussion section is not necessarily pointing at individual projects but rather the trend in reporting delays.

In addition to working out the delays in terms of days after due date for 12 months reporting, the authors also used selected quotes in response to reminders to the different research teams to submit financial reports. The quotes are added to arrive at a thematic strand that explains the reason(s) for observed delays.

Results and discussion

The results (i.e., number of days from due date of submission at 12 months of reporting) are presented in Figures 1a – f. The data reveals that 16 projects, 22, 11, 11, 17 and 19 for the years 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2015, respectively submitted reports after the 12 months due date. The 12 months for the RUFORUM GRG projects implementation timeline is very critical because it represents the second disbursement of funds for a project that has cleared the expected reporting as indicated in Table 2. The delay range in terms of days is between 2 days (see Fig. 1c) to 607 days (see Fig. 1a). A statistical range of 605 days implies a period of 16 months over and above the 12 months when the report was expected. Besides, 605 days represents 20 months in addition to the 24 months scheduled for Master's programme. Without satisfactory financial reporting the second disbursement of funds is not effected and this becomes a defining moment that triggers further delays. There is a decrease in the range across the years which indicates improvement.

Indeed as observed by earlier studies in literature, factors such as intense engagements in academic leadership, heavy teaching loads, resources availability among many others (Bair and Hanworth, 2005; Mutula, 2009; Pitchforth *et al.* 2012) influence timely completion of graduate students. To add to the list, the results in this paper also convincingly indicates the failure on the part of the research team and the Principal Investigators in particular to comply to timely reporting and particularly the submission of satisfactory financial statements in order to allow for seamless financial flows to facilitate implementation of research activities on time. Some of the constraints leading to delays in submission of accountability can be added from the quotes in Table 3.

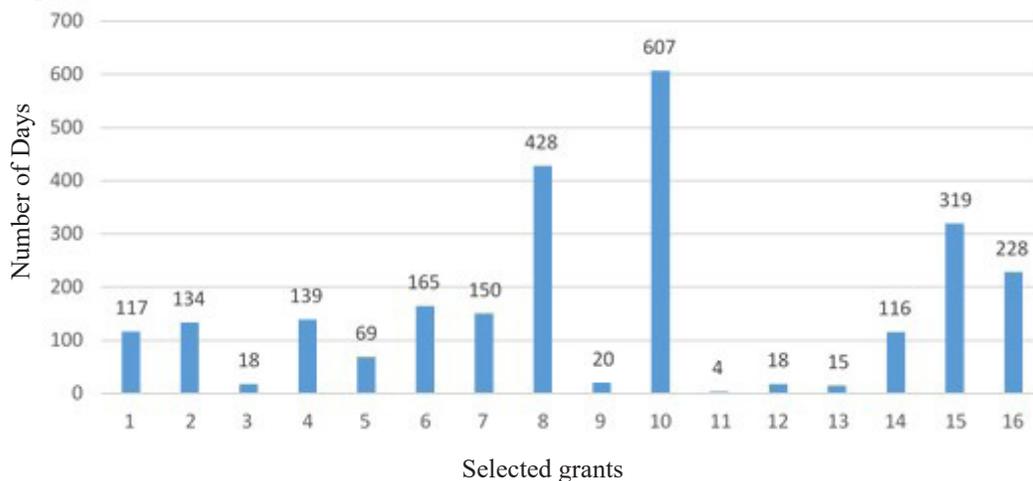


Figure 1a. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2009.

