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**FACTORS AFFECTING GRADUATE COMPLETION  
OF THE MASTER'S THESIS AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST**

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*ABSTRACT*

*This study which was a descriptive survey, was basically to find out the factors that affected the completion of the master's thesis at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana. The primary purpose of the research was to identify factors that might be hindering master's degree students from completing their theses, thereby either delaying or forgoing the successful completion of the degree.*

*The participants in this study were "Successful Thesis Graduates" (STGs), "All-But Thesis" students (ABTs) who were enrolled between the years 1989 and 1993 and lecturers who served as thesis supervisors within the same period.*

*The five most significant factors identified as obstacles to completion of the thesis in order of importance were : (1) lack of books and other relevant materials; (2) lack of financial resources; (3) students' lukewarm attitude or lack of seriousness; (4) supervisors' delay in vetting work submitted by students; (5) students' work demands or combining thesis work with other jobs.*

**Introduction**

It has become almost an academic axiom that any university desiring to grow and to mature should have a graduate programme. It is for this reason that the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana after its establishment in 1962 and as a fully-fledged University in 1971, took the steps towards academic excellence and prestige by expanding her programmes to include master's and doctoral degrees.

The master's degree programme offered at the University of Cape Coast involves courses in various branches of learning leading to the award of Master of Education (M.Ed.), Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Science (M.Sc) as well as Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) in Education, Arts, Social Science, Agricultural Science and Science.

The M.A/M.Sc/M.Ed full-time programmes span over 12 calendar months, three of which would be

used for a project work and would include research methods. The M.Phil full-time programme on the other hand spans over 24 months and requires two semesters of course work followed by two semesters of research culminating in submission of a thesis (Brochure on Postgraduate Studies, 1993/95).

One realises that an important aspect of the master's degree programme is the stress on research and thesis writing. According to Grigg (1965), "graduate education as initially conceived in the U.S. had as its goal the training of advanced students as research scholars in an academic environment which stressed the search for and transmission of knowledge within a community of scholars" (p.20).

The importance of research cannot be underestimated. Through research, the University is able to fulfill its basic functions of the creation of knowledge, teaching and community service. It is also important to note that, it is through research that some major scientific discoveries and inventions are made thereby helping humans to overcome some of the many problems confronting them in the environment.

The master's degree is also very important because the traditional programme for the PH.D degree, as it has evolved in most graduate schools, requires that the students first receive their master's degree, before they proceed towards the doctoral degree. As noted by Philips and Pugh (1995), the M.Phil dissertation is often used as a training course in advanced research work, and can be a preliminary stage for the Ph.D.

In Ghana, it could be said that the government has supported graduate education and research mainly through grants and scholarships. This stems from the firm belief that the results of research may be of critical importance to national development.

At the University of Cape Coast, the last five years have seen rapid expansion in graduate education. The expansion is not only in terms of the number of students enrolled in the master's degree programme but also in the number of disciplines in which degrees are granted. The general pressure which is influencing the present and shaping the future of graduate education is the expanding opportunity for employment in research both in

industry and government as well as the training of teachers to fill vacancies in the university itself. Also with Ghana's new educational reform and the subsequent upgrading of the nation's polytechnics to tertiary status, there has been further pressure for more graduates with the master's degree to take up teaching and administrative positions in the polytechnics.

The ever increasing social demand for graduate education calls for a critical look at the graduate education programme at the university which undoubtedly is beset with a number of problems. Until some of these problems are seriously addressed, the future of graduate education at the university could be described as gloomy.

Some of these problems are related to organisation, the structure of graduate programmes, faculty (lecturers) and students. First, some people feel that though the course work is usually somehow well structured, the thesis phase is often ill-defined following no definite timetable.

Another problem relates to the question of faculty identification with the graduate programme.

Lecturers are not recruited solely for graduate programmes as done by some graduate schools elsewhere outside Ghana (Ziolkowski, 1990). Consequently it is speculated that their interest and concern or commitment with the graduate school has been at a minimum.

The role of the supervisor directing the student's thesis is also another source of problem. From some people's observation, the role of the supervisor is not at all clear. This lack of definition in part is responsible for the student either being too much dependent upon the individual lecturer or being left on his own to wallow in the quagmire of confusion.

