"Procedural Requirements: Storied Experiences of Doctoral Students after Submission of Dissertation"

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present qualitative study was to understand the feelings, storied experiences, and response of doctoral students who had been waiting for evaluation reports for a long time to complete their doctoral degrees. The study was conducted in public and private sector universities of Pakistan in the Province of Punjab. Twenty doctoral students who were purposively selected from the Province of Punjab Pakistan shared the meaning-making of their storied experiences after submission of the doctoral dissertation. Narrative and phenomenological inquiry was used. The anecdotal stories of doctoral students revealed personal experiences that seemed common to most of the doctoral students. A narrative of each doctoral student's experiences disclosed the subjective meaning of his or her concerns after submitting the doctoral dissertation. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were analysed through a thematic analysis approach and was explained in detail. The major themes that emerged from the study were the procedural complexities, perceived negligence and sense of disempowerment. The study has implications for reforms of doctoral degree process and completion.

Introduction

Over the course of the previous decade, there has been tremendous growth in education and research at the doctoral level worldwide. Globalization and the massive increase in PhD programs have benefited countries in every sphere of life, such as technology, scientific thoughts and the development of new ideas based on research, both nationally and internationally (Engebretson et al., 2008). Universities around the world are effectively focusing on how to compete within global rankings and national rankings and in this regard, they are trying to make doctoral education more productive and efficient. Universities are regularly trying to find ways to generate valuable workforce to overcome all these problems. The contribution of doctoral students in this regard is incredibly important because they can make a conceptually strong statement (Van de Schoot et al., 2013a). In the same way, (Boud & Lee, 2009; Gao, 2021; Lee & Boud, 2009) explain that the PhD degree is globally considered a symbol of great thinkers whenever knowledge and research are mentioned., This not only increases enrolment in doctoral programs, but also drives innovation in doctoral studies, as well as significant changes in data production methods for institutional and government policies.

Universities around the world are striving to improve their national and international academic standards and at the same time they are seeking new ways to revise teaching and research according to the modern educational requirements (Van de Schoot et al., 2013b). The role of doctoral candidates in producing a large amount of scientific and research material is very important as they can be a renowned factor in the process of academic development. One of the best academic ranking systems in the world is the Shanghai's Ranking System, according to which the success of universities depends on the number of their PhD completions and the quality of their research work (Feldon et al., 2010). It is a very painful process for PhD students when they find that their own institution is using delaying tactics to complete their academic degree and also putting unnecessary hurdles which can be harmful for the university in future. This practice is not only detrimental to the university as it stops various government and non-government investments on the students, but such delaying tactics cause stress to the students and also the fear of losing their valuable time and money and it can also lead to a lack of interest in the supervising process.(Bourke et al., 2004; Feldon et al., 2010)

A PhD degree is highly valued in our society and its completion has a positive impact on the academic ranking of universities (Jairam & Kahl Jr, 2012; Park, 2005). Highly educated people such as PhD students can play a positive role in bringing about moral and social changes within the society through their academic research. According to Srivastava (2005), Doctoral students have the potential to contribute to the advancement of society by advancing knowledge, challenging myths and misconceptions, and developing solutions to complex problems. The innovation of science and modern technology has made even this difficult task easier. Now only doctoral students need to be trained to use modern technology according to their needs. Future leaders and researchers are trained in doctoral programs in universities for the development of the country (Brew, 2001; Nettles et al., 2006).

In developing third world countries like Pakistan, doctoral degree is always considered as a tedious and mentally demanding job. The PhD degree is pondered backbreaking and high-priced in most of these countries. The most knowledgeable and informed students are considered to be PhD students in universities around the world. We were shocked to learn during their interviews that these highly educated students are being punished for wrong deeds they are not even responsible for them while moving their doctoral destination. We feel as if these students have challenged the writ of a country or university. Similarly (Golde, 2000; Mosanya et al., 2022) surprisingly commented in their research papers that these highly qualified doctoral students face many hindrances in achieving their highly desired academic goals in completing their doctoral degrees. Bair and Haworth (2004) explain there is a major source of stress and anxiety for doctoral students is not completing their doctoral degree on time.