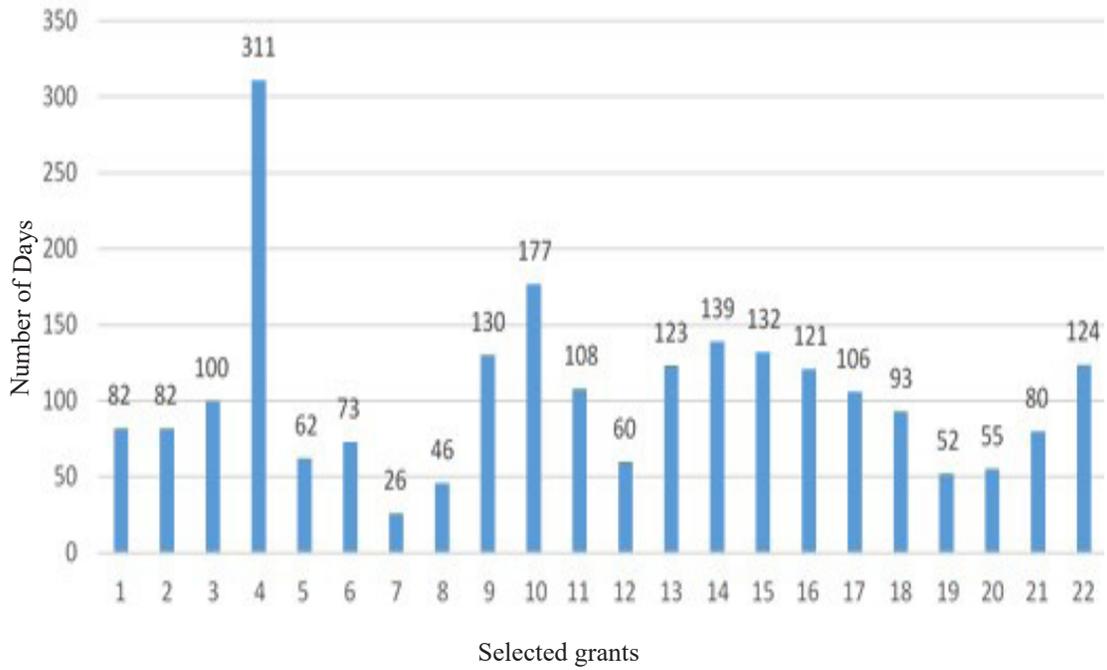


Figure 1b. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2010.

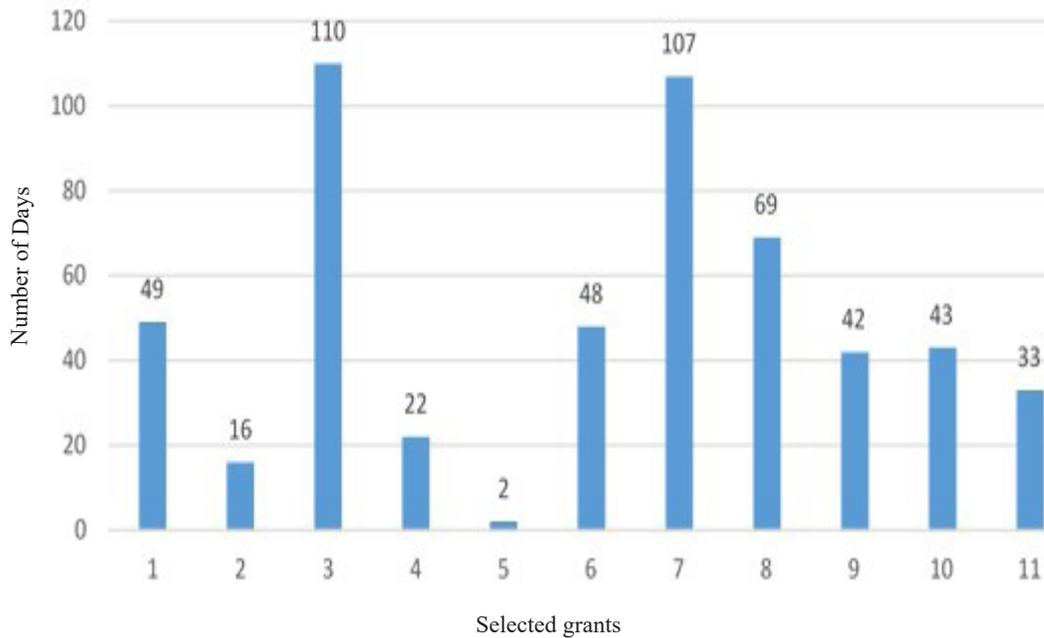


Figure 1c. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2011.