It is also believed that most students are not committed to the thesis process thereby unduly delaying completion of their theses. The cumulative effects of these problems include the undue prolonging of the master's degree programme.

#### *The All-But Thesis (ABT) Phenomenon*

In addition to attrition occurring during course work and examination phases of the master's studies is the phenomenon of attrition that falls into "All-But Thesis" (ABT). ABT

refers to the master's degree student who has completed all requirements for the master's degree except the thesis. According to Tluczek (1995), a growing percentage of students appear to be, especially, vulnerable to dropping out or fading out of the master's programmes after completing their course work and comprehensive written examinations, but prior to completing their dissertation. Ziolkowski(1990) also estimates that as many as 70% of students in the United States of America who pass their general examinations fail, for one reason or another, to complete the degree.

In the University of Cape Coast, it is asserted that the incidence of graduate attrition and the ABT problem tend to be a stumbling block for many prospective graduate students. In the researcher's casual conversation with friends enrolled in the graduate programme, majority of them maintained they were reluctant enrolling in graduate programmes, for the simple reason that they could not afford to spend so long a time pursuing the master's degree. In fact, it is asserted that some students in the past spent between four and seven years just pursuing the master's degree.

As portrayed by the Vice-Chancellor's report to the 27th Congregation (1997) " the

University was able to publish the results of a total of 24 students from 1993/95 academic years by March 1997". This indicates that only 11.4% of the 210 students admitted within that period had successfully graduated within that period.

Although people recognize the ABT phenomenon as a serious problem, it seems it is often overlooked. According to Tluczek (1995), ABT students should be of particular interest because they have proved that they are academically capable, and they have advanced to the point of having only one obstacle to conquer before the attainment of their degree. Research to learn why this occurs and how to prevent the percentage of ABTs from increasing is very important since the major portion of institutional and student investment is made prior to the time ABT status is reached.

Though some researches have been undertaken, particularly, in the U.S., (Berelson, 1960; Coon & Foster, 1993; Tluczek, 1995) it appeared no such studies had been conducted in Ghana and in the University of Cape Coast in particular. It was therefore the desire of the researcher to research into the problems which tended to hinder the successful completing of the master's thesis at the University of Cape Coast. Specifically, the study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What factors appear to impede the completion of the master's thesis?
2. What are STGs, ABTs and supervisor's attitudes, towards the thesis itself?
3. What are *Stags* and *Bats* attitude towards thesis supervisors?
4. What are thesis supervisors' attitude towards their students?

alumni, purposive sampling was used to select all the 35 STGs who were identified to be employed in the University of Cape, in teaching, administrative and other positions. With regard to the ABTs and supervisors the stratified random sampling technique (precisely the table of random numbers) was used to select participants to represent the various faculties of the University.

### Method

The descriptive sample survey was used as the research design for the study which was basically exploratory in nature. The population for the study was the 290 students enrolled between the years 1989 and 1993 for the master's degree programme at the University of Cape Coast and the 105 lecturers who served as thesis supervisors within the stipulated period. Students involved in the study were categorised into two: "Successful Thesis Graduates" (STGs) and "All But Thesis" Students (ABTs).

In all, the study involved a sample of 140 persons comprising 35 STGs, 55 ABTs and 50 supervisors. Since it was very difficult or virtually impossible to trace all the STGs because of lack of accurate and up-to-date data on the University

### Instrument and Procedure

Two sets of opinionnaires developed by Hugley (1988) were adopted and modified to collect data for the study. The first opinionnaire, referred to as Master's Thesis Attitude Scale (MTAS) by the researcher, was administered to STGs and ABTs, and the second opinionnaire, also referred to as Supervisors Master's Thesis Attitude Scale (SMTAS), was administered to thesis supervisors. The opinionnaires which included Likert scale and open-ended questions, sought demographic information about respondents as well as factors hindering completion of the thesis, attitude towards the thesis, students and supervisors. The instrument was pilot-tested in the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, and split-half reliability coefficients showing consistencies of the items

were computed to be 0.88 and 0.81 for the MTAS and SMTAS respectively. In the main study as in the pilot study, the opinionnaires were hand-delivered by the researcher to the respondents and retrieved personally after two weeks. Descriptive statistics such as percentages and means were used as the main procedure for the analysis of data.

