

Navigating the Complex Intersection of Doctoral Degree Requirements: Results from a Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the multifaceted dynamics within higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, focusing on doctoral candidates' experiences of addressing degree requirements. To gain their comprehensive and rich insights, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with purposively selected twenty doctoral students and organized three focus groups, involving a total of 33 participants. Through thematic analysis, three key themes emerged that intertwine to shape the doctoral experiences including mandatory publication requirement for doctoral degree completion, personal and professional conflicts among faculty members and the effect of evaluators' situations on theses reviewing and completion. The results revealed that mandatory publication of the research paper, personal and professional conflicts among the faculty and administration, and challenges in reviewing the dissertation from international evaluators shape the dynamics of doctoral degree completion that hamper the doctoral journey. By connecting these themes, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex intersection of doctoral degree requirements offering valuable insights for academic institutions seeking to enhance the doctoral experience and improve program quality and degree completion.

Keywords: Faculty conflicts, publication, professional conflicts, research evaluators, doctoral candidates, doctoral supervisors

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Introduction

In the evolving landscape of higher education, doctoral programs stand as the pinnacle of scholarly pursuits, demanding a confluence of academic rigor and intellectual persistence (Bozkurt et al., 2023; Grant, 2021; Ishimaru et al., 2022). Within this area, a complex network of factors shapes the experiences of doctoral candidates and the quality of education they receive (Mills & Inouye, 2021; Tuma et al., 2021). Several academic papers identify the challenges that lead to delays in obtaining doctoral degrees. Additionally, these studies identify a range of factors affecting timely completion of doctoral programs. However, the available literature on the factors contributing to delays in doctoral degree attainment is scant. In Pakistan, universities generally do not keep records of such data. The few studies that specifically address academic delay show that while many countries expect students to complete their degrees within the specified time frame, a significant number still struggle to meet these requirements (Ahmad et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Akparep et al., 2017; Van de Schoot et al., 2013; Waheed et al., 2021).

The length of time to complete a PhD degree can vary from country to country, but current literature suggests that students typically take 5 to 7 years to complete doctoral studies. This time frame is usually two years longer than the scheduled or expected completion time (Fang & Zhan, 2021; King, 2008; Miller et al., 2019). Over the past three decades, the average time required to complete a doctorate in the USA has not changed significantly. Students still take about 7.5 years to complete their PhD degrees. (England et al., 2020; Geven et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2019). Similar trends are seen in other countries like the Netherlands. Here, only 10% of students manage to complete their doctoral degrees within the allotted time of four years. On average, students in this context take about five years to earn a doctorate (Byun et al., 2013; Jongbloed & Vossensteyn, 2001; Van de Schoot et al., 2013).

Several factors contribute to delays in completing a PhD program. As Almoustapha and Uddin (2017) indicated, factors including the supervisor's role, family environment, students' psychological well-being, and the overall research environment significantly affect the time required to complete a doctoral degree. (Antonelli et al., 2020; Miller, 2013) emphasize that educational institutions provide conferences, workshops, seminars, financial assistance, and stress management programs to support students during their academic journey. As such, they play an important role in facilitating the timely completion of PhD by offering resources. A study by Pyhältö et al. (2012) indicated that the challenges faced by PhD students are mainly related to factors related to their working environment, the research community, financial resources, support and expertise of their supervisors and students' research knowledge. Dickerson et al. (2014) found that doctoral students have to play different roles during their PhD studies. These roles included family sustenance,

increased workload, and social engagement, affecting all students. Additionally, doctoral students' progress was influenced by their academic ability and subject matter expertise. El-Ghoroury (2012) research highlighted that the challenges faced by PhD students mainly revolve around economic constraints, work-family conflicts, stress, lack of motivation, and heavy academic workload.

An exploratory investigation was conducted to identify factors associated with the timely completion of doctoral degrees among clinical pharmacy students in Nigeria (Mosanya et al., 2022). The study used mixed methods, including in-depth one-on-one interviews with 47 doctoral students. The results showed that several factors contributed to the delay in completing their doctoral programs. These factors include delays in the selection of research topics, processing and approval of research proposals, financial challenges, insufficient study leave during employment and complications arising from the COVID-19 lockdown. Participants in this study also highlighted that receiving adequate support from their supervisors, fostering positive relationships between supervisors and students, and organizing departmental activities had a beneficial effect on the timely completion of PhD programs. Additionally, they provided recommendations to enhance the doctoral student experience, including improving departmental and administrative operations and aligning course and research topics with student research interests.

