

Navigating Academic Study Leave: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Malaysian Academics' Experiences in Completing Postgraduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Academic study leave is a major institutional investment intended to strengthen the qualifications, research capacity, and long-term contribution of university academics. Nevertheless, sponsorship and release from routine duties do not necessarily ensure timely postgraduate completion. Existing research has identified individual, supervisory, and institutional influences on doctoral progress but offers limited process-based explanations of how these influences interact within formal study leave arrangements. This study develops a Constructivist Grounded Theory explaining how Malaysian university academics navigate academic study leave towards successful postgraduate completion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants: 12 academics undertaking or having completed formal study leave and 3 supervisory or administrative key informants drawn from academic supervisors and the Registrar's Office of a Malaysian public university. Data were analysed iteratively through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, supported by constant comparison, memo writing, and Atlas.ti 22. Open coding was used to identify initial concepts from the interview data, axial coding was employed to establish relationships among categories and subcategories, and selective coding was used to integrate the categories around a central explanatory process. Three interrelated categories were generated: Academic Study Leave Governance, Management and Policies; Supervisor and Supervision; and Individual Competencies and Characteristics. Across these categories, the core process was conceptualised as sustaining progress through negotiated alignment. Completion became more attainable when responsive institutional governance, constructive supervision, and individual agency were aligned with the candidate's changing academic and personal circumstances. Misalignment, expressed through weak monitoring, impersonal administrative treatment, inaccessible or controlling supervision, and insufficient research or adaptive competencies, increased the risk of delay and non-completion. The resulting Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave explains postgraduate completion as an iterative process rather than the consequence of a single factor. The study contributes a context-sensitive theory for Malaysian higher education and offers practical guidance for strengthening study leave policy, progress monitoring, supervisor development, mentoring, and research competency support.

Keywords: Academic study leave; Constructivist grounded theory; Postgraduate completion; Doctoral supervision; Malaysian higher education

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions depend on academically qualified staff to sustain teaching quality, research productivity, postgraduate supervision, innovation, and institutional leadership. Within Malaysia, the development of academic talent has been positioned as an important element of higher education transformation,

including through postgraduate qualification, strengthened governance, and improved institutional capacity (Sirat, 2024). Universities therefore sponsor academic staff and grant study leave so that lecturers can undertake master's or doctoral programmes with fewer competing employment demands.

Academic study leave is not merely an employment benefit. It represents a human capital investment that includes salary continuation, tuition sponsorship, administrative support, and the temporary redistribution of teaching and service responsibilities. The expected return is a qualified academic who can contribute more effectively to research, publication, supervision, programme development, and university leadership. When completion is delayed or does not occur, the consequences extend beyond the candidate. Universities may experience higher expenditure, disrupted workforce planning, delayed succession, and a reduced return on staff-development investment.

The doctoral journey is shaped by interacting internal and external conditions. Existing research consistently identifies supervision, departmental environment, social and family circumstances, financial support, motivation, writing competence, self-regulation, and academic identity as influential (Helgøy et al., 2026; McDowall & Ramos, 2024). Doctoral outcomes are also embedded within individual, supervisory, departmental, and institutional contexts (Helgøy et al., 2026; Acharya et al., 2024). These findings indicate that completion cannot be understood adequately by attributing success or failure solely to candidate motivation.

Academics on formal study leave form a distinctive postgraduate population. They remain employees of the sponsoring university while becoming candidates in another academic system. They must respond to programme requirements, supervisor expectations, institutional monitoring, family responsibilities, and return-of-service obligations. Their progress is therefore negotiated across more than one organisation and across several relationships. The experiences of supervisors and study leave administrators are also relevant because these stakeholders interpret progress, provide support, enforce policy, and intervene when difficulties arise.

The preliminary study materials underpinning this article identified three broad areas that motivate or impede completion: academic study leave governance, management and policies; supervisor and supervision; and individual competencies and characteristics. The materials also identified family affairs as a persistent pressure, and recommended stronger multi-stakeholder support, effective mechanisms for monitoring the supervisory relationship, more supportive study leave policies, and development of research, publication, communication, social, problem-solving, and adaptive skills.

However, presenting these areas only as separate themes would understate the theoretical contribution. A Constructivist Grounded Theory requires an explanation of the social process connecting conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences. This study therefore asks: How do Malaysian university academics navigate academic study leave towards successful postgraduate completion? Its main aim is to develop a substantive Constructivist Grounded Theory explaining that process from the perspectives of academics on study leave, academic supervisors, and officers from the Registrar's Office.