## Result

### *Factors Impeding Completion of the Master's Thesis*

The study revealed that the most significant obstacles to completion of the thesis identified by the respondents (ABTs, STGs, and Supervisors) in order of importance were: lack of books and other relevant materials; lack of financial resources, students' lukewarm attitude or lack of seriousness; supervisors' delay in vetting work submitted by the students; students' work demands or combining thesis work with other jobs; supervisors' lack of commitment or poor attitude; lack of motivation; students' inadequate research skills; poor student-supervisor working relationship and ineffective structure in the thesis phase. The details are provided in Table 1.

These obstacles identified in this study were not much different from what were discovered in other recent studies (Tluczek, 1995; Jacks, et al., 1983). Perhaps the only difference was in respect of the order of importance of these obstacles. Unlike the findings of the other studies, lack of books and other relevant materials, and lack of financial resources were identified as the first two most significant obstacles of this study. These obstacles are likely to be problems associated with universities of the so-called third world and developing countries where many basic things are lacking because of the high level of poverty. For instance, unlike students of U.C.C., students of the developed nations have access to a wide range of information and literature because of the efficient and reliable library services as well as the massive use of computers, the internet and other modern communication systems.

One other major factor identified as an obstacle to completion of the thesis was students' lukewarm attitude or lack of seriousness. Possibly, the problem could be linked to students' job demands and level of motivation. One supervisor wrote "most students do not work hard enough because they engage in other jobs like General

*Table 1*  
*Impeding Factors Identified by Respondents*

IMPEDING FACTORS	RESPONDENTS			
	ABTs [N=51] N [%]	STGs [N=33] N [%]	SUPERVISORS [N=48] N [%]	TOTAL [N=132] N [%]
Lack of books and other materials	46[90.2]	28[84.8]	40[83.3]	114[86.4]
Lack of Financial resource	43[84.3]	26[78.8]	44[91.6]	113[85.6]
Students lukewarm attitude	30[58.8]	24[72.7]	42[87.5]	96[72.2]
Delay in vetting work submitted by students	36[70.6]	18[54.5]	21[43.8]	75[56.8]
Supervisors lack of commitment/poor attitude	30[58.8]	17[51.5]	18[37.5]	65[49.2]
Lack of motivation	27[45.1]	16[48.5]	16[33.3]	59[44.7]
Students inadequate research skills	23[45.1]	10[30.3]	25[52.1]	58[43.9]
Poor student supervisor relationship	24[47.1]	10[30.3]	23[47.9]	57[43.2]
Ineffective structure of the thesis phase	26[51.0]	11[33.3]	18[37.5]	55[41.7]

Certificate Examination (GCE) marking and part-time teaching at the expense of the thesis work". What is very significant is that the problem was acknowledged not only by supervisors but also by students themselves. The findings revealed that as many as 36 ABT

and STG respondents, representing 42.8%, agreed that the demands of their jobs impeded their completion of the thesis.

Just as discovered by Tluczek (1995), this study revealed that one major difference between ABTs



and STGs was the priority in a student's life given to the thesis. As much as 75.5% of ABTs indicated that they experienced the lack of proper motivation and focus as an obstacle to completing the thesis compared to 54.5% of STGs. The lack of motivation could be related to the student not needing the degree for any definite career plans or as a requirement for entry into a new field which is also supported by the study. As compared to 9.1% of STGs, 29.4% of ABTs indicated that the master's degree was helpful but not necessary in terms of their future plans.

Delay in vetting work submitted by students to their supervisors was identified as the number four factor which hindered the thesis process. The problem possibly related to the general attitude of supervisors and the kind of student-supervisor relationship which is fully discussed later in this paper. What is crucial is that the problem was acknowledged not only by students but also by supervisors. Majority of supervisors (56.2%) agreed that difficulties working with principal supervisors and delay in vetting students' work constituted an obstacle to the successful completion of the thesis.

The identification of lack of

research skill as an impeding factor in the thesis process, possibly implies that training in research methods was inadequate. This suggests the need for an increase in the time allotted and attention given to courses in research methods. This is crucial because as noted by Smith, et al. (1993), the dissertation is often a student's first experience with a research project of this magnitude. It is again possible that the thesis process is detached from course work and experience and that students are unable to develop practical skills required for the actual field work. This suggests that students must be given the necessary exposure and research experience before they start their theses.