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According to Sedivy-Benton and O'Kelly (2015), anxiety among doctoral students is a barrier to completing their degrees because it is a delaying tactic for assessing student success. In many places matters have reached such an extent that a doctoral student has to think a lot to meet his/her educational expenses at any cost. Whether or not his/her doctoral dissertation is completed, he/she also needs additional financial support to meet his/her family's needs. In addition, dissatisfaction of doctoral students with university policies is a major problem apart from this delay. This journey of completing a PhD is studded with obstacles like loneliness, anxiety, mental stress, mental health, restlessness, exhaustion and unnecessary procrastination. We can say it is not "bed of roses" (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Pyhältö et al., 2009). In the same way (Iqbal et al., 2012; Shams et al., 2020) have already pointed out that doctoral students face many problems in universities such as access to modern research literature, lack of information technology resources and internet access , inappropriate behavior of university officials, old policies of universities which need to be adjusted according to modern requirements, lack of funding in universities, lack of research knowledge among students, lack of separate research discussion room for doctoral students, the ability of research supervisors to conduct research and insufficient consultant meetings

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this qualitative research paper was to investigate the personal accounts and real-life encounters of PhD students regarding the issues they face while awaiting evaluation reports on their doctoral dissertation for a period of two years or longer. This study aims to understand the trends under investigation by exposing participants' emotions, experiences, and reactions to those who have been waiting for a long time to complete their doctoral degrees. The study was conducted in public and private sector universities in Punjab province.

Research Questions

1. How do doctoral candidates experience procedural requirements when submitting a dissertation?
2. What are doctoral students' feelings, anecdotal stories and perspectives about procedural complexities they experienced after the submission of dissertation?

Research Methodology

This research paper was a qualitative study, personal narratives and phenomenology as research methods are used to collect the data through semi-structured interviews and focus group of those doctoral students who had been waiting for 2 years or more for their dissertations' evaluation reports as well as the final defence of their dissertations. Direct contact was essential to obtain reliable information, and a qualitative research design was chosen to tap into the experiences of doctoral students. The researchers had to talk to the participants to get first-hand information. Researchers try to assess the characteristics and values of human behavior with the help of qualitative research. It refers to the unique stances of a person within a precise frame work of time and place (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patterson, 2018). This investigation adopted qualitative research methodology, a narrative and phenomenological design were used to get in-depth information from real-life stories and personal experienced of participants. The individuals who experienced a phenomenon in specific context narrated their personal views. It is the basic requirement of qualitative study, narrative and phenomenology design to explore, understand, represent, and explain the perspectives of the participants about their life stories and lived experiences (Creswell, 2015).

Participants of the Study

The primary participants of the study were doctoral students who had submitted their dissertations and had been awaiting evaluation reports for two years or longer. The selection criteria of the participants are based on the following points: Firstly, these people are working on their doctoral dissertation and trying to resolve the issues raised by the university administration in various forums and meetings with officials. Secondly, things like the availability of participants and how to reach them were taken into consideration.

Data Collection

For narrative and phenomenological designs, semi-structured interviews are used by many researchers as a tool for data

collection (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Derbyshire et al., 2023). As a result, semi-structured interviews were also employed in this study. Compared to focus group interviews, this approach offered an idiographic component, and compared to un-structured interviews, it provides the helpful outlines (Guest et al., 2017). The advantage of semi-structured interviews is that they allow participants to express their views openly and authentically on topics they consider important, ensuring that the research question is adequately addressed (Banha et al., 2022; Cruz et al., 2023).