Recent Malaysian research similarly shows that dropout among doctoral candidates cannot be explained by a single cause but reflects an interaction of institutional, supervisory, and personal circumstances (Chan et al., 2023). The study pursues four objectives: (1) to explore academics' experiences of undertaking postgraduate study during academic study leave; (2) to examine supervisors' and Registrar's Office officers' perspectives on the conditions influencing completion; (3) to explain the interactions among institutional governance, supervisory practices, and individual competencies; and (4) to develop the Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave. By shifting from isolated factors to an interacting process, the study addresses a gap in Malaysian higher education research and provides a more useful basis for policy and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic Study Leave as Human Capital Development

Universities use postgraduate sponsorship and study leave to build advanced expertise and renew the academic workforce (Sirat, 2024). The logic is developmental: protected study time and financial support should allow academics to acquire disciplinary knowledge, research capability, publication competence, and professional networks that later benefit the institution. This logic also creates accountability, and it has practical consequences: Malaysian universities have reported that non-completion among academic staff sent to study abroad affects human resource planning and resource allocation for future training (Sirat, 2024). The academic is expected to make satisfactory progress, comply with reporting requirements, complete within an approved period, and return to service.

Study leave differs from the experience of a conventional full-time postgraduate candidate because the sponsoring institution retains a continuing interest in progress. Administrative rules concerning eligibility, duration, extensions, reporting, and return obligations affect the candidate's decisions throughout the programme. A supportive policy system can clarify expectations and mobilise assistance, whereas an inflexible or poorly communicated system may intensify uncertainty. The issue is therefore not whether governance exists, but how it is enacted in routine contact with academics facing changing circumstances.

Postgraduate Completion as a Multi-Level Process

Doctoral completion is often treated as an individual outcome, yet the evidence points to a multi-level process. Internal influences include motivation, writing skills, self-regulation, and academic identity, while external influences include supervision, personal relationships, departmental socialisation, and financial opportunities (Helgøy et al., 2026). Candidate trajectories are also embedded in supervisory, departmental, disciplinary, and institutional contexts (Acharya et al., 2024). These perspectives are especially relevant to sponsored academics, whose progress is additionally influenced by the policies and expectations of an employing university.

Late completion can arise from both institutional and personal conditions (Alves et al., 2024; Acharya et al., 2024). Cumbersome processes, unsupportive research environments, supervisor workload, communication difficulties, weak research preparation, social pressure, and partial study leave may contribute to delay. Candidate experiences also show that progress is rarely linear; breakthroughs may follow periods of uncertainty, identity disruption, or difficulty in mastering research practices. Thus, effective support must be timely and responsive rather than limited to the initial approval of leave.

Institutional Governance, Monitoring, and Support

Institutional structures shape doctoral progress through policies, milestones, funding arrangements, research training, writing support, counselling, and mechanisms for changing supervisors or addressing stalled progress (Helgøy et al., 2026). Institutional, programme, support, and personal contexts function as interdependent contributors to doctoral success (Acharya et al., 2024). A policy that requires regular reports may be useful when reports trigger constructive dialogue and early assistance; the same requirement may become performative if it merely records delay without addressing its causes.

The source materials for this study emphasised mentoring, proactive contact, practical assistance, use of existing university facilities, respectful treatment, supportive leadership, and continuous communication. These indicators suggest that governance is experienced relationally. Candidates do not encounter “policy” as an abstract document; they encounter officers, faculty leaders, forms, decisions, messages, meetings, and responses to requests. A governance system may therefore be formally adequate yet experienced as unsupportive when its implementation is slow, negative, inconsistent, or detached from the candidate's circumstances.

Institutional and supervisory support also need to be coordinated. Initial institutional support may not always be matched by sustained supervisory support, placing excessive responsibility on one part of the system (Haley et al., 2024). For academics on study leave, a comparable imbalance may occur when faculties, central administration, graduate schools, and supervisors operate independently. A multi-stakeholder response is more likely to identify whether a problem requires administrative flexibility, research training, financial intervention, counselling, or change in supervisory practice.

Supervisor and Supervision

The supervisory relationship is consistently associated with candidate satisfaction, progress, well-being, and completion (Helgøy et al., 2026; Haley et al., 2024). Approachability, accessibility, respect, commitment, and interest may be valued as highly as disciplinary expertise (Haley et al., 2024). Expectations must also be made explicit. Mismatches arise when supervisors believe they provide sufficient guidance while candidates experience limited direction, or when candidates and supervisors hold different assumptions about autonomy, outputs, communication, and responsibility.

Supportive supervision combines academic direction with relational qualities. Empathy, flexibility, openness, trust, and respect can create an environment in which candidates disclose difficulties, test ideas, and develop scholarly independence. Sustainable supervisory relationships also depend on rapport, future-oriented collaboration, and meaningful academic engagement (Haley et al., 2024). These qualities are directly relevant to the negative indicators in the study materials: supervisors being too busy, not helping, scolding candidates, failing to understand constraints, or exercising excessive control.

The central problem is not simply the presence or absence of supervisor support, but calibration. Too little guidance can leave candidates isolated, while excessive control can constrain ownership and confidence. Effective supervision changes as the candidate develops. Early stages may require structure and methodological guidance; later stages require critical dialogue, publication planning, and support for independent judgement. Study leave administrators therefore need mechanisms that protect the integrity of supervision without attempting to manage the academic relationship through bureaucracy alone.

