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An Exploration into the Research Difficulties Faced by M.Phil. Scholars in Pakistani Universities



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Abstract: *This qualitative study has been conducted under the interpretivist paradigm to explore the research difficulties faced by the MPhil Scholars during their MPhil Thesis phase. There were 25 MPhil Scholars studying in five Universities based in the Punjab who have been selected purposively for this study. These Scholars were enrolled in the MPhil, Education program. The data have been collected with the help of a semi-structured interview protocol comprising 12 questions. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. The results revealed that the majority of the students were not forced to select their supervisor on teachers' referrals. However, the majority of the students were not given the opportunity to select their topics for research, rather their supervisors allotted them the topics. Similarly, their supervisors and even the chairperson(s) of the department(s) were not easily available to them. The students also have faced issues regarding access to the university E-library, needed books from the library and paid content, etc.*

Key Words: Research Difficulties, Pakistani Universities, MPhil Scholars

Introduction

University students compile the study they perform with the help of their research supervisor into a thesis or dissertation. This successful research endeavor is an example of the original academic work. They strive to complete it and record it with the best level of critical thought possible (Siddiqui et al., 2020). Research scholars gain from this process' encouragement of logical thinking and problem-solving abilities since they are able to conduct their own research after choosing a topic of study and providing it a suitable title. The theses that students write

represent their knowledge, skills, and views (Matin & Khan, 2017).

After completing their studies and successfully passing their comprehensive/qualifying exams, university students in Pakistan start their research (Smith & Krathwohl, 2005). In this part of their degree program, students work with their research supervisor to select an area of interest, design the study, and carry it out while considering a population that is easily accessible (Komba, 2016).

The scholars face a number of troubles, such as those connected to selecting a supervisor, a topic, and institutional and supervisory support (Ashfaq

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Afzal et al., 2023). Choosing a suitable research method and obtaining and presenting data in the form of reports are only a few of the difficulties they face (Huang, 2010; Lessing & Schulz, 2003).

The dedication to their work, their socioeconomic situation, their management and communication skills, as well as the stress they experience during this time, may all play a role in the association of these difficulties (Bocar, 2009); institutional factors include support from the university administration, advice from senior fellows in addition to their research supervisor, funding, and facilities (Yousefi, Bazrafkan, & Yamani, 2015).

Various research on this topic has been conducted in various countries. For instance, according to Ekpoh (2016), postgraduate degree completion times are lengthier in Nigeria due to the difficulties students face when writing their theses. Most students who enroll in graduate and postgraduate schools also have employment. They combine their study with a full-time job due to their poor means. According to Igun (2010), their lack of funds is stressful for them. Most of the time, they consider and worry about their college fees. This causes them to have a dual focus on their thesis work. This delays their thesis work and has a detrimental effect (Bazrafkan et al., 2015; Igun, 2010).

The research project's completion is also influenced by the research supervisor. The supervising may easily complete the thesis and submit it on time if the supervisor gives them the right amount of time (Zulfiqar et al., 2020). However, several studies have found that it might be difficult for supervisors to take and use the proper time while still providing supervision from a supervisor's standpoint (Ekpoh, 2016; Mouton, 2011). Financial difficulties, problems with the supervisor's lack of cooperation, issues with the university administration, issues with family and work obligations, and other challenges particular to the thesis-writing process are just a few of the difficulties postgraduate students face when finishing their theses, according to Duze (2010) (Ekpoh, 2016).

Matin and Khan (2017) conducted a cross-sectional descriptive study at 20 educational institutions to learn more about the difficulties that students and their supervisors in Bangladesh had when finishing their theses. The results revealed that students lacked the skills, commitment, and background required to finish

their research assignments. They had insufficient meetings with their managers as a result of their supervisor's heavy academic burden and time constraints. Institutional obstacles, such as a lack of support, finance, and other resources from the university administration, arose as a result of their thesis work being completed (Ali et al., 2021).

In 2009, Bocar made the discovery that academic institutions' interaction with students is essential for the timely completion of research students' theses. The findings indicated that students' personal problems, as well as problems with time management and stress management, distracted them, and most students found it difficult to complete the assignment (Bitchener, 2006).

They came to the conclusion that students and their supervisors had very little skill in the second language and that students had an inadequate grasp of the reasons and nature of the issues they faced while working on their theses. Additionally, they discovered that supervisors and students had little knowledge of how to write outcomes. Komba conducted research in Tanzanian institutions in 2016. The results showed that research students had difficulties when composing each chapter of their thesis because they didn't have a solid grasp of academic writing.

