

## **Perception of Scholars regarding Worth of Doctoral Study and Challenges: A Qualitative Exploration**

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### **Abstract**

Since the early twentieth century the doctoral study has been the research degree of choice in all the developed and developing societies. PhDs play the key role in creating and sustaining high-skill ecosystems in society. The purpose of this current study was to explore the perception of scholars about their doctoral study. The study also highlighted the challenges faced by the scholars during their coursework and research work. The objectives of this research were to explore the rationale behind the decisions in pursuing of doctoral study and the barriers they faced during their degree. The population of this study was consisted upon all the scholars of doctoral study at the Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, Lahore. An Opened-ended, semi-structured interview schedule was developed and used in the collection of data. Emerged major themes were generated through thematic content analysis. Major themes were related to personal and social need, personal and professional excellence, hurdles and impediments, challenging task, patience and support, and labor market. The majority of scholars agreed that they are doing PhD because it is personal as well as society needed. PhD degree leads them to get good status in society and to avail respectable job in the society.

**Keywords:** PhD Scholars, Doctoral degree, Personal benefits, Social needs, Challenges

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## **Introduction**

An increase of knowledge value in society has put the emphasis on a knowledge-based economy, particularly for the economic welfare of a country and its industry. In order to achieve international competitiveness, the rise of this "new economy," in which information and knowledge are driving forces (Kot & Hendel, 2012). International discussions about economic growth have been emphasized with higher education and current research. Policy makers are becoming more aware of that post-industrial society which needs high qualified people with technical and professional expertise in a knowledge-based economy (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

In a world, where knowledge has become new 'fuel', and the doctoral education has become supreme importance to the economic growth with leading to knowledge-based economy in all aspects. Although the relationship between human capital and economic growth is not yet accepted, doctoral researchers, who have acquired significant human capital through practice, have been described as "one of the primary actors to develop increasable growth of knowledge-based economy"(Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

Those who seek careers in the academy will be able to complete their research and to teach university students with an indispensable qualification. In this way, the doctoral degree is not just a ticket to the research world and new knowledge, it is also about increasing one's likelihood of earning more money with more desirable occupations. There are three possible ways to consider the social impact of the PhD on respondents: a) social development skills (communication, introduction); b) professional networking and the development of personal connections; and c) social recognition (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Martinsuo (2007) stated that one of the most important factors explaining the research progress is the abilities of the students themselves (with exposure to relevant knowledge, resolution of problems, time spent). The main focus of this research is on the students ' personal features and impact of various forms of study development (Guerin, Jayatilaka, & Ranasinghe, 2015). While this is important and the findings of this research showed that the students ' personal characteristics affect the research, the students ' dedication to their studies was paid with less attention. (Hinkle, Iarussi, Schermer, & Yensel, 2014).

PhD studies often include a constant pressure from peers, frequent assessments, low status, high workload, paper deadlines, financial difficulties, publishing pressure, active participation in the academic environment, and conferences. Feeling as vulnerable and poor ties with superiors (added strain as many PhD positions are expected, i. e. As a student, an employee, a parent or a researcher (Martinez, Ordu, DellaSala, & McFarlane (2013); Schmidt & Umans (2014). The complex work situation and numerous probable stressors, become a challenge for doctoral students, to keep a healthy work–life balance (Golde, 2005).

According to Attrition rate, up to 50% relay on Ph.D. in different disciplines (Gardner, 2008; Jiranek, 2010) and with some of them leaving after completing the Doctoral program to trailing with other occupations. However, it has been demonstrated that educational societies do not always give doctoral students an optimal chance to take positive part.

There are also signs that doctoral students (especially women) suffer from stress and mental tiredness (Stubb, Pyhalto, & Lonka, 2011). However, it is a concern for a number of doctoral students who adversely affected their well-being (Anttila, Lindblom, Lonka, & Pyhalto, 2015).

The quality of doctoral students research can be measured in different ways. When the doctoral programs, such as time for degree completion (Valero, 2001; Seagram, Gould & Pyke, 1998) and drop-over levels are more and more concerned with degree in keeping with a four-year timetable, this indicator of how the students get advance during the course of study which is reduced.