The results of the study also indicated that majority of respondents agreed that the lack of structure of the thesis phase of the master's degree programme as compared to the course work phase was an obstacle to degree completion.

Though one supervisor asserted that the lack of structure of the thesis phase presented an opportunity to students to work independently and made them responsible for their own work, this research found out that most students have difficulties working independently outside the formal lecture room with limited

structure. Several STGs and ABTs commented that when faced with the problem of balancing job, family and academic responsibilities, the responsibility they did not face daily was the one that was usually put aside. As noted by one ABT respondent, lack of any definite time frame leads to procrastination and the prolonging of completion of the thesis. The recommendation by some respondents of all the three groups (STGs, ABTs and Supervisors) that a definite timetable with associated tasks and dates for completing of the thesis be followed rigidly further suggests that the inadequate structure of the thesis phase is acknowledged as an important obstacle in the thesis process and needs to be addressed.

*The Attitude of ABTs, STGs  
and Supervisors  
Towards the Thesis*

The study revealed that in general, all the respondents were positive towards the thesis. This was a healthy development because as observed by Porter and Wolfe (1975), there is significant link between students' attitude and completion of the dissertation. According to them, if the student had a negative attitude towards the dissertation, delays were often experienced. On the other hand, those students with attitudes

supportive of the dissertation requirements are less likely to be subject to attrition. It is important to note that the majority of respondents (94.7%) were not in favour of abolishing the thesis as a requirement for the award of the master's degree. Also 92.4% felt the thesis is an intellectual experience of genuine substance and interest while 87.1% felt the thesis stimulates interest for future research.

The finding of this study that there was not much difference between ABTs and STGs in their attitude towards the thesis confirms the studies of Strasser (1977) and Porter and Wolfe (1975). They found that both ABTs and STGs have positive feeling about the dissertation and that surprisingly, even students who did not complete the dissertation requirement responded positively towards the dissertation. With such positive attitude on the part of ABTs, the implication is that, all other things being equal, they would be motivated to work hard and complete their theses on schedule.

It is important to mention however, that though in general STGs and ABTs had positive feeling towards the thesis, STGs were slightly more positive than ABTs. The possible reason for such difference was

probably STGs' feeling of accomplishment and superiority for having completed the thesis.

With the high level of support for the thesis as a worthwhile requirement for the award of the master's degree, perhaps what is needed is to enhance its process. Institutions could learn from the majority of ABTs and STGs who thought the thesis produced too much anxiety, by getting rid of all bottlenecks thereby enhancing the thesis process, while at the same time enforcing quality standards that help produce distinguished graduates.

#### *The Attitude of Students Towards Supervisors*

Though in general both STGs and ABTs had positive attitude towards thesis supervisors, STGs were more positive than ABTs. This could be natural and therefore not unexpected because, all other things being equal, students who have been successful in the thesis process are more likely to be satisfied with their supervisors than those still struggling to complete the thesis.

It is important to learn from the responses given by most ABTs in order to improve student relationship with supervisors and

strengthen the thesis supervisory role. The results of the study showed that nearly half (49%) of ABTs felt they received too little attention from their supervisors.

Also unlike majority of STGs (81.8%) only 43.2% of ABTs claimed their supervisors were co-operative. This suggests that students had less difficult time with supervisors who were available, co-operative, supportive and prompt in reading and returning materials. On the other hand students experienced difficulties with supervisors who exhibited the opposite characteristics. Again, since the findings indicated that ABTs had less effective relationships with their supervisors than did STGs, it is probably fair to conclude that one of the most important factors affecting completion of the thesis is the nature of the student's relationship with supervisors.

From the researcher's perspective, three reasons might account for poor student-supervisor relationship. First, the possibility that both students and supervisors did not understand their respective roles, which could be attributed to lack of effective communication about the nature of relationship between the two parties.

Possibly, as discovered by Hockey and

(1994), some supervisors adopted an implicit form of communication and failed to make clear and explicit certain taken-for-granted assumptions about the supervisory relationship which they assumed their students also held. The result of the lack of clarity in communication is that patterns of interaction may well be established and maintained which constitute a fertile ground for the breeding of misconceptions about the nature of supervision on the part of the student and about the student's understanding on the part of the supervisor. The feeling of not being well supervised could derive from the assumption that some students might define the concept of supervision quite differently from that of supervisors.

