Problems Faced By Ph. D Scholars During Research Thesis: A Case Study Of Institute Of Education And Research

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to explore the problems of Ph. D research scholars in Institute of Education and Research, Universities of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. The study was qualitative and a case study design was used. The study was conducted on a sample of 10 Ph. D (Education) scholars of the Institute of Education and Research (IER), who were selected through purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview was designed to collect data about students' problems regarding academic, administrative, social, and financial aspects. The data were analyzed through the thematic analysis technique. The study revealed that Ph. D scholars faced varied problems related to financial support, weak communication between supervisor and supervisee, hostel facility, research knowledge, weak verbal and written English communication, little research competencies of supervisors regarding analysis, inadequate advisor-advisee meetings, politics of faculty, inadequate access to online resources and provision of the latest books in the libraries. The study recommended a timeline in the submission of the research synopsis and the final project, an adequate increase in the online learning resources, availability of latest books and journals of good repute, more training programs, workshops, seminars, and conferences to increase research competencies of the scholars and supervisors.

Keywords: Problems, Ph. D scholars, Research

Introduction

Education is necessary for human beings to develop their complete personalities. It plays an important role to change the attitude and behavior of the individual. In the process of education, people learn how they can better survive in the fast progressing

world. Innovations and discoveries in the fast-changing world demand humans to develop themselves to meet the challenges of the future (Anjum, Iqbal, & Rao, 2012). Education is one of the most powerful instruments that can bring out changes in the community, society, and particularly in the future dusting of the nation. In education, academics play a very important role in all the civilized societies of the world. They are the people who tear down myths and solve the mysteries that stand in the way of the development of society (Shrivastava, 2005).

Every day, the globe has become a global village, and conditions change. Many developing countries are in a state of transition, moving towards a system of higher education that requires both specialization and coordination. Interest in higher education has greatly increased all around the world in recent times. Developing countries have realized that higher education is the most important means of scientific, technological, and industrial progress which is vital for the eradication of poverty and development of societies (Iqbal, Saeed, & Abbas, 2012). For them, higher education is also a means of moderating their societies and producing highly educated leaders in all walks of life. Higher education is also meant to enable graduates to meet various challenges in a dynamic world and to create in them, strong adaptability to a changing society (Raza, 1995). For this purpose, research scholars are working on their projects in different areas of education. They try their level best to ensure the quality of work.

Postgraduate study quality is more than just a matter of supervision, technique, and motivation. According to Alan (2005), it hinges also on institutional admission procedures and policies, faculty/school administration policies as well as assistance and infrastructure that is provided by faculty/school to supervisors and students, including financial assistance, access to child care, pastoral care, computing, library, office space, phone access, access to secretarial support, provision of research seminars and presentations, funding for library searches, conferences, travel grants, fieldwork, photocopying, and opportunities for casual work within the school.

The quality of higher education suffers as a result of failing to pay attention to all aspects of higher education's holistic existence since each component contributes positively to its quality while its absence or lack of it has a negative influence. There are many problems faced by research scholars in pursuing their education. Madhusudhan (2007) found that the researchers are faced with the problems of inadequate computers with Internet facilities, slow internet connection, and lack of skills and training. The survey also reveals that 57 percent of the respondents are facing retrieval problems. Some research scholars lack research techniques and training. Hockey (1994) showed that there was the problem of managing the combination of intellectual and counseling dimensions of the supervisory role and should be increased or alleviated by particular forms of communication with students.

Golde (2005) found that the challenges that research researchers confront begin at the registration stage, such as expensive research expenses. Most of the research scholars choose the topic as advised by their supervisor. Poor facilities in the department such as lack of computer and internet facilities, poor electricity and water facilities, and inadequate access to learning resources, pure drinking water, hygienic

toilet facilities, and Xerox machine in the library influence their works quite depressingly. The second dimension of the problems is associated with academic work, for example, supervisors are very busy with other work; sometimes they are prejudiced towards sex and caste. They also do not guide their students to attend seminars, conferences, and present research papers.

