



RESEARCH PAPER

Ph. D Completion in a Low-Income Country like Pakistan: An Exploration into the Difficulties and Challenges faced by Ph. D Scholars

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by Ph.D. scholars in completing their doctoral studies within the constraints of a low-income country, such as Pakistan. A purposive sampling method was used to select 16 Ph.D. scholars from the social sciences across various regions of Pakistan. Their experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews, guided by a 12-question protocol adapted from Siddiqui et al. (2020). Results based on Thematic analysis indicated that a majority of the Ph.D. scholars expressed satisfaction with their choice of supervisors, having selected them based on their own. However, they suggested delaying the supervisor-selection process until the second semester, citing instances where some faculty members posed difficulties and challenges to those who had not chosen them as supervisor. Furthermore, scholars reported dissatisfaction with the support provided by their supervisors. Financial difficulties were also prevalent among the scholars, with many failing to secure merit scholarships, particularly due to their enrollment in evening or weekend programs.

KEYWORDS Low-Income Country, Pakistani Universities, Ph.D. Completion, Research Difficulties

Introduction

The Under the direction of their research supervisor, university students record their study results in the form of a thesis or dissertation. This is the researchers' original work, and it calls for the use of their strongest critical thinking abilities (Zulfiqar et al., 2020). Through the identification and naming of a study problem, this procedure helps scholars develop their logical thinking and problem-solving skills, empowering them to perform autonomous research. Students' traits, including their knowledge, abilities, and values, are reflected in their thesis work (Siddiqui, 2020).

In Pakistan, after finishing their curriculum and passing qualifying/comprehensive examinations, university students begin their research projects. In this stage of their academic career, they work with their research adviser to choose a topic that interests them personally, design the study, and carry out their research taking into account the population that is accessible (Matin & Khan, 2017).

Research students face a number of obstacles during this time, including choosing a topic and a supervisor as well as getting support from their university and supervisor (Ali et al., 2021). They struggle with selecting a suitable study design as well

as gathering and compiling data for reports. Students face a variety of difficulties when preparing their reports at the last stage of their study (Ekpoh, 2016).

These difficulties may be attributed to personal problems and experiences they had while using their education, their commitment to their jobs, their financial situation, their ability to communicate and manage their time effectively, and the stress they were under at the time (Afzal et al., 2023). These challenges are caused by institutional factors like the funding and facilities provided by the university, the supervision and guidance from senior colleagues as well as the supervisor, the support from the administration of the university, and supervisor-related issues like the supervisor's expertise and interest, the relationship and communication between the supervisor and student, and the supervisor's feedback (Komba, 2016).

Similar concerns have been brought to light by research undertaken in other nations. For example, research conducted in Nigeria shows that the difficulties students have when working on their theses frequently cause them to take longer to finish their postgraduate degrees (Duze, 2010). Furthermore, a large number of graduate and postgraduate students work full-time employment; this is explained by their low financial means. Due to their constant concern over their tuition, this financial burden causes stress, diverting their focus from their thesis work and adding to the delays (Safari et al., 2015).

Literature Review

Completing research work is also greatly impacted by the position of the research supervisor. Students may finish their theses more quickly and readily when their supervisors provide them enough time and direction. Nonetheless, a number of research reveal that supervisors find it difficult to allot enough time and offer the essential direction (Huang, 2010). Postgraduate students face a range of barriers in finishing their theses, such as financial limitations, supervisors' lack of cooperation, administrative problems at the institution, difficulty relating to their families, work-related concerns, and challenges with the writing process (Yousefi et al., 2015).

Matin and Khan (2017) carried out a cross-sectional descriptive study at 20 educational institutions with the goal of identifying the challenges supervisors and students in Bangladesh encounter when finishing their theses. The findings showed that students lacked the skills, dedication, and experience needed to finish their research projects. They had problems with time management, and their supervisors' heavy academic demands resulted in inadequate meetings. Completing a thesis was also hampered by institutional issues such the university administration's lack of support, funding, collaboration, and other resources (Huang, 2010).

Bocar (2009) emphasized the significance of academic institutions working together to help research students finish their theses on time. Personal problems including time management and stress were shown to be the main obstacles, making it difficult for students to finish their assignments. Duze (2010) discovered in a qualitative investigation that supervisors understood result writing better than students did. The causes and types of challenges encountered during thesis work were not well known to students or their supervisors, and students' second language competency was inadequate.

According to a 2016 study by Komba at Tanzanian universities, research students struggled to write every chapter of their thesis because they lacked a thorough

understanding of academic writing. All university students, undergraduate and graduate, must successfully complete a thesis in order to be eligible for their degree, according to the Higher Education Commission (HEC). But a lot of students struggle and can't finish their degrees in time (Ekpoh, 2016). Despite this, not enough attention has been paid to the obstacles and problems Pakistani students' experience (Mouton, 2011).