To ensure that there is good working relationship between students and supervisors, it is prudent that effective communication is established which would enable supervisors to know what students expected of them, while students also become aware of what supervisors expected of them. Corresponding to what Phillips and Pugh (1995) discovered in a similar study, this research identified the following as what the student and the supervisor expected of each other. Among others, students expected supervisors to vet their work in good time; to be

available when needed; to be friendly, open and supportive; to read their work well and be constructively critical; to have good knowledge and sufficient interest in their research.

Supervisors on the other hand expected students to be hardworking and persevering; to be resourceful or well read; to be analytical and have initiative drive; to be independent; to be conversant with research methods and statistics; to have regular consultation with them; to follow the advice they give; to have good writing skills and good command of the language.

Secondly, the poor student-supervisor relationship could be explained in terms of the fact that under normal circumstances supervisors would identify themselves more with enterprising and hardworking students who they felt were more anxious to complete their thesis than the lazy unenterprising students. As noted by Phillips and Pugh (1995), from the supervisor's perspective, "enterprising" students are not so problematic, as they equate with an ideal type of thesis student. They claim such students display autonomy, enthusiasm, and the capacity to develop intellectually to the point of generating original ideas. In contrast, difficult students

are those who at this level do not display such 'enterprise' and the aforementioned qualities. It is with these latter students that supervisors find their supervision more problematic.

Thirdly, supervisors' poor attitude and lack of commitment could account for the poor student-supervisor relationship. This seems to be supported by the students' written responses to the open-ended items which identified inadequate time to consult with students, too little attention and guidance, and delay in vetting work submitted as the three most important problems students faced working with their supervisors. The fact that supervisors might be overburdened with a lot of responsibilities should, however, not be ruled out. Majority of supervisors (62.5%) found combining thesis supervision and teaching to be somewhat burdensome. This is likely to be the case when one considers the fact that in the university, apart from their teaching schedule a lot of lecturers are charged with other responsibilities such as serving on various boards and committees, being hall master or counsellors and so on.

#### *Supervisors' Attitude Towards Thesis Students*

The study showed that most

supervisors had negative attitude towards thesis students. The researcher will not be far from right to speculate that such negative attitude could mar any healthy relationship that should exist between students and supervisors which could impede progress on the thesis process. As noted earlier, supervisors would identify themselves more with students they considered enterprising and hardworking than those they considered as lazy and unenterprising.

The negative attitude, first, relates to supervisors' feeling that most students lacked the skills of academic essay writing and that students often wrote on irrelevant issues. This brings into question the criteria for the selection of candidates for the master's degree programme. It is believed that unlike the undergraduate admission, selection of candidates for graduate programmes is expected to be more properly scrutinized. It is therefore expected that the master's degree student would be able to use advanced writing skills necessary to clearly and precisely write the thesis. Improving selection procedures in graduate programmes therefore becomes a crucial issue. Perhaps as part of the selection interview, candidates should be made to take a short written text basically to test their writing skills.

In any case this also suggests the need for training in the mechanics of writing as a means of improving students' writing skills.

Most supervisors also saw their students as not working hard enough and also not frequently consulting them. One supervisor commented that some of his students at times played hide and seek with him. This is ironical because most students also accused supervisors of not devoting much time to assist them through the thesis process.

The lack of diligence or seriousness on the part of students could be attributed to a number of factors including lack of relevant literature and materials and lack of financial resources which have been identified in this study as the most important factors which impeded the thesis process. Students could sometimes be stuck somewhere along the line because of the lack of materials or funds to propel them on. The problem could also be attributed to poor supervision. As perceived by many supervisors in a study by Bargar and Ducan (1986). Positive reassurance, enthusiasm and encouragement should be part and parcel of supervisors' input and are necessary for maintaining the student over such a prolonged period of arduous study. When such input is lacking, the student is not likely to be encouraged to work

hard. The student should, however, realize that because of the positive inspiration and negative turmoil that go hand in hand with the thesis experience, perseverance is needed through all stages of the thesis, from selection of a topic to writing recommendations.