The use of focus group interviews in qualitative data collection was beneficial in obtaining a substantial amount of information from a group of individuals at the same time (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Neo et al., 2022) and to emerge divergent views (Barbour, 2013; Kayrooz & Trevitt, 2005; Ramlo, 2020). In addition, it allowed the researcher to understand the participants' perspectives on the topic, and they could draw evidence from both dialogue and their own observations. (Freeman, 2006; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Data Analysis

Constructivism is founded on the belief that individuals construct their own reality. Each person has unique belief systems that influence their perception and interpretation of the world and their personal experiences. Through the utilization of narrative and phenomenological inquiry, we can comprehend how individuals derive meaning from their belief systems, as well as their attitudes, values, and ideas that influence their sense of self and identity. However according to (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) narrative researchers must exercise caution regarding the authenticity of the stories and experiences they record. Narrative inquiry is a comprehensive term that encompasses the human and personal aspects of experiences over time and explores the link between personal experiences and cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Haydon et al., 2018).

Results of the Study

In the past decade, there has been significant growth and change in PhD education globally, with a substantial increase in the number of PhD programs benefiting countries at the national level. Universities around the world are actively focusing on increasing their competitiveness in global and national rankings, constantly looking for ways to improve and meet established standards. The role of doctoral students is extremely important in this context, as they have the potential to contribute valuable and sustainable knowledge, which is a key factor in many classification systems.

Procedural Complexities

Education is the primary process by which knowledge and skills are transferred to learners, often at a higher level in universities. However, our education system faces various challenges that may affect the quality of education imparted to doctoral students. These issues are consistently identified and recognized by doctoral students over time. According to Participant "A" who holds the post of Lecturer in a Public Sector College, it is stated that:

> *"According to Participant "A", who is a lecturer in a public sector college, he has raised concerns about several issues in doctoral education programmes. These issues include challenges related to the formalities of thesis submission, obtaining consent from external and internal review panels, as well as perceived bias and arbitrariness within the examination department. Additionally, there is a lack of transparency in the publication of dissertation evaluation reports, and unnecessary delays in the doctoral defense process. Participant "A" further emphasizes that he continues to raise his voice and bring attention to issues in various forums where his voice can be heard."*

It is important to address these issues as per the policies formulated by the Higher Education Commission and the universities themselves. Alignment with these policies is critical to ensure that the challenges faced by doctoral education programs are adequately and accurately addressed. In addition, he expressed his opinion that:

> *"When we have the opportunity to communicate with university*

officials, we consistently draw attention to the issues facing doctoral students and urge them to address these issues consistent with Higher Education Commission (HEC) policies. Simultaneously, we advocate for revising these policies to align them with contemporary standards in the modern world."

The attitude of the university administration was identified as one of the key concerns raised by the doctoral students. Compared to international standards, the evaluation process after submission of doctoral theses is quite delayed and inefficient. Such delay on the part of the university administration adversely affects the quality of research. Doctoral students who have already submitted their theses are actively advocating for the rights of their fellow doctoral candidates.

Participant "B", another doctoral student who also holds a private job, has been struggling to complete his PhD for the past decade. Unfortunately, he too has faced disappointment from the university administration staff. Expressing his dissatisfaction, he shared, *"I have reached this point of frustration with the university administration, but the authorities responsible for resolving the matter seem indifferent to the seriousness of the situation."* The university administration has consistently shown a biased attitude, subjecting students to long waits without any valid reasons. Moreover, they refuse to provide any justification for this unfair treatment. It has been almost two years since the doctoral theses were submitted, and they are still stuck in the evaluation process. The management even restricts access to their offices for necessary assistance and treats the students with disdain. "*Helplessly, we doctoral students find ourselves stuck in a situation where we can only bear resentment and remain silent, as our doctorates are now completely at the mercy of the administration, and we feel unjustly punished for no good reason."*

Participant "C" described that,

"We face numerous challenges, especially university policies, which have been the focus of our long-standing struggle. Recently,

we expressed our concerns regarding extending the doctorate policy as per the Higher Education Commission (HEC) guidelines. Earlier, the policy remained stagnant for many years without any updates."