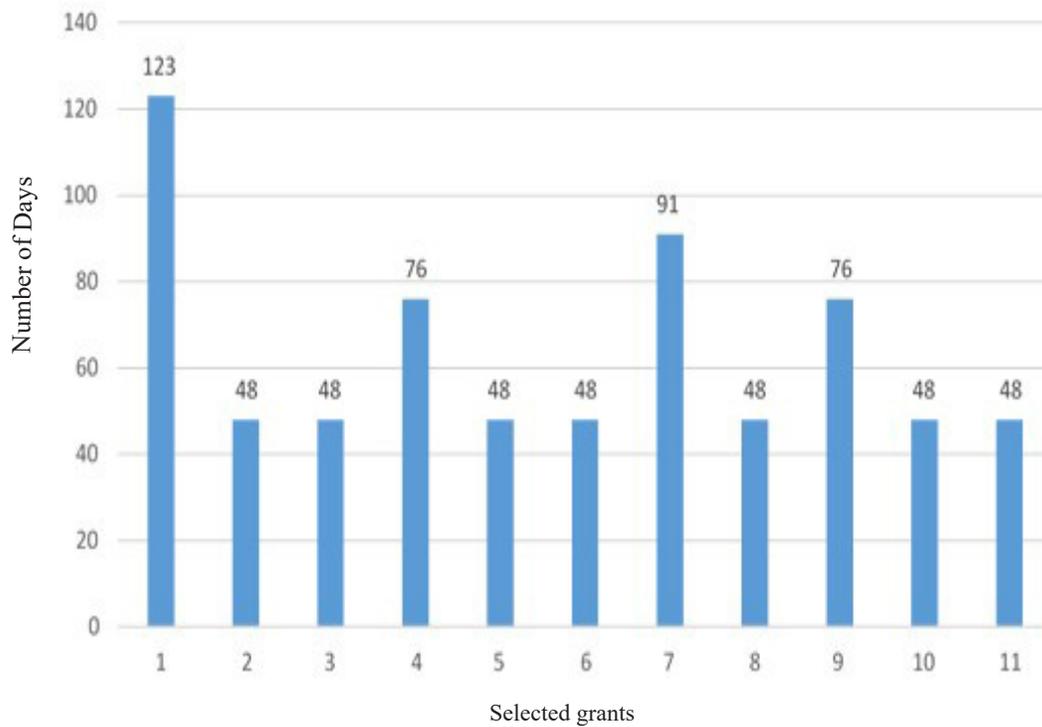


Figure. 1d. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2012.