One of the previous research has used indicators, such as the dismissal or attrition of students (Golde, 2005), the lag in dissertation (Green, 1997) published study productivity in papers (Stack, 2004), satisfaction of progress research Martinsuo (2007), and the progress made in the achievement of certain milestones in doctoral studies in estimating the performance of doctoral students during their study phases. Golde and Dore (2001) acknowledged three primary issues:

1. A smaller academic job market lead to less competition for new doctorates, as tenure positions are reduced, but a constant number of new doctorates are awarded.
2. The future faculty is not prepared to carry out other duties as faculty members, despite highly specialized trainings.
3. PhD holders also fight to transfer from academia to the workplace where they search for skilled workers in industry, government and other sectors.

At present the student's academic progress, expressed in numbers of publications or lectures, is the most important priority. Monitoring not only the success of academics, but also the well-being of doctoral students that can contribute to systematic changes in institutions. When doctoral students feel a lack of well-being and are unable to maintain a healthy balance during the long period of their doctoral study and are willing to drop out this is a loss for all concerned authorities. This attrition is related to financial (i.e., a misuse of the department, administrative, state and personal resources), psycho-social costs (i.e. Loss of time and effort and efficiency in research projects in terms of social and emotional costs to students and faculty) (Golde, 2005), and opportunity costs to both (i. e. PhD contributors and doctoral student) (Auriol, Misu, & Freeman, 2013; Guerin, Jayatilaka, & Ranasinghe, 2015).

Based on the previous researches, the PhD journey can be viewed as a continuous process of making meaning, where students must develop a sense of themselves as skilled researchers and feel themselves vital, valued members of the academic world. These interactions can best act as an anti-stress buffer, burnout and emotional exhaustion. Now it's not just in Pakistan, but throughout the whole world this demand is increasing. Not only doctoral studies make the limit of human knowledge worthy and meaningful, but they also have the ability to articulate their ideas clearly and effectively in their writing and themselves.

### **Significance of the Study**

Although, at international and national level, studies are available in this area, but in Pakistani context no specific research on such topic with qualitative research is available. Therefore, in viewing its importance, this research will be helpful to bring positive change in public that owing to their higher qualifications and their understanding of their fields. The highest qualification allows people to become deployed on the top levels of management hierarchy. This study will also put emphasis on high qualifications such as a doctorate which create a plethora of coveted opportunities which normally come with good compensations. It will be obliged for the scholars and their supervisors to create a meaningful learning environment, to enable them to spend worthy time in institutions. This study will be helpful for department heads and professors to help the students to cope with the challenges faced by scholars. This study is an attempt to point out the challenges faced by the student of PhD faced during their coursework and research, with the possible suggestions which will be made at the end of the study.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the rationale behind the decisions in pursuing of doctoral study.
2. To explore the ways to overcome the challenges during doctoral study.

## **Research Questions**

Following research questions were formed for the study.

1. What is the rationale behind the decisions the students have to make in pursuing of doctoral study?
2. How to overcome the challenges during doctoral study?

## **Methodology**

This section comprises with research design, population of the study, sample and sampling design, instrumentation with the validation process, collection of data and procedure of data analysis. The nature of this research is qualitative. For this purpose, a phenomenological research design was selected to explore the perception of scholars in pursuing their doctoral study and related challenges.

## **Population and Sample**

The population of this study consisted of all scholars of doctoral study at the Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab. According to the available data, 43 doctoral studies scholars were currently enrolled in PhD study (Source: IER). A purposive Sampling design was employed for this study. Therefore, 8 scholars were selected as a sample of the study.

## **Instrumentation and Validity**

The interviews were carried out in compliance with a well-ordered schedule from the selected sample. The interview schedule for the investigators includes a series of questions, developed by the researcher on the based on research questions. The questions were in open-ended form. The construct validity of the questions in interview schedule were vetted by experts in the field. The interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the research and the interview questions to be posed regarding PhD study. The schedule of the interviews was finalized as per convenience of the participants. Data collected and interpreted by

the used of thematic analysis with semi-structured interviews. Data were reviewed and explored. This was accompanied by coding in order to identify the patterns and themes. This research has taken account of all ethical considerations.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher conducted the interviews and transcribed verbatim. For each interview question, the themes were defined. Such themes have been coded and meaningfully interpreted. The codes P1 for participant 1, P2 for participant 2, etc. were given to each participant in this study. In this paper, the researchers have used these codes for citing their wordings.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The analysis and interpretation of the transcribed data are given below question-wise. The main research questions were to find the rationale behind the decisions the scholars have to pursuit of doctoral study and how they overcome the challenges during doctoral study. The responses were coded and analyzed thematically. Themes were interpreted which were related to objectives and research questions. Emerging themes were related to personal and social needs, personal and professional excellence, hurdles and impediments, challenging task, patience and support, and labor market.