The administration is the third dimension of the difficulties. For example, students need much help from the department and many times their problems are not solved due to long procedures taking even weeks. Many students who study on fellowships do not get fellowships timely. Choosing a research guide is the most important decision a student can make. Likewise choosing the right students is essential for the career of advisers. Both should have common research interests and compatible work habits, lack of adequate linkages between universities and research labs on one hand and business firms, on the other hand, restricts the capability to handle the real-world problems and many a time the research work remains confined to academic interest alone (Iqbal, Saeed, & Abbas, 2012).

The cures haven't been found yet (Abdullah, 1992). Ali (1998) did a research study in the disciplines of the social sciences at Peshawar University to identify the issues that M. Phil and Ph. D academics confront. The results revealed that scholars faced many problems during their research. For example, they were not provided with proper financial support, laboratories, conveyance facilities, and secretarial assistance as well as typing and computer services. Recommendations have been made to compensate them in the future for research work.

Bacha (2009) in his study on problems of Ph. D in English program found that the reasons for the Ph.D. degree ineffectiveness are the lack of competent faculty members, inadequately equipped libraries, a shortage in the state of the art language labs, insufficient financial support for the given research, unnecessary delays in granting theses, a sense of narrow-mindedness among the language program supervisors, lack of the foreign subject specialists, excessive emphasis on the theoretical work and inadequate availability of full-time internet access.

The present study aimed at exploring the problems faced by Ph. D scholars during the research thesis. This research was significant because it would be helpful for the enhancement of research activities in public sector universities. The study would be helpful for the administration and academicians to take remedial measures to overcome the problems faced by Ph. D scholars and their supervisors to improve the quality of higher education.

Objectives of the Study

The present study carries following two objectives.

1. Identify the problems faced by Ph. D scholars during the research thesis.
2. Suggest viable measures to overcome problems faced by Ph. D scholars.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives following research questions were developed:

1. What are the different problems Ph.D. scholars faced at the IER, University of the Punjab?
   1.1 What are the academic (including research) problems of Ph. D. research scholars?
   1.2 What are the administrative problems of Ph. D. research scholars?
   1.3 What are the social problems of Ph. D. research scholars?
   1.4 What are the financial problems of Ph. D. research scholars?
2. What measures should be taken to overcome the problems faced by Ph. D. scholars?

Methodology and Procedure

The study was qualitative and a case study design was used. All the Ph. D scholars enrolled in Ph. D (Education) at the time of the study, at the Institute of Education and Research, University of Punjab, Lahore were the population of the study. A purposive sampling technique was used in this research and the size of the sample consisted of 10 participants. A semi-structured interview was used as a research instrument. The interview questions were developed by the researchers in light of the literature review. The interview questions were validated through experts' opinions to ensure the validation of the interview questions. The open-ended questions of the interview are based on the themes of academic, administrative, social, and financial problems of the scholars. All interviews were tape-recorded. The researchers conducted interviews personally and explained the questions to the subjects if needed, while respondents were taken into confidence to eliminate ambiguity at any level of the interview. It was also ensured that the information provided by participants would remain secure from any type of risks. The researchers analyzed and interpreted data by using the thematic analysis technique which is most commonly used in qualitative research.

Results

The data were analyzed through thematic procedures. First of all, all the interview recordings were transcribed. Afterward, transcribed text was further enriched and completed with the help of the interview notes. Then, key themes were identified around the various questions asked in the first attempt. In the second attempt, the identified themes were reduced to further broad key themes. In this process, data were analyzed. The detail of themes and sub-themes was given below. The findings of this study have been presented and discussed by the research questions of the study.

Table 1 Academic (Including Research) Problems of Ph. D Research Scholars

Major Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
	Problems in data collection	4
	Problems in data analysis	5
	Difficulties in searching and approving the topic	2
Academic problems	Failure of supervisor in giving proper time owing to his/her workload	8
	Late feedback of supervisor	3
	Lack of research expertise of the supervisor	3
	The problem in academic writing	4
	Supervisor's attitude	1

The researcher asked the respondents about problems they faced related to academic matters. Some scholars thought that they did not know how to analyze the data. One of the interviewees said, "I was late to submit my thesis due to analysis because I was not able to do the analysis myself". Data collection is also the main problem given Ph. D scholars. While some scholars highly emphasized that people did not cooperate during the data collection. One of the male interviewees said, "Staff and teachers do not cooperate in the data collection process".