In order to help university instructors who oversee research students, this study attempts to identify these obstacles and issues. They will be better able to comprehend the challenges that students have in finishing their theses and take corrective action to reduce these issues.

Material and Methods

This study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by Ph.D. scholars in completing their doctoral studies within the constraints of a low-income country, such as Pakistan. A purposive sampling method was used to select 16 Ph.D. scholars from the social sciences across various regions of Pakistan. The selected participants were those who had successfully completed their PhD from either public or a private university within Pakistan. Their experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews, guided by a 12-question protocol adapted from Siddiqui et al. (2020). The data collection involved the individual interviews from the PhD Scholars that have been tape-recorded and transcribed by the inquirer(s) later on.

Results and Discussion

PhD Supervisor's Selection

The majority of the participants given their stances regarding their experiences of selecting the PhD research supervisors that they have selected them as per their will. Only a few of them complained that their wished/selected supervisor has not been allotted to them. Rather they have been allotted the supervisor for which they haven't given the consent. One of the participants shared that:

Yes, I have selected my PhD research supervisor as per my will. I was very clear about the selection of my supervisor. So, I just took the consent from the desired faculty member and submitted the consent form. When the recommendations of the Boards of the Studies (BoS) were notified, I was allotted the same supervisor that I have applied for.

Another participant stated similarly:

I faced no issue regarding the selection of the PhD supervisor for the research phase. I got what I wanted. Although there were many PhD Scholars who have applied for the same faculty member and I was afraid if I don't get the desired supervisor. But luckily I was allocated the desired PhD supervisor as the supervisors' specialization was the similar with my mentioned research interest and topic.

Another participant given the similar stance:

"As we were only four PhD scholars in our department and there were more faculty members than our strength. So, I found no problem to get the wanted teacher as my PhD research supervisor."

However, another scholar shared a different experience that:

I wasn't the lucky enough to have my desired teacher as my PhD research supervisor. I have applied for that teacher but when the recommendations of the BoS were notified, I got to know that the desired supervisor wasn't allocated to me as his area of specialization was not matching my area of interested in research.

The similar stance was shared by a participant that:

I wasn't allocated the supervisor that I had applied for while stating the reason that the proposed teacher hasn't the required Post-PhD experience for being the PhD research supervisor. That's why I was awarded someone else that I hadn't proposed for. So, I was a little bit disappointed about this.

It also have been shared by the majority of the participants that the supervisor's selection process should be delayed till the completion of the Semester-II as the teaching faculty creates difficulties and hurdles for them if they are not selected by the PhD Scholars. Even some of the PhD Scholars have complained that their semester results are also affected by the PhD supervisor's selection decision. One of the participants stated that:

As far as you ask for the difficulties regarding the PhD supervisor's selection, yes I have faced many. The reason behind the faced difficulties and challenges was that we were asked to submit the consent form before the completion of the second semester of PhD Coursework. So, those faculty members who have approached me and asked to select them as the PhD supervisor, started making hurdles for me on non-compliance. When they came to know that I have selected someone else as the supervisor. They even criticized me directly in the classroom. Even one of those faculty members have started scolding me unnecessarily during the class sessions.

Another PhD Scholar shared the stance that:

Let me call a delay regarding the PhD supervisor's selection till the completion of the second semester as some of the teachers get personal if they are not selected as the PhD supervisor. Even I am the one who have faced the same problem. I was asked by one of my teachers to select him as a PhD research supervisor but I selected another one and the consequences were very disturbing. The teacher has started disrespecting me during the class and even I feel it strongly that my semester results of that specific subject have been affected by this. As per my understanding, the situation could be better if the supervisor's selection was delayed till the second semester so that no teacher could have affect the scholars' semester results.

One of the scholars shared the similar experience that:

Yes, the semester results seem to be affected by the PhD supervisor's selection as well as the teachers' behavior was changed with the students. So, the PhD supervisors' selection must not be made before the completion of the second semester as some of the teachers' behavior gets totally changed with the scholars who do not select them as supervisor.

Research Topic Selection

The majority of the participants reported that their supervisor given them the autonomy to select their research topics as per their area of interest. However, they also intimidated them with their areas of specialization and especially command in the research

approach i.e., quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods research. Meanwhile, few of the participants given their stance that they were asked by the supervisors to extend their PhD work or work on the topic suggested by the supervisor. One of the participants stated that:

There was no restriction from my supervisor's side for selecting the topic for the PhD research. The supervisor has given me the autonomy that you may select any topic of your interest. However, I was told that my supervisor has the expertise only in Quantitative methods of the research and if I choose the qualitative approach, then the supervisor would be at less ease for helping me out during my research work.