Similarly, a study conducted by Fetene and Tamrat (2021) investigated the reasons for study and degree delays at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, as well as the strategies used to deal with these delays. This study used a mixed-methods research methodology, incorporating a decade's worth of archival data on 1711 doctoral students. Additionally, the research involved comprehensive interviews with a sample of 10 students, allowing them to describe their experiences about the research objectives. The results of this investigation were unexpected, showing that students typically need two years longer than the traditional four-year time frame to earn their doctoral degrees. On average, students completed their degrees in about 6.19 years. The results of the study highlighted several important factors that influenced whether students completed their doctoral degrees on time or suffered delays. These factors included the quality of rapport and coordination between supervisors and supervisees, the level of student motivation, their commitment and preparation, the overall academic and departmental climate, and the positivity of the research environment.

In light of these findings, the study's recommendations emphasize the importance of institutions taking proactive measures to reduce the financial and emotional burden placed on PhD students. Such initiatives will enable students to focus on their research more effectively and accelerate the completion of their degrees within the expected time frame. Noel et al. (2020) reviewed the literature to investigate how effective supervision

affects research progress and timely completion of postgraduate degrees among students. This review revealed that the relationship between supervisors and their supervisees has a direct or indirect effect, positively or negatively, on all factors that contribute to the successful completion of research and the timely attainment of postgraduate degrees. Furthermore, Japheth et al. (2023) demonstrated that students benefited positively in terms of their research progress from effective professional support provided by their supervisors. Additionally, Noel et al. (2020) explained that female students faced unique personal challenges that hindered effective communication with their supervisors, which ultimately negatively impacted their research and degree progress. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of positive relationships between students and their supervisors as a key indicator of timely completion of postgraduate degrees.

In a study conducted by Chidi and Sylvia (2020), the objective was to identify factors influencing the timely completion of postgraduate research and degrees among students in Nigeria. This research employed a descriptive survey design and used multistage sampling to collect data from 1254 students from various state and federal universities in South-East, Nigeria. The results of the study indicated that negative student-supervisor relationships contributed significantly to delaying the completion of students' research projects. Additionally, supervisor-related factors in these delays include a lack of research skills, infrequent meetings with students, delays in reviewing submitted work, frequent changes in research topics, insufficient familiarity with current research trends, and failure to follow up on a timely meeting schedule for monitoring research progress.

The study also identified several student-related factors that lead to delays in the submission of research work. These factors include challenges in selecting a suitable research topic, delays in addressing required reforms, lack of research skills, low interest in research, limited financial resources, difficulties in organizing various components of research projects, failures to conduct a thorough literature survey, and lack of dedication to a research task. Consequently, when students submit their research work late to their academic department, it invariably leads to extended timelines for degree completion beyond the standard period.

This qualitative research embarks on a journey to unravel the complexities at the intersection of these factors, focusing closely on three key themes: the mandatory publication requirement for doctoral degree completion, conflicts among faculty members, and the impact of evaluator payment delays on student engagement. As the academic community strives to continuously improve and enhance program quality, a deeper understanding of these dynamics becomes imperative (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Malik, 2018; Morawska-Jancelewicz, 2022). Through a rich tapestry of doctoral students'

voices, experiences, and thematic analysis, this study seeks to illuminate nuances within doctoral programs and offers a lens through which academic institutions can enhance and enrich the doctoral journey.

Research Questions

1. How does the mandatory publication requirement for doctoral degree completion affect the experiences of doctoral candidates?
2. What are the main causes of conflict among faculty members in higher education institutions (HEIs), and how do these conflicts affect doctoral programs? How do doctoral students' perceptions of the evaluator's delay in payment affect their engagement in dissertation evaluation?
3. The research questions were formulated after the thorough examination of the existing literature that was left, it was found that the publication pressure, the conflicts between supervisors and faculty and administrative delays are the long-standing issues, which affect post-submission experiences of doctoral students.

Research Methodology

The qualitative research methodology used in this study was originally justified by the interpretive nature of the research questions. In the interpreter's view, the world is seen as an unfolding social cycle created by the individuals involved in it. This approach emphasizes a process that allows researchers to explore the subjective experiences of individuals within a particular context, known as the participants' frame of reference, such as contrary to the perspective of an outside observer (Morgan, 1979; Shorey & Ng, 2022; Tschisgale et al., 2023). Unlike other forms of study, thematic analysis does not require the rigorous and rigid steps associated with modern-day testing. Instead, it corresponds to the notion of understanding things through objective analysis, as opposed to merely explaining them. This serves as the basis of the interpretive approach (Crotty, 2004; Monks et al., 2021).