Individual Competencies, Agency, and Adaptability

Postgraduate completion requires more than disciplinary knowledge. Candidates must search and synthesise literature, design research, collect and analyse data, write sustained arguments, respond to feedback, manage projects, and communicate across academic and administrative contexts (Pandey & Kaushal, 2025). Doctoral success can be supported through targeted supervisory, mentoring, and tutorial actions rather than assuming that candidates already possess all required competencies (McDowall & Ramos, 2024; Pandey & Kaushal, 2025).

The study materials identified problem-solving, finding alternatives, research skills, publication skills, communication skills, social skills, and adaptability. These competencies operate as forms of agency. When a method fails, access is delayed, a paper is rejected, or family circumstances change, candidates need to reinterpret the problem and mobilise alternatives. Agency does not remove institutional responsibility; rather, it determines how effectively available resources and relationships are used.

Adaptability is especially important because the doctorate contains uncertainty. Candidates may need to change research questions, methods, timelines, supervisory arrangements, or expectations. Yet adaptability should not be used to individualise structural problems. Expecting candidates to be resilient while leaving policies unclear or supervision dysfunctional merely transfers risk to the individual. A stronger explanation must show how candidate agency interacts with the conditions created by governance and supervision.

Research Gap and Theoretical Sensitivity

The literature establishes that completion is influenced by institutional conditions, supervisory relationships, and individual capabilities. Three gaps remain. First, much research concerns postgraduate candidates generally rather than academics undertaking institutionally sponsored study leave. Second, studies often privilege the candidate perspective and do not integrate the views of supervisors and study leave administrators. Third, many studies identify factors but do not explain the process through which those factors become aligned, misaligned, and renegotiated over time.

In Constructivist Grounded Theory, prior literature functions as a source of theoretical sensitivity rather than a fixed framework. The concepts of governance, supervision, agency, support, and persistence sensitised the analysis, but the proposed theory was developed by integrating the categories in the study data. The resulting explanation treats completion as an iterative alignment process shaped by stakeholders' actions and interpretations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT), an interpretive qualitative methodology that recognises data and analysis as being constructed through interaction between researchers and participants rather than discovered as a single objective reality (King et al., 2025). CGT is appropriate for examining complex and context-dependent experiences and generating substantive explanations grounded in participants' perspectives. Previous studies have applied this approach to investigate employability readiness within changing labour-market and entrepreneurial contexts, demonstrating its usefulness for explaining how individuals respond to institutional, professional, and environmental conditions (Kamarudin et al., 2024; Kamarudin et al., 2025).

CGT was appropriate for the present study because the research sought to generate a substantive explanation of how academics navigate formal academic study leave rather than test a predetermined causal model. The inquiry focused on actions, interactions, conditions, and consequences. Particular attention was given to how participants responded when postgraduate progress was disrupted, how stakeholders interpreted responsibility, how assistance was requested or provided, and how institutional, supervisory, and personal conditions shaped progression towards completion or delay.

Although the study was informed by a constructivist orientation, the analytical procedure incorporated open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to organise and integrate the emerging concepts. These coding stages were applied flexibly and interpretively rather than as rigid or purely objective procedures, consistent with the study's constructivist position.

Setting and Participants

The study was situated in a Malaysian public university that sponsors academics to undertake postgraduate studies locally and internationally. Fifteen participants were included to capture the study leave process from the positions of sponsored academics, supervisors, and institutional administrators. The participant population comprised 12 academics undertaking or having undertaken formal study leave and three supervisory or administrative key informants drawn from academic supervisors and officers involved in study leave administration within the Registrar's Office.

The academic group comprised five senior lecturers and seven lecturers. Their study experiences covered Malaysia and overseas settings across Asia, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and the United States, providing variation in institutional, supervisory, and cultural circumstances. The three key informants contributed perspectives on supervision, progress monitoring, policy implementation, and institutional intervention. Because

these roles were represented by a very small number of individuals within one institution, the exact split between supervisors and Registrar's Office officers is reported in aggregate to reduce the risk of deductive identification.

Table 1. Participant Profile and Stakeholder Coverage

Stakeholder grouping	n	Participant characteristics and analytical contribution
Academics undertaking or having completed study leave	12	Five senior lecturers and seven lecturers; study experiences in Malaysia and overseas settings across Asia, the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, and the United States. Provided first-hand accounts of governance, supervision, competencies, and personal or family pressures.
Supervisory and administrative key informants	3	Academic supervisors and Registrar's Office officers involved in supervision or study leave administration. Provided perspectives on progress monitoring, policy implementation, supervisory relationships, and institutional response.
Total	15	Multi-stakeholder coverage. The exact split within the three key informants is aggregated to protect anonymity in the small institutional setting.