Perceiving Negligence

The appointment of both external and internal reviewers is very important in the doctoral process, yet the university administration underestimates its importance. As a result of this negligence, doctoral students have to bear the brunt of it. He has urged the university administration to revise the rules and policies to streamline and facilitate this important aspect. Additionally, there are instances where university authorities unduly delay the appointment of evaluators due to personal animosity and resentment towards professors serving as doctoral research supervisors. Such unnecessary actions have the potential to hinder future progress toward completing our doctoral degrees.

Participant D, who works as a primary school teacher in the Punjab School Education Department, a public sector organization, expressed the following:

"I submitted my doctoral thesis within the stipulated period, but the approval process by the Board of Advanced Studies and Research (BASAR) suffered a setback due to the retirement of one of its members. I had to wait long enough for the new board member to be reconstituted so that the university administration could send my thesis to the reviewers. This delay continued for several months and had a profound negative impact on me and my fellow doctoral students."

Sense of Disempowerment

This situation is very disturbing not only for those directly affected but also for listeners and future doctoral students. This can lead to a sense of disempowerment, resulting in a reduction in the number of doctoral researchers in the country. As a result, the low number of doctoral researchers has a negative impact on the academic quality of the region's universities, and the overall academic quality as well.

Participant E, an influential figure in a powerful public sector organization, described her experience of completing her doctoral dissertation as something of a sense of helplessness.

"I had contacts and influence in various departments Because of my powerful position, and I tried my best to use them to speed up the necessary procedures within the university but in vain. As a result, the completion of my degree was significantly delayed. I found myself completely helpless as even those with whom I had personal relationships preferred their departmental disputes to resolving our issues."

Participant F, who was unemployed while pursuing his doctoral degree, had numerous aspirations for his future upon completion. Living with elderly parents who could no longer provide him with adequate support, he described his challenges as follows:

"I was unemployed and facing many problems due to delay in completion of my doctorate degree because I thought of using my doctorate degree to get a good position in some institution. I faced many problems in collecting data and writing the doctoral thesis and submitting it on time which I easily overcame. But the real problems arise even after submission which I now realize. To make matters worse, the university authorities delayed the procedure due to the absence of a member of the forwarding committee who was responsible for processing doctoral theses. This led to an extensive waiting period for completion of all necessary procedures. When we asked for information regarding the appointment of new committee members, the officials did not have a concrete answer and they assured us that it would happen very soon and said that we need not worry.

Participant G, an unmarried woman who had devoted five years to work on her doctoral dissertation, presented for internal and external evaluation 18 months ago. She has been eagerly awaiting the completion of her doctoral degree for the past 18 months. This delay not only affected her professional aspirations but also hampered her personal plans including her marriage. She envisioned celebrating this milestone in her life by starting a new chapter. However, the lengthy assessment process has created significant frustration and uncertainty. She hopes for a quick resolution so she can finally move on with her life and career. She expressed the following sentiments regarding the delay:

"I had made promises to my family, assuring them that I would go ahead with my marriage plans after completing my doctorate. This decision was influenced by the fact that my fiancé was also pursuing a doctorate, and I wanted to have academic parity between us. However, despite the submission of my doctoral thesis, it suffered significant delays in the evaluation process due to personal conflicts between the controller of examinations and my supervisor. This resulted in months of waiting and suffering. I personally appealed to the Controller of Examinations to take action, but unfortunately, there was no progress. Consequently, both my doctoral degree and marriage were postponed for a frustrating two-year period."

Participant "H" is serving as a lecturer at the same university, faces a dilemma where her promotion to the next position, Assistant Professor (BPS-19), is dependent on her completion of her doctoral degree. The delay in obtaining this degree poses the following challenges for him.