The lack of seriousness associated with the thesis writing could also be linked to students' job demands. The study supports this. As much as 80.8% of the respondents agreed that the demands of the students' job impeded the thesis process. Perhaps the problem arose as some students did part-time jobs to supplement their income. It is also possible that some students are held back because of the demands associated with their employment as demonstrators or teaching assistants in the university.

It is hoped when there is good rapport between students and supervisors, some of the genuine concerns of the students could be identified and resolved. This calls for effective communication between students and supervisors which is vital in all supervisory relationships.

### **Conclusion**

It may be concluded from the results of the study that both students and supervisors share the blame for the long delays associated

with the completion of the thesis and the attainment of the master's degree. While some students could be accused of not being very serious with the thesis work and allowing the demands of other jobs to take precedence over the thesis work, some supervisors also did not seem to be co-operative and committed to their supervisory roles and spent long time vetting and returning work to students. The findings of the study also lead the researcher to conclude that successfully completing the thesis and earning a master's degree is more about persistence in spite of the many obstacles faced by the student. Since all students experience similar problems, the successful students will be the one who has the internal motivation and personal desire to succeed at the identified task, enabling him or her to overcome all opposition. It is however, important to state that the institution must create a congenial atmosphere that is conducive to degree completion by helping reduce obstacles faced by students.

### *Recommendations*

Based on the findings of the study and conclusions drawn from them, the following recommendations are made for facilitating the thesis process and completion of the master's degree. In formulating the

recommendations, some of the recommendations from ABTs, STGs and Supervisors were duly considered. The recommendations have been classified into two: Those for the university and those for master's degree students.

### *For the University*

Recommendations for the university are intended for review by all institutional components including administration, graduate school, faculties, departments, students and lecturers.

1. To cut cost which many student's claim hinder the thesis work, it is recommended that the university establishes the necessary links with industries and organizations which may sponsor the researches conducted by students. This implies the university should encourage students to embark on research studies geared towards pressing problems of industries, organisations and the nation as a whole.

To further cut cost, it is also recommended that students should be given intensive training in computer

application so that the analysis of data, typing of scripts and so on would be done by students themselves instead of hiring people to render such services for fees.

2. Since students' lukewarm attitude or lack of seriousness was identified as one of the major constraints on the completion of the thesis, it is recommended that unless absolutely necessary, students should not be granted extension of time to enable them have their study leave period extended. It is hoped this will compel students, majority of whom are on study leave to work hard to complete their theses within the stipulated time.

3. Recognising the important roles of supervisors and the importance of the student-supervisor relationship in the thesis process, it is recommended that both students and supervisors are periodically educated on their roles in the thesis process. This could be done through their participation in seminars or

workshops. Topics to be covered at such fora may include: student-supervisor relationship; how to serve as a supervisor; how to advise students in the thesis process; vetting of thesis work; and methods for shortening the time of thesis completion.

It is further recommended that students are made to select their supervisors. To effectively select these supervisors, it is vital that students seek advice from other students and also read literature related to the selection of supervisors.

#### *For Master's Degree Students*

Though these recommendations are directed towards students, it will be beneficial for supervisors to be aware of them.

1. Master's degree students should have thorough understanding of the requirements of a master's degree programme before starting the course. Prospective students should be aware of the various stages of the degree programme such as course work, examinations, written and oral thesis



- components. It is also in their interest to inquire about time requirements, skills required, the degree of independent work required for degree attainment as well as the emotional, psychological and physical stamina required to endure. The student should realize that the master's degree attainment is often associated with personal motivation and perseverance. Students should have complete and thorough understanding of why they want to earn the master's degree. This will motivate the student to work hard and to persevere in the face of difficulties and opposition.
2. Students should try to identify topic areas for their thesis as early as possible in the course of the programme. This will enable them focus well on the thesis topic and relate the coursework to the thesis process. For instance, it would be expedient to select a topic before being introduced to research methods and

statistics so that relevant questions relating to the topic could be asked for clarification and better understanding.

3. Finally, students should develop a programme plan of work for the entire thesis process that includes dates and resources for identification of thesis topics, selection of thesis supervisors, thesis proposal presentation, the collection of data and thesis defence or viva

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