Participants were initially selected purposively based on their direct experience with academic study leave. As the analysis progressed, theoretical sampling was used to seek perspectives that could elaborate emerging categories, clarify differences between stakeholder experiences, and examine the conditions under which support, delay, or difficulty occurred. The purpose of the sample was therefore conceptual depth and variation rather than statistical representation.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, a method commonly used in CGT research to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences, interpretations, and actions (Kamarudin et al., 2024; Kamarudin et al., 2025). The interview protocol explored the study leave journey, expectations before commencing postgraduate study, institutional communication, progress monitoring, supervisory experiences, family and personal pressures, research and publication requirements, coping strategies, support received, and recommendations for improving postgraduate completion.

The questions were sufficiently open-ended to allow participants to introduce experiences and concerns that had not been anticipated by the researchers. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' meanings and expressions. Data collection and analysis proceeded iteratively, allowing insights from earlier interviews to inform subsequent questioning. Follow-up attention was directed towards emerging issues, including the distinction between supportive and punitive monitoring, the balance between supervisory guidance and control, and the role of individual problem-solving when formal assistance was insufficient.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was supported by Atlas.ti 22 and involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, together with constant comparison and memo writing. These procedures have also been used in previous CGT studies to move from detailed participant accounts towards integrated theoretical explanations (Kamarudin et al., 2024; Kamarudin et al., 2025).

During open coding, the interview transcripts were examined line by line to identify concepts reflecting participants' experiences, actions, interpretations, and responses. Codes were compared across incidents, participants, and stakeholder groups, while analytic memos were used to record emerging insights and possible relationships.

During axial coding, related codes were grouped into categories and subcategories by examining their conditions, actions, interactions, and consequences. This process generated three major categories: Academic Study Leave Governance, Management and Policies; Supervisor and Supervision; and Individual Competencies and

Characteristics. These categories broadly corresponded with institutional, supervisory, and candidate-level domains identified in recent doctoral education research (Helgøy et al., 2026; Acharya et al., 2024).

Selective coding was then used to integrate the categories around the central process of sustaining progress through negotiated alignment. This core process explains how institutional governance, supervisory relationships, and individual agency interacted throughout the postgraduate journey. The categories were not treated as independent predictors but as interdependent domains capable of strengthening or weakening one another across different stages of academic study leave.

Theoretical sufficiency was considered to have been achieved when the categories were adequately developed, their principal relationships were clearly established, and further comparison no longer substantially altered the emerging explanatory structure. The analysis resulted in the Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave, a substantive theory situated within the context of academic staff development in a Malaysian public university.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Credibility was strengthened through constant comparison, iterative data collection and analysis, the examination of variation rather than only confirming evidence, and the inclusion of multiple stakeholder positions. The 12 academics' accounts were compared with the perspectives of three supervisory and administrative key informants, providing stakeholder or perspective triangulation across the candidate, supervisory, and governance domains. Dependability was supported by maintaining interview transcripts, coding records, category definitions, methodological decisions, and analytic memos as part of an audit trail. This triangulation was based on participant perspectives; institutional documents and study leave records were not included in the present analysis.

Confirmability was addressed through reflexive consideration of how the researchers' institutional knowledge, professional experience, assumptions, and expectations could influence interpretation. Analytical decisions were documented through memo writing and repeatedly checked against the interview data. Transferability is necessarily conditional rather than statistical. It is supported to a certain extent because the substantive theory concerns structural features that are likely to recur in universities operating formal study leave schemes: the academic's dual status as employee and postgraduate candidate, institutional sponsorship and progress monitoring, dependence on supervisory relationships, return-to-service expectations, and changing academic and personal circumstances. Variation across local and overseas study settings and across candidate, supervisory, and administrative perspectives further strengthens the range of conditions represented. By making these contextual features and theoretical boundaries explicit, the study enables readers to judge whether negotiated alignment is relevant to comparable higher education settings.

Because the study concerns employment, postgraduate sponsorship, supervision, and institutional administration, anonymity and careful reporting were prioritised. Detailed subgroup information that could expose individuals was aggregated. Short in-vivo expressions retained in the coding records are presented in the findings to demonstrate how the categories were grounded in participants' language while limiting identifying contextual detail.

FINDINGS

The analysis generated three interrelated categories and one core process. Table 2 summarises the categories and analytic indicators derived from the supplied study materials. The indicators are not presented as a frequency count; they identify the conditions and actions that participants associated with progress, delay, support, or frustration.

Table 2. Analytic Categories and Indicators

No.	Category	Analytic indicators
1	Academic Study Leave Governance, Management and Policies	Mentoring; proactive contact; motivation; practical assistance and solution finding; progress monitoring; access to existing facilities; respectful treatment; supportive leadership; continuity of communication.
2	Supervisor and Supervision	Supervisor workload and availability; adequacy of guidance; responsiveness; respectful communication; understanding of candidates' constraints; balance between direction and control.
3	Individual Competencies and Characteristics	Problem-solving; identifying alternatives; research competence; publication competence; communication and social skills; self-management; adaptability; resilience.