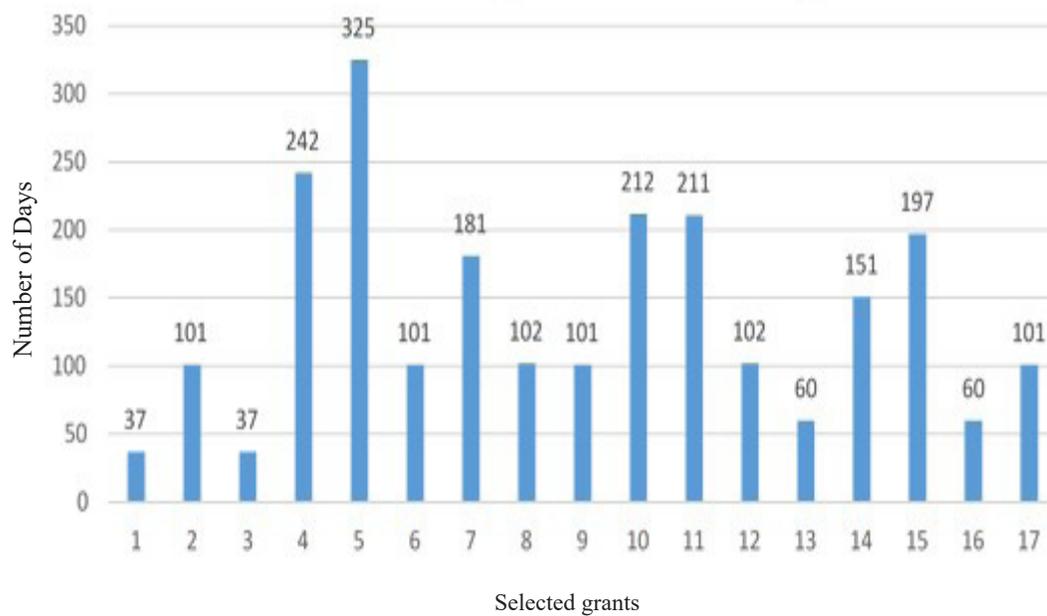


Figure 1e. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2014.

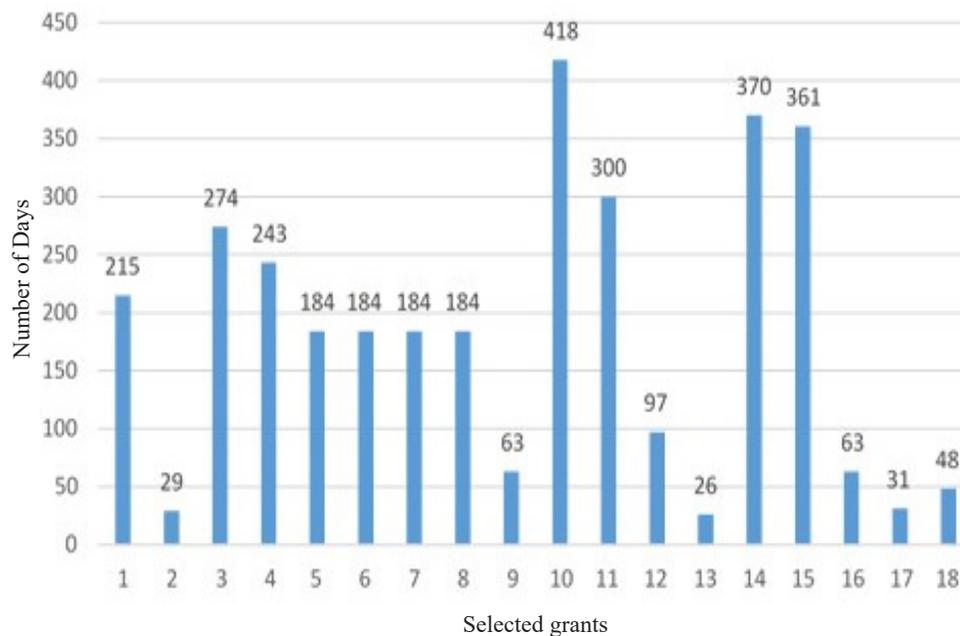


Figure 1f. A graph showing the number of days delayed by the PIs after 12 months due date to submit their grant accountabilities in the year 2015.

Conclusion and recommendations

Graduate studies are not only a life and career enhancing activity for students, but also a vital component of research and scholarship that facilitates effective sharing and dissemination of knowledge for application in society. Graduate student support may come from a variety of sources such as Graduate Teaching Assistantships, scholarship funding from the Faculty of Graduate Studies, internal and external scholarships and bursaries as well as research funds acquired by the advisor/supervisor (designated as Research Assistantships to grants). Whatever the funding source, accountability is important and it is the expectation of funding agencies and grant awarding bodies that universities will through the faculty and support team engaged on a project submit accountabilities on time. As indicated above, this is unfortunately not always the case and this puts the research team and the institutions they serve in disrepute. First they fail to comply with reporting timelines and secondly, the direct consequence of this is delayed completion on the part of the graduate student(s) attached to the project in question. It is important to build the capacity of universities to address this concern.