The HEC stipulates that all university graduates and post-graduates must successfully complete their theses in order to be eligible for their degrees. The majority of students, however, have significant difficulties in this area and are unable to complete their degrees on time (Ekpoh, 2016). However, in Pakistan, the challenges and problems experienced by students are not fully examined. Thus, this study will shed light on the issues and challenges that the students deal with in this regard. This study will be helpful to the university teachers who are supervising the research students.

Methodology

This qualitative study has been conducted under the interpretivist paradigm to explore the research difficulties faced by the MPhil Scholars during their MPhil Thesis phase. There were 25 MPhil Scholars studying in five Universities based in the Punjab who have been selected purposively for this study. These Scholars were enrolled in the MPhil, Education program. The data have been collected with the help of a semi-structured

interview protocol comprising 12 questions. The concerning instrument was developed in light of the research instrument developed by Siddiqui et al. (2020) that was used for a quantitative study on a similar topic. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data.

Results

The collected data have been tape-recorded during the interviews and then transcribed by the researcher(s). Then the Thematic analysis was used by the researcher(s) for the analysis of the concerning data. The detail is given below:

Supervisor's Selection

When the participants were asked about their experiences about the selection of their MPhil supervisor, the majority of the participants shared that they had no pressure from their teachers' side during their coursework for the selection of MPhil Supervisor. Rather they have selected their supervisors on their own.

One of the participants said that:

No, I was not pressured by my teachers during the coursework for the selection of MPhil research supervisor. Rather, I had my free will and choice about this. So, I thought on my own and then selected my research supervisor myself.

Another participant responded that:

"No one forced us to select anybody as our research supervisor. Neither our teachers pressured us to select them as their supervisors, nor did they ask us to select their friends."

Another participant gave a similar view:

I had my own and free will as it was my matter because I had to interact with the supervisor for the completion of my MPhil Thesis. I was the person who could be affected by the bad selection. This is why I neither asked anyone nor listened to anyone regarding this. In fact, I made my choice of my free will and I am satisfied with it.

One of the participants gave a similar stance:

It was all upon the individual students to select the desired supervisors for their MPhil research and thesis. There were no bindings from anyone including the university management or teachers. All of them clearly communicated to us that we can select to anybody who has the space regarding the MPhil research supervision.

However, another participant gave a different stance:

Let me tell you that one of my teachers called me and asked me to visit him. When I reached to his office, the pro forma for the selection of the MPhil Supervisor was handed over to me by that teacher. Everything related to my details was filled in along with the required details and consent of the desired supervisor. I was asked to just sign that pro forma and was motivated for this. I did not want to sign that pro-forma and select that teacher but I had to sign that as I was forced by that teacher. Later on, all of the promises were violated by my teacher and I had to take the help of some other teachers to complete my thesis. That teacher always used to say that he had some health problem due to which he was not able to give me time and check my work each time I asked him for an appointment.

Supervisor's Support

When the participants were asked regarding their supervisor's support, the majority of them responded that they wanted to conduct their research on the topic of their own choice. However, they were given the topic from their supervisor's side either forcefully or by choice and they asked for the supervisor's advice. So, the majority of the participants had completed their research on the topic allotted by their supervisor.

One of the participants stated that:

When I was about to choose the topic for my research, I thought of some novel ideas and approached my supervisor. I hope that the supervisor will like those ideas and I shall be offered help by him for the refinement of the suitable idea. However, my supervisor did not encourage me for this. Rather, I was directed to either rethink replicating any existing topic so that my research could be easily completed or let the supervisor do this. And in the end, the supervisor allotted me the topic and asked me to work on that. In short, I was not given the opportunity to select the research topic on my own.

Another participant gave the same stance:

I thought of a research topic and worked on that somehow to refine but I was asked by the supervisor to do the research on the topic given by the supervisor. I requested that he let me do the research on the topic I was working on. However, I was told that the research on this topic will take

more time and it can be difficult for me to complete the thesis within due time. So, I had no choice but to drop off the topic of my choice and start work on the allotted topic.

A similar stance was given by another participant that:

“As far as the selection of the topic is concerned, it was given by my research supervisor. The supervisor asked to work on the topic and complete the research sooner. So, I just did what the supervisor said.”

Another participant responded with a similar stance:

Yes, the topic was given by the supervisor. The reason behind this was myself that instead of working on my own idea, I asked him for his opinion and advice on what should I research on? And he gave me the topic to which he considered the grey area. So, I worked on that topic. It was a good experience overall.