Academic Study Leave Governance, Management and Policies

The first category concerns how the sponsoring university organises, communicates, and enacts academic study leave. Participants associated constructive governance with mentoring, proactive contact, assistance in identifying solutions, progress monitoring, access to existing university facilities, respectful treatment, supportive leadership, and continuous communication. Short in-vivo expressions captured the relational quality expected from the institution: management should “assist and suggest solutions,” “treat staff with courtesy, not with negativity,” and maintain “constant contact.” These expressions distinguish developmental governance from administration that is experienced mainly as procedural control.

Progress monitoring was interpreted positively when it created an opportunity to diagnose difficulty and mobilise support. Participants linked proactive institutional contact with the ability to “increase motivation” because it signalled that the academic remained a valued member of the institution. Monitoring became less useful when communication focused mainly on delay, blame, or procedural compliance. The same formal mechanism could therefore support progress or intensify defensiveness, depending on the tone of communication and whether contact led to practical assistance.

The category also revealed that study leave difficulties often require support from several units rather than a single office. Faculty management may understand disciplinary and staffing implications; the library can support information access; the research management centre can assist with research and publication; academic enhancement units can provide writing or language support; and the bursary can address financial administration. Effective governance coordinates these resources around the candidate’s actual problem.

Policy flexibility was not interpreted as the absence of standards. Participants still recognised the need for deadlines, reporting, and accountability. The issue was whether policy allowed proportionate responses to illness, family crises, supervisory disruption, research access problems, or major changes in the project. Governance supported completion when it combined clear expectations with early intervention and context-sensitive decision-making.

Supervisor and Supervision

The second category concerns the academic and relational quality of supervision. Participants’ short in-vivo descriptions included supervisors being “too busy,” “not helping,” candidates “being scolded,” supervisors who “don’t understand student’s constraints and situation,” and relationships experienced as “very controlling.” These expressions show that supervisory difficulty was not limited to technical guidance; it also involved availability, communication, dignity, and the candidate’s capacity to exercise ownership of the research. Such conditions reduced willingness to disclose difficulties, delayed feedback, and weakened confidence.

Effective supervision required availability, constructive feedback, intellectual direction, and interpersonal respect. Candidates needed supervisors to understand that study leave did not remove family responsibilities, financial concerns, health issues, or the administrative demands of the sponsoring university. Understanding did not mean lowering academic standards; it meant calibrating guidance and planning realistically.

The data also point to a tension between dependence and autonomy. Candidates may initially require substantial structure, but persistent control can prevent the development of independent judgement. Conversely, an assumption that academics already know how to conduct doctoral research can lead to neglect. Progress was sustained when the supervisory relationship was negotiated: expectations were explicit, meetings and feedback were dependable, challenges could be discussed without humiliation, and responsibility gradually shifted as competence developed.

The sponsoring university has limited authority over an external supervisor, yet it can establish mechanisms for detecting supervisory breakdown. Periodic confidential check-ins, guidance on escalation routes, and assistance in changing supervisory arrangements can protect candidates without intruding into academic judgement. The category therefore links the supervisory relationship back to institutional governance.

Individual Competencies and Characteristics

The third category captures the capabilities and personal orientations that enabled academics to respond to uncertainty. Participants emphasised “problem solving” and the capacity to “find alternatives” when research plans, data access, publication strategies, or formal support did not proceed as expected. Research rarely followed the original plan without disruption; candidates had to adjust methods, identify new data sources, seek additional expertise, or revise timelines. Adaptability therefore allowed setbacks to be treated as problems requiring action rather than as definitive evidence of failure.

Research and publication competencies were also critical. The coding records repeatedly retained participants’ emphasis on “research skills” and “publication skills,” indicating that experienced teachers could still require development in research design, analysis, academic writing, journal selection, and responding to review. Publication requirements became a bottleneck when writing support and feedback were limited. Targeted workshops were most useful when connected to the candidate’s current stage and accompanied by opportunities for application and follow-up.

Communication and social skills enabled candidates to access support. Participants’ references to “communication skills” and “social skills” reflected the need to explain difficulties to supervisors and administrators, negotiate expectations, build peer networks, and seek assistance before problems became severe. Social connection also reduced isolation, particularly for academics studying overseas or away from their home faculty.

Family affairs emerged as an important contextual pressure, echoing findings from other Asian contexts where doctoral candidates studying away from home report family obligations, self-discipline pressures, and limited social support as central acculturative and academic stressors (Jia & Yeung, 2023). Responsibilities involving spouses, children, parents, finances, relocation, or health could reduce time and concentration. These demands were not fully controllable through individual discipline. Nevertheless, planning, communication, adaptability, and timely institutional support influenced whether the pressures produced temporary disruption or prolonged disengagement.