Funding agencies are increasingly embracing the Disbursement Linked Indicators (DLIs) and Results Linked Indicators (RLIs) to guide disbursements and cost-effective performance/ implementation of project activities. For the DLIs and RLIs, the release of funds is contingent on attainment of indicators set out in the process of project preparation as opposed to release of funds based only on submission of satisfactory accountabilities. Based on the experiences from the RUFORUM Graduate Research Grants universities should consider (a) equipping their internal audit offices and ensure adequate capacity to effectively manage the increasing project-based research funded activities; and, (b) establish grants and research management units to support research teams at universities to articulate as well as follow up in timely manner obligations outlined in contract agreements (e.g., grant award letters).

Table 3. Themes that explain delays in financial reporting adduced from explanations presented by RUFORUM GRG Research Teams

Quote extracted from responses from Research Team	Adduced themes linking to delays in reporting
“There have been some delays in obtaining the Final Finance Audit Report from the university bursar that I expect to get today or tomorrow. Then I will submit the required documents”	Internal Audit process delays
“Thanks for the communication. I will consult finance office on the issue of the outstanding provisions amount in question”	Laxity to comply with grant award
“Thanks, and for clarification the process has not changed. It is as per the Grant Award letter except in your case, at the time of submission of 12 months you had used less than 20% of your budget for year one and still had a balance against which we could not honour your request for second disbursement of funds”	Burn rate issues and capacity to fast track activity implementation
“Thanks for the quick response. I did not check in the online platform the RUFORUM Information Management System (RIMS) for this response after the automated RIMS message I received regarding the report. As was the case for the 12 Month report, our Accounts cannot provide an audited report by 31 December 2016. We are shutting down for Christmas on 14th December 2016 and will re-open on 9th January 2017 implying that there will be no activity during this period. I was hoping to submit the unaudited financial report and narrative by 14th December before the University shuts down”	Institutional calendar vis-à-vis project schedule
“Delays with student’s recruitment will certainly impact on timely completion of your project. I advise you engage the students to fast track research components of the project as they undertake coursework at the sometime. In terms of Budget, I notice that you have a significant balance and have utilised less than 10% of the 1st disbursement of funds. With this, will defer your requisition for 2nd disbursement and review expenditure against budget based on your next reporting period (18 months report due 31 Dec. 2016)”	Burn rate issues and capacity to fast track activity implementation
“We are striving to get the audited report to you on time, but I am afraid we are also faced with clashes with other competing tasks for the Accountant and auditor my university and also tight deadlines for marking examinations. I would therefore like to kindly request for some extension and we shall get back to you by mid-June”	Capacity of auditors to cope with demands for audit reports
“I write to sincerely thank RUFORUM for awarding us research grants under the GRG programme. Specifically, I appreciate your continuous engagement and your availability to support throughout the project period. Sorry, there may have been some weaknesses in reporting yet on the flip side, the project has also produced numerous positive results”	Laxity to comply with grant conditions
“I will get the financial report verified by the internal audit, I think they must have forgotten to I stamp as it was prepared by grants office and check by the auditor”	Internal Audit process delays
“Sorry for the delay on this...things are moving as far as I understand but at a very slow pace One document that is needed and I don’t think we still have it is the Grant Award Letter we signed for the project. By any chance do you have a copy that could send to us?”	Internal Audit process delays and laxity of grant award conditions

Similarly, to better the situation, it is in order for development partners and grant awarding agencies to consider mounting short courses in project management for faculty and support staff, especially since the current retooling courses only focus on aspects of academic supervision and less or no modules on project management (and Financial Management in particular).

We add issue of mentorship and building a community of practice (what role can RUFORUM play in this). Also orientation PIOM).

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