One of the Participants given the similar stance:

"I did my PhD research on my proposed research topic. My supervisor supported my proposed topic instead of compelling me to do the research on his referred topic."

Another PhD scholar shared the similar experience while saying that:

During the first meeting with my supervisor I was told that I have the liberty of choosing any of the research topics but I must be choosy in a sense that I should choose a novel topic that could have the significance of addressing any latest gap regarding the research area. I was also told that my supervisor was well-versed with the Qualitative research methods but there would be no issue even if I go for the Quantitative research methods. The supervisor was very kind while sharing that both of us will be learning the quantitative statistics together during my PhD research work.

A similar experience was shared by one of the participants:

"I chose the topic for my PhD on my own. However, I was given the support by my supervisor in this regard."

Another scholar given the stance that:

I wasn't expected by the research supervisor to select the topic of my supervisor's interest. Rather I was asked to study the latest research articles and think on my own that what did I wanted to do and then decide about the research topic. I did the same and then my supervisor helped me out to refine my proposed research topic.

However, one of the PhD scholar given a different stance that:

I was asked by my PhD supervisor to extend his PhD research work instead of looking for something else so that it could be easy for both of us. That proposed area of research was ok but I wanted to do on a different topic of my interest. This is why we had almost four session comprising the discussion on my PhD topic selection but then I had to give up and choose the topic proposed by my PhD supervisor. It was disturbing for me initially but then I had made myself understand that the completion of my PhD was more important than doing the research on my desired topic. So, I conducted the research on my desired topic later on in shape of a research article.

A similar stance was given by a PhD scholar:

"I was compelled by my supervisor to extend his PhD research topic. I was told with the gaps and asked to explore the existing literature related to that problem and I did so."

Supervisor's Support

The majority of the PhD Scholars have shared their dissatisfaction with the support provided by their supervisors, noting a lack of responsiveness to emails seeking feedback on their research work. They told that they had to wait sometimes for even months after sending the research work to their supervisors. On the other hand, their supervisors also remained unable to attend them properly in office for being burdened with the assigned tasks. Similarly, their supervisors' colleagues often visit them during the meeting with the supervisory which causes disturbance in discussion. One of the PhD Scholars shared the experience that:

Getting the supervisor's feedback on sent emails was like digging a Milk-Canal from the mountains. Whenever I sent her the research work, I had to request and remind her frequently for the feedback that usually didn't give by her. This is what had delayed my PhD from the completion. If I had been lucky enough to get her feedback timely, my PhD would have been completed timely instead of taking the extension.

Another participant shared the similar experience:

My supervisor was quite planned regarding the assignments but his feedback was never same as his planned assignments for me. Although he had planned the research activities and given me the timeline. I always tried hard to meet the timeline but his feedback was never on time. I was like doing the tasks, completing them and then waiting for his feedback. Sometimes, I had to text him many times to request the feedback and he always responded that he will send the feedback soon but usually he couldn't.

One of the participant shared the similar experience that:

"My supervisor's feedback was a kind of slow but I knew that the reason was the business and excessive workload otherwise the situation could be different."

A similar stance was shared by a PhD Scholar that:

My supervisor was much busy because of the workload and departmental tasks that didn't let him respond to my emails on time. He knew this and also acknowledged it many times that my research work was getting disturbed due to the late feedback but it wasn't in his control as even when I visited him in office he usually was burdened with the tasks.

Another participants stated that:

My supervisor remained much busy whenever I visited the office. Even his colleagues used to come to his office during our meeting which was very disruptive that I had to wait for their departure. As far as the feedback on email was concerned, it was not available to the satisfactory level.

Similar experience was shared by a participant while stating:

"My supervisor was cooperative enough but his feedback was not so warming. Usually, I was given the feedback after 2 weeks or later."

Institutional Support

The participants shown their dissatisfaction regarding the institutional support. The majority of the PhD Scholars complained that their institutional library wasn't updated regarding the needed latest books. Whenever they visited the institutional library, they remained unable to find the needed books. Similarly, if they could find the desired book, the librarian refused to issue them as it was either the only copy in the library or an imported book which is not issued to the students. Rather, this book was only available to study within the library premises. Even if the PhD Scholars have requested to the librarian for providing the required book which is not available within the local context. The librarian shown the helplessness that it cannot be done as this matter is related to a few of the PhD Scholars. One of the participant stated that:

"The library was not updated with the latest books. The needed books were not ordered for the students. The e-library was also not available and operational completely."