The researcher asked the respondents about problems they faced related to the academic matter in terms of supervisor. Many Ph.D. scholars hold that supervisors did not give proper time to the scholars due to their academic workload. One of the interviewees said, "There was the problem of less number of faculty at a Ph.D. level that is why teachers were overloaded". Another important finding of the present study was that supervisors were biased and prejudiced in terms of sex and castes. Consequently, it creates problems for Ph.D. scholars in their research theses. Scholars also pointed out that there was a communication gap between supervisors and supervisees.

Moreover, a few scholars were of the view that the harshness of supervisors creates a problem for them and they cannot discuss easily the matters related to their research due to their harshness. One female scholar said, "my supervisor's harshness sometimes creates problems for me as I remain unable to discuss my research work properly". One male scholar said, "His attitude towards me was unbearable. I suffered a lot and as a result, I became a patient of blood pressure". Some scholars highlighted that supervisors were lacking in research competencies in terms of data analysis and could not guide the research scholars properly. One of the Ph.D. research scholars said that "I am doing Ph.D. research work on my own; whenever I want to consult my supervisor, the supervisor accepts the piece of work without providing critique related to the work".

When the researcher inquired about the problems of research scholars, the scholars attributed some of the academic problems to their selves as well. As some pointed out that they were facing a problem in English academic writing. Their inadequate ability in academic writing and lack of English language skills create many problems for them. They said that they were weak in vocabulary and grammar. Some

scholars were said that they do not give proper work to their research projects due to their other responsibilities and domestic problems.

Table 2 Administrative Problems of Ph. D Research Scholars

Major Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
	Problems for research scholars due to teachers' politics	5
	Administration not conducting enough seminars, workshops, and conferences to develop research attitude and skills	6
Administrative problems	Accommodation problems in the university hostels	3
	Less access to online resources, fewer latest books present in the libraries	8
	Non-cooperation of administration with scholars	5
	Untimely provision of scholarship	1

When researchers inquired about the problems of research scholars, most of them attributed their problems to administration. Scholars said that internal politics and grouping in IER, sometimes create a problem for the scholars in their approval of research synopses. For example, one male scholar said "Yes. Politics is present in IER. There were 2 to 3 groups present at the time of the start of my course work". Another female scholar said, "I am feeling difficulty in getting my synopsis approved, due to the clashes between my supervisor and the other members of DDPC". Furthermore, one scholar said, "the meetings of DDPC mostly ended in quarrels and score settings among the members and students faced the music in the shape of delays."

When the researchers asked a question about the seminars, conferences, and workshops, whether professional seminars were conducted to enhance their knowledge and research skills? Many scholars thought that the administration did not conduct enough seminars to develop research aptitude and skills. A scholar, for example, asserted that "different teachers organize seminars but do not inform their students well on time". Another female scholar also responded like the same as she expressed "if some seminars were arranged, all the scholars were not informed properly". This infers that there was a problem in the planning and organization of the activities on the part of the administration.

Another point to consider is the accommodation problem in the university hostel. For instance, one of the scholars said, it was difficult for us to live in private hostels, because of high expenses in paying rent and eating food. The interviewee highlighted several administrative problems while conducting a doctorate thesis. Responded reiterated that access to the recent online resources is a major problem. More importantly, scholars believed that there was limited access to online resources and a few latest books were available in the library. Internet wifi connectivity is highly

weak in the department, and access to the latest research articles in recognized journals is not possible most of the time. Furthermore, there is no single lab devoted to Ph. D scholars. It is concluded that accessibility to recent online material, library issues, lack of lab, lack of new research journals and books are the main problems in the way of conducting a quality Ph.D. thesis.