" I am eagerly waiting for the completion of my doctoral degree as it is a prerequisite for my promotion to the post of Assistant Professor (BPS-19). However, constant delays in completing my degree have stunted my progress. This delay not only hinders my career development but also hinders the professional

development and recognition that I deserve. Eligibility criteria for the post of Assistant Professor clearly requires a doctorate degree. It is impossible for me to go on without it. Consequently, my promotion and accompanying benefits, such as increased responsibilities and compensation, have been postponed indefinitely. This situation creates great frustration and uncertainty about my future prospects at the university. The situation is gradually deteriorating as clashes between university officials are a major obstacle to the processing and publication of my doctoral dissertation reports."

Participant "I" is a wireless operator in Punjab Police Department working in BPS-7 with low income. Eagerly waiting to complete his PhD degree so that he can get better job opportunities. However, during the interview, he expressed deep sorrow over the unnecessary complications created by the university's procedures. The procedure, which should have been completed immediately, has been unnecessarily delayed due to personal grudges among university authorities. He expressed his sorrow in these words:

"I am deeply saddened by the unnecessary complications that have arisen during the completion of my PhD degree. As a wireless operator in the Punjab Police Department, I am already struggling with low income due to which more Inflation makes it difficult to support myself. Completing my PhD degree is very important for me to have better job prospects and improve my financial situation. However, procedures at the university have been unnecessarily complicated, resulting in considerable delays. These delays caused by personal grudges between university officials prolonged my agony and hindered my progress. It is disheartening to witness such personal conflicts affecting my future and depriving me of these opportunities. I hope the university authorities should put

aside their personal differences and prioritize the welfare of the students, ensuring that the procedure is completed smoothly and without any unnecessary delays."

Participant "J" is wife of an Army officer and founder of an NGO for the Army Soldiers Family Welfare Center, enrolled in a doctoral degree program while her husband was stationed in the same city. She diligently attended her doctoral classes during the coursework phase and tried to complete her doctoral thesis within the stipulated time. Notifying her husband of a possible transfer every three years, as required by Army regulations, she understood the importance of timely completion, as it would become increasingly difficult to meet with her research supervisor for feedback on the thesis. Despite its urgent need, the university administration has left it in limbo. She remains unaware of the current status of her thesis. Lack of transparency and information has hurt him a lot. She expressed her concern as follows:

"My decision to enroll in this university, based on its proximity to my home, was a result of wishful thinking. The treatment of my doctoral thesis by the university authorities is beyond words. Despite completing the doctoral thesis on time, the university procedures made it a joke. Adding to my dismay, my husband has been transferred to another province as per army regulations, necessitating relocation of my family. Traveling alone for 800 km from my current location to the university has become a daunting task. Unfortunately, the university authorities do not answer phone calls. On the rare occasion they do listen, their response is consistent: "Don't worry, ma'am, we're working on the procedure of doctoral dissertation, and we'll let you know very soon."

Participant "K", a female doctoral student working as a junior clerk in a law department, finds herself in a difficult situation. As a married woman and mother of

two, she faces the financial hardships that come with her and her husband's low-paying jobs. Six years ago, he joined a public sector university to pursue a doctorate. However, despite submitting her doctoral thesis 21 months ago, she finds herself stuck in a seemingly endless waiting line. She expresses her difficulties in this way:

"I find myself in a dilemma, unsure whether to attribute the delay in completing my doctorate to my own shortcomings or a twist of fate. Despite being surrounded by numerous challenges, I dedicated myself to completing my doctoral thesis, sacrificing countless hours of work day and night. The damage it caused to my family, especially my children and husband, was palpable. I even fell ill from exhaustion, but I persevered with a positive outlook. However, the attitude of the university officials and the procedural hurdles I have faced have left me completely disappointed. Their interactions are inconsistent, leaving me in a constant state of uncertainty. It seems that the university administration and the officers holding their positions are not aligned in their approach. It's tempting to want to retreat to a secluded corner and leave it all behind, but my responsibilities as a parent prevent me from doing so. I have to bear these difficulties for the sake of my children. The challenges I faced in completing my doctoral degree have tested my patience and resilience. I hope for a resolution that will bring clarity and allow me to move forward, fulfilling my wishes and providing a better future for my family."