#### **Theme 1: Personal and social need**

Most of the participants agreed that the motive behind doing PhD were personal as well as social interest. Higher education is becoming the need of every society. All of the participants agreed that everyone tries to get and maintain a good status in society. For that they carried out advanced studies and research work to upgrade their knowledge. According to P1:

“It is my personal interest because deep down, there is a quest to grow intellectually and this streamlining track directly impacts the personal need and indirectly the social need. So, it is a hand in hand process.”

The majority of the participants put emphasis that PhD degree has not only groomed their personality as well as professionally enable them to achieve higher status of a job in society. Few of the respondents said that they are doing a PhD to enhance their personality. While P4 said that he is pursuing a PhD to polish his ability in research world. According to P1:

“I feel myself a groomed person as compared to a few months back. And in professional life I can't say exactly as I am not doing any job, but, yes, when I'll be in the field I will defiantly utilize my knowledge to improve the system as I am passionate about it. My degree will help me with professional development, and I may find a better job.”

### **Theme 2: Hurdles and impediments**

As a PhD is the highest degree in Pakistan so doing a PhD is not an easy task. Most of the respondents were married and already doing jobs, stated that they feel deprived many times during course work and research work. To manage their families, job and study at this level are very difficult. Most of them said that they faced lack of time, guidance, motivation and limited resources. Social and economic pressures are major hurdles for those who are unemployed or not having a good job. According to P3:

“I am facing difficulties to maintain personal (family) and profession (job) while doing research work, research is a time consuming task which is badly affected both personal and professional assignments simultaneously.”

### **Theme 3: Challenging Task**

All of the respondents said “Yes”, that PhD itself is a challenging task, its demand full commitment, time and mentally and physically involvement. Few of the respondents stated that they faced stressed, personally one becomes victim to psychological ailments such as frustration, anger and short temper, at the end which affect their personal and professional life. As P7 stated that:

“I am already doing a job and have a family so it's difficult to maintain balance between the requirements of the PhD and family and professional obligation.”

### **Theme 4: Patience and Support**

Research is really a challenging task. To meet these challenges first weapon for a person is his/her patience. One should be persistent, enduring when he is going through the research work. Tolerance is the only thing that can handle lots of problems and give you the right direction as well. Most of the participants said that their family and supervisors supported them in all sorts of hurdles, although sometime professors and supervisors are unavailable, but they have to face the problems. As P5 said “it's my advisor who always proves to be true mentor who never let me surrender and accept challenges as opportunity”.

### **Theme 5: Labor Market**

All participants were agreed and said “Yes”, PhDs are needed in every field of life because every field needs research to improve its condition. The market is still in demand of PhDs. However, PhD degree with quality research is imperative to increase the demands of the market. Few participants strongly agreed that this degree is the resplendent addition to the already existing market. It increases the efficiency of market processes and nourishes the minds with culture and civilizations.

All respondents provide similar suggestions to overcome the challenges, faced by scholars. Key suggestion are given below:

- As more courses did not give an opportunity to go for in depth study. Course outline should be prepared as per the needs of the modern world and that can match with Pakistani context.
- Striking a balance between personal/ professional commitments and academic requirements.
- Frequent contact and interaction with supervisor.
- Online support and access to online libraries.

As P2 gave valuable suggestions:

- Universities should provide every kind of support to scholars. Scholars should never be made a scapegoat to any policy deficiency by the university or HEC.
- Scholars’ time could be saved by giving them online help.
- Latest material/ books/journals should be made accessible to scholars on their personal computers and laptops.
- Supervisors should be made accountable. Their job is to motivate students. On the contrary, what happens is that they tend to discourage their supervisees.
- Supervisors usually behave like bosses in Pakistan. They should learn to be cooperative to the scholars as is the case in technologically advanced countries.
- Scholars should be given funding to go abroad for short courses and also for participation in international conferences.



Suggestions regarding measures for improvement in quality of PhD research by respondents are as follows:

- The institute/department must provide the environment to groom the scholars personally and professional competed in their specific area.
- Provide internship in their area of specialization.
- Research topics should be provided by HEC
- Supervisors must pay all time, attention towards Ph.D. students preventing extension.
- Keep a track and attend various workshops/ seminars on related topics at various universities
- Encouragement and motivation are the most important aspect
- The degree should not be for the degree's sake. It should be meant to add some knowledge to the existing knowledge.