Table 3 Social Problems of Ph. D Research Scholars

Major Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
Social and Psycho-social problems	No proper time for family and friends	7
	Adverse comments of people over data collection	2
	Far away from family	1
	Noncooperation of fellow scholars	1
	Anxiety and stress due to too much work	3
	Social and psycho-social problems from the supervisor side	1

The researcher asked the respondents about social problems they have faced. Many Ph.D. scholars believed that did not give proper time to their family and friend due to their academic workload. One of the interviewees said "I am not giving proper time to my friends and family" Another important finding of the present study was that people comment on data collection. For example one of the interviewees said that "People Comment over the way of data collection and give a different opinion regarding data collection. A few scholars said that they were far away from their family which creates social and psycho-social problems. They did not attend so many functions due to the long distance from family. Furthermore, respondents said that too much work did not allow them to attend family and friends' functions and also too much work creates anxiety and stress. For example, one interview said that "At times too much work creates anxiety in me".

One respondent said "I was on scholarship and had no other earning. Whenever the scholarship funds were transferred from HEC to IER, my worthy research supervisor was ready to avoid releasing those funds timely. In my case, when I had needed them badly for treatment purposes, I had to use requests-channel from worthy director IER for release, all the time. It always was a problem to get a final signature from supervisor and you can imagine the situation". One female interviewee said regarding the psycho-social problem that "the incident of Amy Public School had a great influence on her while doing her thesis". She could not work at that time because of that incident that happened in Peshawar.

Table 4 Financial Problems of Ph. D Research Scholars

Major Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
	Inability to buy books	4
	Unemployment	2
Financial problems	Too much money spent on prints, photocopy, books	2
	Inability to spend on other activities	1
	Difficulty in running home and studying together	5

The researcher asked the respondents about financial problems they have faced. Many Ph.D. scholars thought that did not buy some important books due to financial problems. One of the interviewees said, "I have to run home and spend on my studies as well. I could not buy some important books I needed". On the other hand, a few scholars said they were unemployed that's why they had faced financial problems to continue to Ph.D.

Furthermore, scholars said that too much money was spent on prints, photocopy, and books. Due to that, they could not spend money on other activities of life. One male scholar said when asked a question about a financial problem that "Yes many times. My fees were to be paid from the HEC fund. But the refund process was very slow at IER so I had to manage them by taking loans as the worthy supervisor had threatened to report to HEC, in doing any side by earning task to meet both ends. He never allowed the permission to do any such activity even when the draft of the thesis was handed over to him." It is also important to highlight that some scholars said they run home and spend on their studies as well. That's why they could not buy some important books which they needed.

Table 5 Measures Should Be Taken to Overcome the Problems

Major Theme	Sub-themes	Frequency
	Government should provide more scholarships.	7
	There should be a timeline for all the procedures of coursework and research.	3
Measures to be taken to overcome the problems	A regular meeting between supervisor and supervisee	5
	Online learning resources should be increased.	5
	Availability of research journals and books	3
	More training programs, workshops, seminars, and conferences should be arranged.	3
	More foreign high qualified teachers should be hired.	4
	There should be a proper Lab for Ph. D scholars	3
	Proper guidance and counseling	1

Nearly all scholars underscored the importance of a strict timeline for all of the activities of course work such as allocation of supervisors, submission of synopses, and comprehensive examination. Some scholars said that the schedule of the meeting between supervisor and supervisee must be written down to have a scheduled work routine and sense of direction. There must be a continuous report on what has been achieved and what needs to be done? These tight work schedules should be checked by the head of the department randomly to ensure that the quality of interaction between supervisors and scholars is in place.

Furthermore, interviewees said that the online learning resources should be accessible and proper guidelines should be provided to students on how to locate the relevant research material. While a few scholars also said that there should be more training programs and workshops to increase the research competencies of the scholars and supervisors. More seminars and workshops should be arranged for Ph.D. scholars to enhance their research knowledge and competence, English writing skills, communication, and presentation skills. Lastly, many scholars said that there should be foreign qualified teachers for Ph.D. scholars, a separate lab devoted to Ph.D. scholars and there should be guidance and counseling services for Ph.D. scholars aiming to solve their personal and academic issues.

Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to identify the problems of Ph.D. research scholars in the Institute of Education and Research, Universities of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. The findings of the study showed that there were several problems faced by Ph. D scholars during the research thesis. One of the major problems of the Ph. D scholars were that supervisors did not give proper time to the scholars due to their academic workload and there was a communication gap between supervisors and supervisees. One of the interviewees said, "There is the problem of less number of staff at Ph. D level that is why teachers are overloaded." Similar findings were revealed in the study of Iqbal, Saeed, and Abbas (2012) who found that supervisors were very busy with other work. Parallel findings were also revealed in the study of Hockey (1994) who found that there was a problem of managing the combination of intellectual and counseling dimensions of the supervisory role.

Another important finding was that supervisors were lacking in research competencies, especially, in data analysis, and could not guide the research scholars properly. One of the Ph. D research scholars said, "I am doing Ph. D research work on my own; whenever I want to consult my supervisor he accepts the piece of work without providing critique related to the work". This finding supports the results of a previous study undertaken by Bacha (2009). He found that the lack of competent faculty members was one of the reasons given normally for the ineffectiveness of a Ph.D. degree.

The finding of the study showed that there was an accommodation problem in the university hostel. For instance, one of the scholars said, "It is difficult for us to live in the private hostels, because of high expenses in paying rent and eating food." Similar

findings were revealed in the study of Bacha (2009) in which it was found that students staying in hostels faced more problems than day scholars.

Scholars said that internal politics and grouping in IER, sometimes, create a problem for the scholars in their approval of research synopses. For example, one male scholar said, "Yes. Politics is present in IER. There were 2 to 3 groups present at the time of the start of my course work". Another female scholar said, "I am feeling difficulty in getting my synopsis approved, due to the clashes between my supervisor and the other members of Departmental Doctorate Program Committee".

The finding of this study showed that the administration did not conduct enough seminars to develop research aptitude and skills. A scholar, for example, asserted, "Different teachers organize seminars but do not inform their students well on time". Another female scholar also responded like the same as she expressed, "If some seminars are arranged, all the scholars are not informed properly". This inferred that there was a problem in the planning and organization of the activities on the part of the administration.

These findings supported the results of a previous study undertaken by Alan (2005) which concluded that the quality of the postgraduate study was not only purely a question of supervision, methodology, and motivation but also required the scholars to participate and attend research seminars and presentations.

The finding of this study showed that they (scholars) did not give proper time to their research projects due to their other responsibilities and domestic problems. They pointed out that they were facing a problem in English writing. Their inadequate ability in research writing and English language skill created many problems for them. They said that they were weak in vocabulary and grammar. This finding supported the results of a previous study undertaken by Bacha (2009).

Another point to be considered was that Ph. D scholars were of the view that their main problem was financial. They could not afford, at times, the expenses of stationery and the like things. One of the scholars said that he was lacking in IT skills and research techniques which created a problem for him during his research project. This finding supports the results of a previous study undertaken by Madhusudhan (2007), who found that some research scholars lacked research techniques and training. One of the scholars thought, "After course work, I have joined my job because I could not get leave from my parent department and thus I am unable to give proper time to the research project."

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is concluded from the study that doctorate-level scholars faced a range of specific problems related to academic, administrative, social, and financial areas. Firstly, from the academic standpoint, the teaching load of the research supervisors was quite high and they were overloaded with teaching classes and other assignments; hence they did not give proper time to their supervisees. Further, many supervisors did not possess the requisite research skills to effectively supervise their students. It might be due to the reason that the topics of research were not following the area of specialization of their

supervisors. Lastly, scholars also lacked academic writing skills in the English language.

In the light of the findings, the following recommendations can be put forward to improve the quality of higher education in research. More indigenous scholarships should be offered by the government. There should be a timeline for all the procedures of course work, comprehensive examination, allocation of supervisors, and submission of synopses. The schedule of the meeting between supervisor and supervisee must be written down to have things done timely and encourage scheduled work. There must be a continuous report on what has been achieved and what is left? These structured time schedules should be checked by the head of the department. The online learning resources should be increased and students should have easy access to these resources. There should be more training programs and workshops to increase the research competencies of the supervisors. More seminars and workshops should be arranged for Ph. D scholars to enhance their research knowledge and competence, English writing skills, communication, and presentation skills.

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