A similar stance was given by another participant that:

“I was not given the topic for the research by my supervisor forcefully. Rather I requested the supervisor to help me out for selecting the research topic and then the topic was allotted by him.”

When the participants were asked about the availability of their research supervisors, the majority of the participants shared their experience that their supervisor's availability had never been a problem for them but the guests used to visit the supervisor off and on. This remained a problem for the supervisees.

One of the participants shared the experience that:

My supervisor remained available for me whenever I requested an appointment and help with my research work. Most of the time I was given the time by my supervisor. However, if any guest came during my appointment, then I was used to being asked to come again. I was given less priority than the guests which I think was not okay as that was my appointments, not the guests. So, in such a condition, I must be attended on priority instead of the guests.

Another participant stated the same:

Yes, I had no issue regarding the availability of my research supervisor mostly I was given the time by my supervisor on my demand. There were only a few times when the supervisor was not available

and I had to take the appointment for some other day. However, usually during my meeting with the supervisor, I had to face a problem that either any of his colleagues used to come or sometimes other visitors. This made me suffer and I had to wait for the visitors to leave so that we could resume our meeting.

One of the participants gave a similar stance:

There were no issues with the availability of the supervisor. The supervisor was always available and a call away. However, the visitors were the problem as my supervisor was also a Director of a department, that's why mostly the visitors were coming and going and our meetings used to be disturbed due to this all.

When the participants were asked regarding the supervisor's help, the majority of the participants responded that they were only scaffolded by their supervisors, not more than this. Rather, they were encouraged to do their work on their own.

One of the participants responded that:

“I was helped by my supervisor only when I got stuck during research. Otherwise, mostly I was told that it is your work, so you must do it yourself.”

Another participant stated that:

“The supervisor's helping hand was always available. I had no issue related to this. However, I was only scaffolded by the supervisor when I was stuck. Otherwise, I was just asked to try try and try again.”

A similar stance was given by another participant:

“Yes, the supervisor never showed reluctance to help me out when I became unable to continue my research work. Whenever I felt stuck, I got help from the supervisor.”

Institutional Support

When the participants were asked regarding the availability of their HoD, the majority of them complained that the HoD was unable to be met with. Usually, they had to face to non-availability of either the HoD or the time from the HoD's side.

One of the participants responded that:

We being students did not an easy approach to our HoD. It was difficult for us to visit him as whenever we asked to visit him, we were told that he is busy in some meeting. So, we had to wait sometimes for many days to meet the HoD so we

could discuss our problems with him and seek solutions.

Another participant stated that:

The Head of Department was very difficult to reach as he had a lot of things to do and complete. He was so burdened with the administrative and academic activities that the students were at great difficulty if they had to meet him.

A similar stance is shared by one of the participants that:

Our Director of the department was a good person. Whenever we tried to approach him, he tried to give us the due time but unfortunately, he couldn't give us the due time because of his administrative and with academic responsibilities. However, he always tried to solve our problems to the maximum extent.

Another participant said:

The chairperson was available for the students but still, he was difficult to reach as there were no specific hours for the students to visit. So, whenever, we visited him, either any of the teachers or the administrative staff member was there to discuss the official things. This is what we always had a problem regarding the solution of our problems as the complete attention was not available from the chairperson's side.

When the participants were asked regarding the institutional support, the majority of the participants responded that the institutional support was not sufficient and they were not satisfied with this.

One of the participants responded that:

We had only a little institutional support and we were not provided access to the paid e-libraries.

Even the university library does not have the needed books. Once I requested a paid book from the librarian but I was refused to provide that book. Even we had to face the problem regarding the access to the university's e-library.

Another participant stated that:

As far as the institutional support was concerned, it was not up to the need. Neither had we been provided with access to the paid content, nor even the e-library of our university. On the other hand, whenever we requested paid books from the university library, we never succeeded in getting the books from our university library.

A similar stance was given by another participant:

I am not satisfied with the institutional support that the university never provided us with any facility regarding access to the required articles or books. Neither the university VPN was provided to us, nor the access to the e-library. And when access to the e-library was provided to us, we came to know that most of the time the network went down.

Conclusion

It has been concluded that the majority of the students were not forced to select their supervisor on teachers' referrals. However, the majority of the students were not given the opportunity to select their topics for research, rather their supervisors allotted them the topics. Similarly, their supervisors and even the chairperson(s) of the department(s) were not easily available to them. The students also have faced issues regarding access to the university E-library, needed books from the library and paid content, etc.

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