Discussion

A research degree is considered the highest academic qualification in the academic field. Generally, students who want to make their future in research field are very active and they are useful to the society in socio-cultural field. In the 19th century, when Friedrich Wilhelm was awarded the world's first doctorate at the University of Berlin, the practice of teaching and research began to spread throughout the world. (Park, 2007). The primary purpose of present study was to examine the stories and experiences of those doctoral students who had been submitting their dissertations for two years or more ago and facing indirect delays in their evaluation reports and viva voice defence. Interviews were conducted with PhD students who experienced delays in completing their doctoral degrees to explore the reasons for the delay and its impact on their individual and scholastic lives. So that it can be analyzed and understood. Key findings from the qualitative analysis are discussed below under each theme with reference to contemporary literature that primarily addresses these issues.

The prime aim of this research was to determine the encounters faced by doctoral students that contribute to the postponement of completing their doctoral degrees. The initial two primary research questions concerned the doctoral students' encounter with the procedural prerequisites during their dissertation submission, and the involvement of the university officials in processing the doctoral students' dissertations after submission. The involvement of university officials in addressing doctoral students' issues was investigated based on the feedback provided by the participants of this research paper. University officials possess significant power and authority to address obstacles faced by doctoral students through an appropriate platform, providing them with the opportunity to voice their concerns, identify issues, and collaborate as stakeholders to find solutions.

The university administration plays a crucial role as one of the primary stakeholders in doctoral degree programs. As part of the process, doctoral students are required to obtain clearance certificates from various departments, including the Library, Controller of Examinations, Accounts Office, and QEC, before they can submit their final dissertation. Despite

these departments already having access to all the relevant data regarding each doctoral student, they often create significant obstacles when it comes to issuing clearance certificates. In many instances, the QEC fails to provide plagiarism reports to doctoral students due to expired Turnitin accounts or the negligence of administrators. Consequently, these issues arise only after the doctoral dissertation has been completed, making it impossible for students to submit their dissertations without obtaining the aforementioned clearance certificate. Based on our comprehensive literature review, we identified two key factors that impact the experiences of doctoral and postgraduate students. These factors, namely university-related and student-related factors, have a significant influence on the progress and successful completion of doctoral degrees, as well as on students' well-being, attrition rates, and persistence. (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Dominguez, 2006; Manathunga, 2002). Research scholars have also found a relationship between departmental factors and the level of satisfaction and progress of doctoral students. (Austin, 2002; Cotterall, 2013; Herzig, 2002; Welde & Laursen, 2008).

Previous research studies have shown that culture and practices within departments play an important role in attracting doctoral students, especially depending on the student's interest in a particular field. (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2005). Consistently, one of the problems that arise is the mismatch of values and expected outcomes between students and their respective departments (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Gardner, 2010, 2013; Golde, 2005; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lin, 2012; Lovitts, 2008; Nelson & Lovitts, 2001; Sweitzer, 2009). An unfortunate situation may arise in which the admission department fails to provide adequate information about the duties and responsibilities of the students during the initial stage of admission. (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Gardner, 2010; Nelson & Lovitts, 2001).

Conclusion

This study has brought to light some issues that were previously unknown to many people considering a PhD. Aspiring doctoral students often perceive the research process as challenging, time-consuming, and stressful. However, the present study revealed the problems and concerns faced by doctoral students even after submitting their doctoral dissertation. From the researchers' perspective, the majority of problems or causes for delays in completing doctoral degrees are attributed to non-professional behavior and deliberate delays by university officials, often motivated by personal reasons such as interdepartmental or intradepartmental issues. This study provides guidelines for future doctoral students to be aware of the situation they may encounter after submitting their dissertations, as they may face a prolonged waiting period to complete the procedural process.

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