## **Discussion**

In this study the focus has been very much upon the perceptions of the eight PhD scholars, who share their experiences during the doctoral journey. Following themes were emerging from their responses: personal and social need, personal and professional excellence, hurdles and impediments, challenging task, patience and support, and labor market.

Most of the scholars, pursuing a course of PhD study, because they are passionate to get higher degrees and they are motivated towards its achievement. All the participants were agreed that they acquired higher degrees to fulfill the personal and social need. The study results from Wellington and Sikes (2006) show that a doctoral study has a dynamic impact on personal and professional life, as these aspects are all closely interlinked and likely inseparable. Personal satisfaction is a strong motivator inherent in the pursuit of knowledge and the intellectual challenge combined with professional interest.

Doing a PhD is not only improving abilities to comprehend and solve problems, being confidence, enhanced skill for better job and good communicator. Most of the participants are agreeing that doing PhD not only for the sake of a job but, they are all ambitious to enhance their knowledge and skills which help them to lead a good status in society. Schmidt and Hansson (2018) study also align with the results that it is the demand of the society to offers opportunities to those who have

grip on their knowledge and show professional competency. It is not necessarily the second major attraction with working to improve professional knowledge and practice through study and research which has its origins in the workplace and is genuinely committed to making things better (Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

The study of Brailsford (2010) also emphasized that success in doctoral education cannot be guaranteed without facing hurdles and impediments. It is a challenging task, on the daily basis faced time management, lack of interaction with friends and family and pending tasks of the job, leads to demotivation. Frequent evaluation, financial pressure, low status, a competitive environment, and high workload could lead the doctoral students to high levels of stress. In addition, most students are trying to forge a professional identity that is new to them (Stubb, Pyhalto, & Lonka, 2011)

Doctoral study needs full dedication, enthusiasm, and optimism of person. During coursework and research to overcome the challenges students need on the time support of their family, friend and especially their supervisors. All of the respondents stated that supervisors are not helping the student to overcome the challenges and with the strong relationship of supervisor and students create such learning and cooperative environment, which open a bright way not only for the students but all over the departments/institutes. The mentoring relationship not only affects the quality of training provided for a student, but also provides an impression of motivation and emotional aspects, like a person's self-confidence level, a dedication to the area of research and the persistence of the student (Bamgboje-Ayodele, Almond, & Sakulwichitsintu, 2016; Wellington & Sikes, 2006). One of the most important aspect of students in doctoral study to experience relationships with faculty supervisor as regarded by many respondents. The Frazier study (2011) also showed the results that the influence of faculty is characterized by the quality of the relationship which directly affects the quality of the doctoral experience. This offers a supportive departmental climate, effective departmental socialization, and a timely completion of the degree.

Many quality suggestions were made by all respondents to overcome the challenges and measures for improvement in quality of PhD degree. Provided online guidelines, keep the track of research, motivational support and help from a supervisor, guideline to overcome social hurdles, time management strategies, internships for professional skill improvement, guidelines to publish articles and research work in quality journals.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The objectives of the study were to explore the rationale behind the decisions in pursuing of doctoral study and what are the challenges they faced during PhD study. The results of the following study indicate that Ph.D not only fulfills the need of the individuals to become subject matter experts in their own fields but is also expected to participate in a variety of professional development programs (i. g. Conference presentations, committee work, teaching internships) to become more competent scholars, practitioners, and leaders. Being a PhD scholar, the society provides a more respectable stage to perform their professional skills and competency. But doing a PhD is full of hurdles and impediments. This study is beginning to peel away the layers of complexities between doctoral students while they pursue PhD degree completion. These challenges can be overcome with the supports of family, friends and supervisor and professors of the departments/institutes. In the light of the above discussion following recommendations were formed.

1. For the improvement of students in their fields, seminars and discussion platform opportunities should be provided by the head of the department/institute.
2. Supervisors should take as a moral responsibility to support the students in all steps of their doctoral degree.
3. University as well as in state level should provide such platforms to publish articles and research studies in good quality international journals.
4. Adopt student-centered approach to meet the need of doctoral students, and in order to improve productivity, enhancing their well-being.
5. For in-depth study, a case study will be needed to investigate the experiences of doctoral students.

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