Core Process: Sustaining Progress through Negotiated Alignment

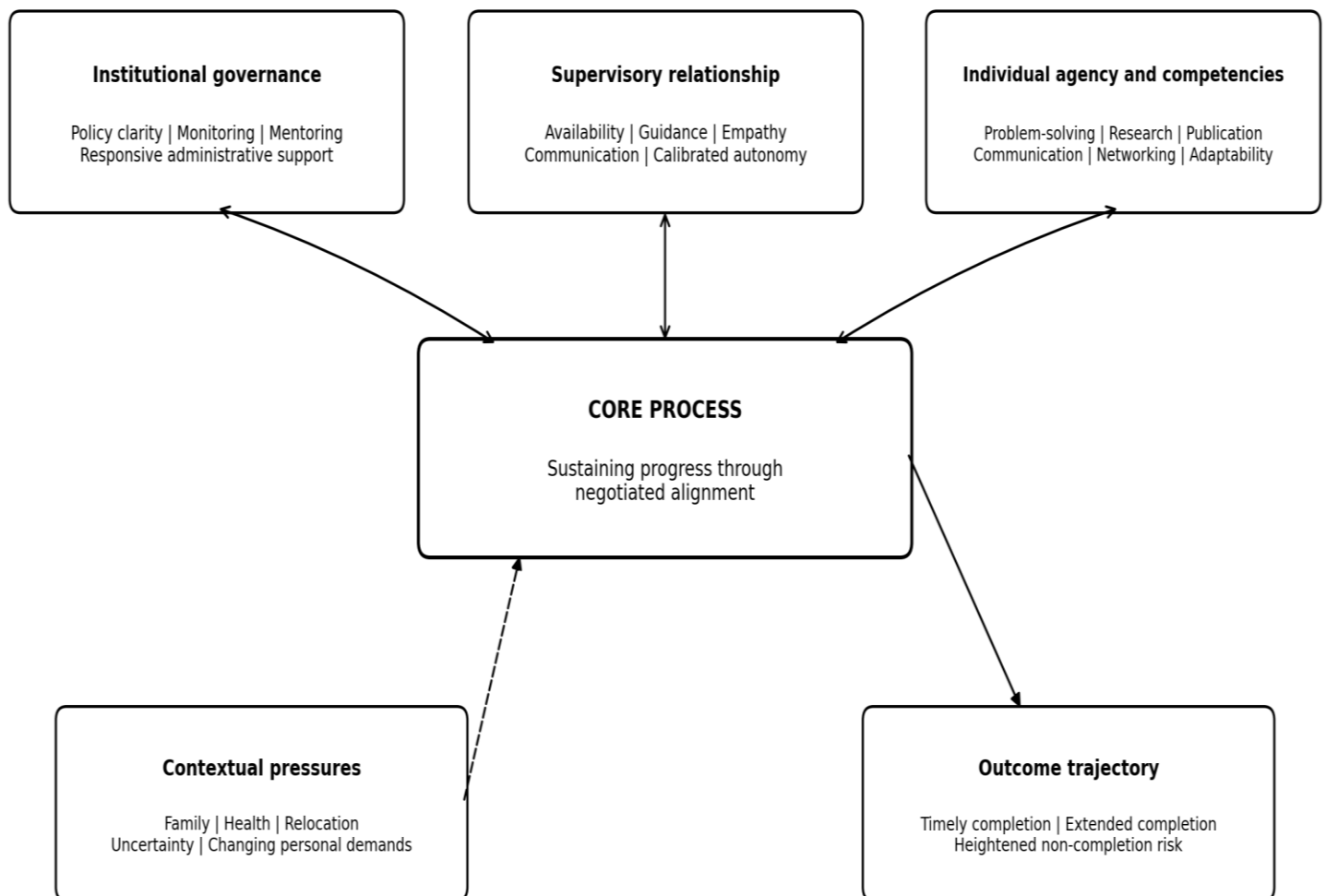
The three categories were integrated through the core process of sustaining progress through negotiated alignment. “Alignment” refers to a workable fit among institutional expectations and support, supervisory guidance, and the academic’s competencies and circumstances. “Negotiated” indicates that the fit is not

established once at the beginning of study leave; it must be repeatedly adjusted as the research, relationships, and personal context change.

When governance was responsive, supervision was constructive, and the academic exercised effective agency, the three domains reinforced one another. Monitoring identified a need; administrators connected the academic to resources; the supervisor helped translate support into research progress; and the candidate applied new skills. Conversely, misalignment created compounding risk. A candidate with weak research skills could deteriorate rapidly when supervisory feedback was delayed and administrative contact was experienced as punitive. The theory therefore explains why apparently similar problems produce different outcomes across candidates.

The outcome is best understood as a trajectory rather than a binary event. Academics may complete within the original period, complete after an extension, or move towards non-completion. Timely realignment can change the trajectory. This is the practical value of the theory: it directs attention to where alignment has weakened and which stakeholder is positioned to act.

Figure 1. Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave



Completion is theorised as an iterative process of aligning institutional, relational and individual conditions.

