

# The pains of pursuing a masters programme

Allegations of sexual harassment, absentee supervisors and moonlighting have cast doubt on the quality of higher education in Kenya. Ruth Mwhaki and Njoroge Wachai investigate the agonies that post graduate students have to endure.

They come in droves, dignitaries and ordinary folks. It's a carnival fenced by those who hunger for knowledge. It takes years of sacrifice characterised by braincracking episodes.

The climax of the tortuous journey to the pinnacle of academic feat is an event that merely lasts two hours as an annual rite - the graduation ceremony.

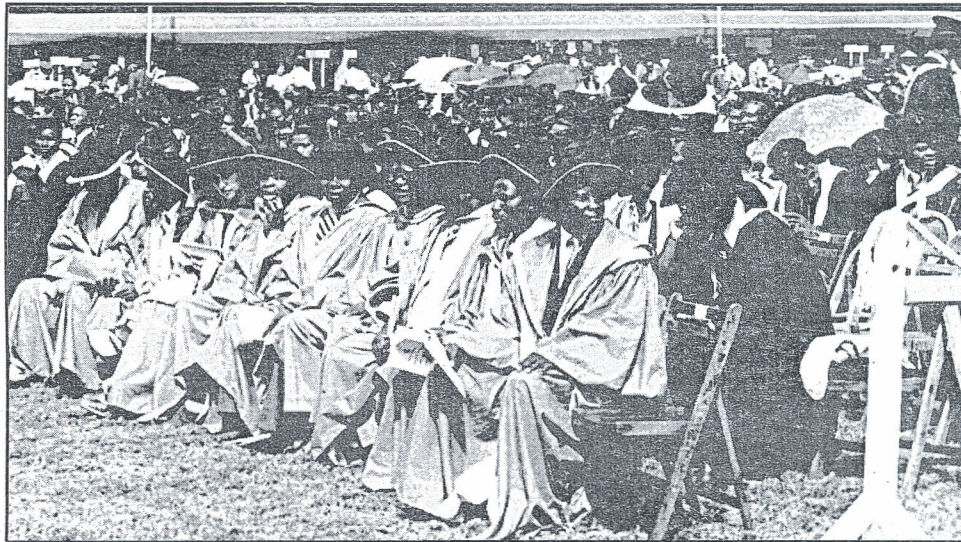
They are granted the power to add and to do all that appertains to their degrees and diplomas."

The President, who is also the chancellor of all public universities, presides these ceremony. The ceremony paves way for graduands to resume post-graduate studies.

But take caution before filling in application form for post-graduate studies. You might save the \$1,500 application fee. If you do not have Job's patience, you have no business undertaking a master's programme at the University of Nairobi, one of the oldest and most respectable public institution of higher learning in Kenya.

It might take a lifetime for your proposal for thesis work to be accepted. For some students, studies in masters programme have ended at proposal stage; for others acceptance of proposal have been after numerous attempts.

Although the scenario varies from one department to another, the picture is gloomy in the entire University.



A graduation ceremony at the University of Nairobi. The struggle to join the men and women of letters at the front row is agonising. (File picture)

According to a student at the Kikuyu campus, frustration from supervisors has forced some students to abandon the course. Some supervisors are not committed while others are slow in reading through the proposals.

For masters students at Kikuyu Campus it is a cry of discrimination. They are required to write a thesis with no option of doing projects like other departments. They are also expected to defend their proposals twice, at the department and faculty levels. More worse is the fact that the process is regrettably slow, it can take a year after submission before one is called to defend it. The source cited a case of a student who gave in his proposal in January this year, but is yet to receive feedback.

According to the university's procedure, the approval of a project proposal is a prerequisite for commencement of any research work.

Students attribute the lecturers apathy to Masters students to a number of factors.

A number of lecturers are said to have multiple jobs or are constantly outside the country, making them ineffective. Casualties of such a scenario are students taking a course in International relations. Ken, who only wanted to be identified by one name, says, "the faculty has only four lecturers who are taking the diploma, masters' regular and parallel group. Only two act as supervisors as the others are not devoted."

Ken, who enrolled in 1997, is not sure of graduating as his supervisor left the country and may not be back until later in the year. Their first year was extended by four months to allow a lecturer complete his work. Last year, for instance, only four out of 12 regular students graduated with none from the 16 parallel students.

The situation is worse for foreign students. The language issue and adjustment to the new environment helps to lengthen their stay. At Upper Kabete campus, a Burundian and an Ethiopian student have tasted the hospitality of Kenya. The Ethiopian has been at

the campus for 15 years, while his Burundian counterpart has been around for five years.

Although a masters programme takes two years, the lengthy time taken to finish leaves those who take double the time surprisingly relieved. And for a reason. Jane Ambuka who defended her thesis for Msc (horticulture) in March this year is assured of graduating this year. Even though she joined the college in 1997 she is upbeat that she has not taken too long. "I have finished within good time considering that most finish after five years." In the faculty, only one graduated out of five last year in the 1996 group.

While most students blame the supervisors for their predicament, others attribute their success to the lecturers constructive criticisms. "The supervisors got me thinking, and made me work hard," says Jane. She was assigned three supervisors.

At the department of horticulture, there was no record of delay of course work as most lecturers finished their work in time.

Apart from the lecturers' sluggishness, other problems abound. Students taking plant breeding are expected to plant crops for two seasons and

uncontrollable conditions like rainfall can cause a delay. None of the four students taking course has submitted their thesis. It takes minimum of five years to complete.

The students cannot be absolved of blame. Some of them combine their studies with work making it impossible to finish projects within recommended period. Jane admits that she is lazy and after collecting data, she got a part time job last year, which she admits compromised her studies.

Allice Mwaniki, an agriculture student started the course in 1997 but has not defended her thesis. She says she took up a job due to frustrations after it took too long before she was called to defend it.

Students sponsored by the university, other organizations claim they take part-time jobs when there is a lapse in financing. University gives sponsorship for two years, first year is automatic but the second year sponsorship is suspended until the proposal is proved. The delay in the approval has for many to take up jobs.

To circumvent the delay, some students have turned to giving sexual favours. But it is not rosy. In Kikuyu, a source intimated that a supervisor misled a female student in to selection after a sexual encounter.

The proposal was rejected at the departmental defense stage as the topic was not within the scope of the department. The other supervisor was hard on her especially after learning the affair. She was forced to design a new proposal.

In some instances, other unorthodox methods have been employed. A student who was taking a course in M.A (Literature) put a knife between the proposal after he had been frustrated by the supervisor. The supervisor picked and the proposal went through very easily.

But is the effort worthwhile? A master student, Jane Ambuka, who attended a job interview with four other master's graduates, was dismayed when a diploma holder was selected. Although she is currently lecturing at the college on voluntary basis, she hopes that efforts will pay someday.

It will be another colourful celebration year as many will turn to congratulate efforts of the graduands. The joy of the moment will blind the pains of the long journey.