A similar stance was shared by one of the PhD Scholars that:

"We were unable to access the paid-online content and online international libraries as our institution didn't given us the access to that paid content. The VPN was also not provided to us."

Another participant stated that:

"The institution was not much helping regarding our difficulties. Neither there was any working space allotted to us after the completion of our coursework. We were always wandering like refugees here and there whenever we visited the institute."

The similar stance was given by another participant that:

One of the participants shared that:

Whenever I visited the institutional library, I remained unable to find the needed books. However, if I could find the desired book, the librarian refused to issue them as it was either the only copy in the library or an imported book which is not issued to the students. Rather, this book was only available to study within the library premises. Even if any PhD Scholars have requested to the librarian for providing the required book which is not available within the local context. The librarian shown the helplessness that it cannot be done as this matter is related to a few of the PhD Scholars.

Financial Management

The majority of the PhD Scholars shared their experiences that they had suffered a lot regarding the financial management. The majority of the PhD Scholars were either unemployed or doing sub-optimal jobs. Those who were unemployed, had to ask to the family for the financial assistance due to which they were mostly stressed. Whereas those who were doing jobs but they had to support their families financially. So, they had to do extra/ second job due to which they had to suffer regarding the rest time as well as the study time. However, only a few of the PhD Scholars who were either doing optimal-jobs or were receiving good salary package were ok with it. They weren't facing any financial issue during their PhD. One of the PhD Scholars shared the experience that:

It was difficult to manage the expenses for my PhD as I belong to the Middle standard family. Although I have a job but I had to feed my family as well along with

managing the semester fees. For this, I started another job. Started teaching in an academy but then conflict arose as I was perusing the PhD in evening program. The conflict arose in the timing of my academy classes and the university classes at the same time. However, I requested the academy principal to relax me regarding the timing and even to the university teachers. Summing up all, it was very difficult to manage the fee as many times I had to beg my friends for the fee.

A similar stance was stated by another participant:

The financial management was very stressing during the PhD. The Merit based scholarship was not available for us as we were enrolled in the Morning shift whereas the Need-Based scholarship was not affordable for my conscience. So, I had to take loan from the friends and family for the completion.

Another participant stated the same that:

The issue faced by us was that our university was offering two types of scholarships. One was the Merit-based scholarship offered specifically to the PhD scholars enrolled in Morning shift and was not available for those scholars enrolled in the Evening shift. The other one was need-based scholarship offered for the needy scholars either from the morning shift or evening shift. Even I was in need of the financial assistance but still I did not find myself fit for the Need-based scholarship. My conscience didn't let me apply.

Another participants stated that:

I was jobless at that time when I was doing my PhD. So, it was quite embarrassing for me to ask for the fee from the parents. It was not like embarrassment for taking money from the parents but being their male offspring I felt so. Then I started the job to avoid this embarrassment but then my study time was suffered.

However one of the participant shared a different stance that:

"I was employed on a reasonable, in fact an optimal job and it was no issue for me to manage the semester fee for the PhD. Therefore, my focus was always on the completion of my PhD instead of the finances."

A similar experience was shared by another participant:

"I faced no issue regarding my PhD fee management as I was availing the Merit-based scholarship which was fair enough to bear the expenses."

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the challenges encountered by Ph.D. scholars in completing their doctoral studies within the constraints of a low-income country, such as Pakistan. A purposive sampling method was used to select 16 Ph.D. scholars from the social sciences across various regions of Pakistan. The selected participants were those who had successfully completed their PhD from either public or a private university within Pakistan. Their experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews, guided by a 12-question protocol adapted from Siddiqui et al. (2020). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Results indicated that a majority of the Ph.D. scholars expressed satisfaction with their choice of supervisors, having selected them based on their own. However, they suggested delaying the supervisor-selection process

until the second semester, citing instances where some faculty members posed difficulties and challenges to those who had not chosen them as supervisor. Furthermore, scholars reported dissatisfaction with the support provided by their supervisors, noting a lack of responsiveness to emails seeking feedback on their research work. Financial difficulties were also prevalent among the scholars, with many failing to secure merit scholarships, particularly due to their enrollment in evening or weekend programs. Additionally, scholars faced challenges related to institutional support, including inadequate resources such as access to paid e-libraries, necessary books in university libraries, and dedicated working spaces during their research endeavors.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it has been recommended that:

- The universities should start the process of PhD supervisor's selection after the completion of the second semester so that no teacher could get biased.
- The HEC and universities should provide the merit scholarships to the students enrolled in the evening students similar as provided to the students enrolled in the morning shifts.
- The universities should ensure the provision of the facilities like access to e-libraries, latest books as per the PhD Scholar's demand and dedicated work space.

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