Theoretical Propositions

The substantive theory can be expressed through four propositions:

- Proposition 1: Academic study leave progress is more likely to be sustained when institutional monitoring is developmental, respectful, and linked to accessible support.
- Proposition 2: Supervisory relationships support completion when guidance, availability, empathy, and candidate autonomy are explicitly negotiated and recalibrated over time.
- Proposition 3: Individual competencies influence completion through agency—particularly the capacity to identify problems, mobilise resources, communicate needs, and adapt research plans under uncertainty.
- Proposition 4: Delay risk increases when institutional, supervisory, and individual domains become misaligned; timely intervention can restore alignment and alter the completion trajectory.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that doctoral outcomes are produced through interacting internal and external conditions. The proposed theory adds specificity by locating those interactions within formal academic study leave. The academic is not only a student but also a sponsored employee whose progress is governed by an employing institution. This creates a three-sided relationship among candidate, supervisor, and sponsor, rather than the conventional candidate–supervisor dyad.

The governance category demonstrates how doctoral progress is embedded within nested institutional contexts, consistent with reviews showing that institutional structures, policy flexibility, and academic integration are among the strongest correlates of doctoral completion (Helgøy et al., 2026). Institutional policies become consequential through implementation: the tone of contact, speed of response, availability of resources, and willingness to diagnose problems. The distinction between developmental and compliance-oriented monitoring is particularly important. Monitoring is not automatically supportive. Its effect depends on whether it generates practical action and preserves the academic’s dignity and willingness to communicate.

The supervision findings indicate that candidates value accessibility, respect, commitment, and candidate-oriented interaction, in line with systematic evidence that supervisory competence is judged by candidates as much on relational qualities as on disciplinary expertise (Haley et al., 2024). They also show how expectation mismatches can arise between supervisors and candidates. The grounded theory reframes such mismatches as failures of alignment that can change over time. A supervisory arrangement that worked during proposal development may become inadequate during data analysis or publication. Regular negotiation of roles is therefore more useful than a one-time agreement.

The emphasis on empathy, flexibility, openness, and trust highlights the relational dimension of supportive supervision. Nevertheless, the present study situates these qualities within institutional study leave. Supervisory empathy alone cannot resolve unclear extension procedures or funding problems, just as administrative flexibility cannot substitute for intellectual guidance. Completion depends on coordination across domains.

The individual competency category identifies writing, self-regulation, motivation, and academic identity as important internal influences, while also recognising that targeted supervisory and mentoring actions can foster doctoral success (McDowall & Ramos, 2024; Pandey & Kaushal, 2025). The theory rejects two extreme interpretations. It does not treat the academic as a passive recipient of support, and it does not treat resilience as a substitute for sound governance and supervision. Agency is relational: it is strengthened or constrained by the quality of resources, feedback, and institutional response.

Family affairs and changing personal circumstances function as contextual pressures rather than a separate explanation of failure. Their effect depends partly on alignment. A family crisis may be manageable when the supervisor adjusts short-term milestones, the institution communicates extension options, and the candidate has the skills to re-plan. The same event may produce prolonged delay when each domain remains rigid or disconnected.

The theoretical contribution is therefore the concept of negotiated alignment. Existing literature often categorises factors as institutional, supervisory, or personal. The Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave explains the process connecting them. It also identifies intervention as a dynamic act: stakeholders must diagnose where alignment has weakened and respond before temporary disruption becomes structural disengagement.

Although the theory was generated within one public university, it has potential analytic transferability to institutions that share the structural conditions of formal academic study leave. The transferable element is the process rather than the frequency of any specific problem: sponsored academics in comparable settings commonly negotiate a dual employee–candidate role, institutional monitoring, supervisory dependence, return obligations, and personal circumstances. The theory should therefore be applied through contextual fit. It is likely to be more relevant to Malaysian public or private universities with formal sponsorship and study leave governance than to self-funded, part-time, or non-employed postgraduate populations where sponsor oversight is absent.

Practical Implications

Implications for University Management and the Registrar's Office

Universities should shift from periodic compliance reporting to risk-sensitive progress management, an approach supported by evidence that institutional flexibility and an approachable administrative ecosystem help buffer the hindrance demands that doctoral candidates otherwise experience as threats to well-being and progress (Acharya et al., 2024). Reports should identify the nature of difficulty, actions already taken, assistance required, and the stakeholder responsible for follow-up. Early-warning indicators may include repeated missed milestones, prolonged absence of supervisor feedback, unresolved ethics or data-access problems, publication bottlenecks, and recurring extension requests.

Communication should be respectful and solution-oriented. Officers and faculty leaders require clear protocols for responding to different types of difficulty, including referral to research training, counselling, financial administration, library support, or senior academic advice. A named study leave coordinator or case-management approach can reduce fragmentation across units.

Policies should state expectations clearly while allowing transparent, evidence-based flexibility. Extension decisions should distinguish avoidable delay from circumstances such as illness, family crisis, supervisor change, research access disruption, or major methodological redesign. The objective is not to remove accountability, but to intervene in ways that improve the probability of completion and protect institutional investment.

Implications for Supervisors and Graduate Schools

Supervisory expectations should be discussed and reviewed at major candidature stages, since research on supervisory competence indicates that clarity of expectations and calibrated guidance are as strongly linked to candidate outcomes as supervisors' technical expertise (Haley et al., 2024). Agreements should cover meeting frequency, feedback timelines, communication channels, authorship and publication expectations, the degree of supervisor direction, and escalation when communication breaks down. Graduate schools can support this process through supervisor development focused on pedagogy, relational practice, and expectation management rather than only regulations.

Where an academic is externally sponsored, supervisory teams should understand that the candidate has reporting and return obligations. With the candidate's consent, limited and appropriate coordination can prevent contradictory expectations. Confidentiality must be preserved, but prolonged supervisory problems should not remain invisible until the study leave period expires.

Implications for Academics on Study Leave

Academics should enter study leave with a realistic development plan that includes research methodology, academic writing, publication, data management, communication, and project planning. They should establish a support network extending beyond the principal supervisor, including peers, research groups, librarians, methodologists, and institutional contacts.

Early disclosure of difficulty is strategically important. Delaying communication may reduce the range of available options. Candidates should document supervisory meetings, feedback, milestones, and administrative correspondence, and should request clarification when expectations are ambiguous. Adaptability should be treated as purposeful re-planning rather than passive acceptance of delay.

Table 3. Alignment-Based Intervention Framework

Domain	Warning signs	Priority response
Governance	Repeated reporting without improvement; unclear requirements; delayed responses; negative or impersonal contact.	Assign a case coordinator; clarify policy; connect the academic to relevant support; agree on a documented recovery plan.
Supervision	Infrequent meetings; delayed feedback; conflicting expectations; controlling or dismissive interaction.	Review supervisory agreement; facilitate expectation dialogue; provide supervisor support; activate escalation or change procedures if required.
Individual agency	Weak research or publication skills; avoidance; poor planning; limited communication; inability to adapt.	Provide stage-specific training, mentoring, peer support, writing assistance, and structured milestone planning.
Contextual pressures	Family crisis, illness, relocation, financial or access disruption.	Use temporary workload and milestone adjustment, counselling or welfare referral, and evidence-based extension where appropriate.

Limitations And Future Research

The study was conducted in a single Malaysian public university with 15 participants and therefore does not support statistical generalisation. The academic group provided variation in rank and local or overseas study settings, but the supervisory and administrative perspectives were represented by only three key informants. Their accounts broadened the analysis, yet they cannot capture the full range of supervisory styles, faculty practices, policy interpretations, or institutional arrangements found across Malaysian higher education.

The findings are nevertheless transferable to a certain extent when other settings share the study's central structural conditions: formal sponsorship, the academic's simultaneous employee and postgraduate roles, progress monitoring by the employing university, supervisory dependence, and return-to-service expectations. This is conditional or analytic transferability, not a claim that the findings will operate identically in every institution. Readers and future researchers must assess the fit between these contextual features and their own settings.

A further limitation is the absence of documentary triangulation. The analysis relied on interviews, coding records, constant comparison, and stakeholder perspectives, but did not examine institutional study leave policies, progress reports, extension applications, completion records, supervisor-change documentation, or

related administrative correspondence. Such documents could corroborate reported experiences, reveal differences between formal policy and enacted practice, and strengthen confirmability. The use of short in-vivo excerpts protects anonymity, although future studies with appropriate consent may present longer participant quotations to provide still greater narrative transparency.

Future research should use a multiple-case study design across several Malaysian universities, including public and private institutions, research-intensive and teaching-oriented universities, and different disciplinary environments. Comparison of local and overseas study leave, as well as on-time completion, delayed completion, and non-completion trajectories, would test which elements of negotiated alignment remain stable and which depend on institutional context. Documentary analysis of study leave policies and records should be incorporated within each case to triangulate interviews and examine how formal procedures are implemented in practice.

A mixed-method design would provide a complementary form of validation. An exploratory sequential study could first refine the categories and propositions through qualitative multiple cases, then develop a survey or diagnostic instrument measuring governance responsiveness, supervisory alignment, individual agency, and emerging delay risk. Testing the instrument across a larger multi-university sample would assess the prevalence and relationships of these constructs without replacing the contextual interpretation provided by qualitative inquiry. Longitudinal research following academics from pre-study-leave preparation through candidature, extension decisions, completion, and return to service would further show how alignment changes over time and when intervention is most effective.

CONCLUSION

This study developed the Grounded Theory of Navigating Academic Study Leave to explain how Malaysian university academics move towards postgraduate completion. The analysis integrated three categories—academic study leave governance, management and policies; supervisor and supervision; and individual competencies and characteristics—through the core process of sustaining progress through negotiated alignment. The theory shows that completion is not produced by sponsorship, motivation, or supervision in isolation. It becomes more likely when institutional governance is responsive, supervisory guidance is constructive, and academics possess or develop the agency to solve problems, communicate needs, and adapt to uncertainty. Misalignment across these domains can compound relatively manageable difficulties and increase the risk of delay or non-completion. For universities, the central implication is to treat study leave as an actively managed developmental process. Clear policy must be combined with respectful monitoring, coordinated support, effective supervisory safeguards, and stage-specific competency development. Such an approach can improve completion outcomes while strengthening the return on institutional investment in academic talent.

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