Researchers' experiences act as reflective mirrors, capturing the events that shape their lives, and it is through narratives that they communicate and convey these lived experiences (Coates, 2015). In this study, a philosophical basis is called for when choosing two qualitative methods to support research claims. This approach is rooted in a critical methodological perspective that is more cognitive, rather than strictly prescriptive, as described by (Crotty, 1998). The study presented here exemplifies one of several possible ways to collect and examine representations of meaning. This is achieved by using two qualitative methods namely narrative and phenomenology within a research investigation.

It demonstrates the depth and breadth of insights that can be derived from a multidimensional approach to understanding complex human phenomena. This study is a testament to the ever-evolving landscape of qualitative research, which continually seeks innovative and nuanced ways to explore the complexities of human experiences and meaning-making.

Participants of the Study

The study consisted of twenty doctoral students in the social sciences, in addition to three focus groups, each involving more than four doctoral students. These participants were purposively selected from among doctoral candidates who had experienced notable delays in fulfilling degree requirements. Inclusion criteria included a selection of individuals who had been waiting for a long period for their dissertation evaluation reports or defense of their doctoral dissertation and had relevant experiences. As Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggest, a narrative design allows for the selection of participants who have personally lived through and experienced the work context, allowing the events and helping to understand more nuances about the stories. Riessman (2008) contributes valuable insights into narrative methods within the humanities, while (Charmaz, 2014) works on grounded theory construction and (Patton, 2014) comprehensive coverage of qualitative research methods, including narrative inquiry, further strengthens the basis of this method.

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Data Collection

The use of interviews represents the most logical approach to data collection. In this research, the main aim was to explore an in-depth understanding of the individual experiences of the participants and then identify themes for further exploration. Open-ended interviews were conducted to understand the informants from their unique perspectives and how they create meaning in their lives, experiences, and cognitive processes, as described by (Brenner et al., 2008), “Within the realm of qualitative interviews, it is important to note that they allow informants to express their meaning in their own words and guide the interview process in their preferred direction” (p. 357).

Data Analysis

The data analysis phase of this study was a complex and comprehensive process aimed at gaining meaningful insights from the information collected. The raw data, consisting primarily of interview transcripts, were systematically organized and examined to discern recurring patterns, themes, and notable findings. Using thematic analysis as a central approach, the researchers engaged in a process of coding and categorizing the data,

allowing the identification of key themes emerging from the participants' narratives. This interpretive analysis sought not only to understand the individual experiences and perspectives of the participants but also to explore the underlying connections and broader implications of their accounts. Additionally, qualitative data analysis involves a constant comparative method, enabling researchers to refine and reinforce emerging themes through ongoing examination and comparison of data segments. Throughout this phase, emphasis was placed on maintaining rigor, transparency, and reflexivity to ensure the authenticity and validity of the findings. Ultimately, the data analysis phase served as an important bridge between the data collected and the generation of meaningful insights that contribute to the broader body of knowledge in this research field.

Based on qualitative data analysis, as described earlier, this process draws further on the guidance provided by the researchers in their book on qualitative analysis (Ezzy, 2013; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). This comprehensive approach includes several key steps to perform narrative and phenomenological analysis. First, the collected stories are systematically organized and compiled to facilitate structured examination. During the initial reading of narratives, paying particular attention to material that stands out, researchers highlight, note, and comment on elements that pique their interest. These reactions encompass moments of reflection, doubt, and amusement. The analysis then goes deeper, focusing on unlocking insights and understandings within each narrative, including an examination of the explicit content, dialogues, and real-life contexts in which these narratives are embedded. Additionally, this process extends to capturing the sublime messages hidden within the text. To inform analysis, the researchers look for both commonalities and variations in substance, style, and interpretation across the array of stories under investigation. Furthermore, the effects of background variables, such as history, geography, gender and age, are taken into account to provide an important perspective. Finally, researchers select information or stories that best exemplify emerging themes, perceptions, and understandings, facilitating a comprehensive and contextualized analysis that helps in a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. This methodology of narrative and phenomenological analysis is integral to uncovering the multidimensional layers of meaning embedded within the collected data and generating valuable insights for the broader purposes of the study.

Results of the Study

Publication Challenges

To obtain a doctoral degree, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) mandates that doctoral candidates publish at least two research papers in an HEC-recognized journal, in addition to completing their doctoral dissertation. Completion of all of these requirements, including specific publications, is essential to obtaining the degree.

However, the process of publishing research papers poses significant challenges for doctoral students due to its inherent complexity and demands. PhD students are research experts which makes the task of writing a research paper relatively easy. However, the challenge arises when it comes to finding HEC-approved journals in your specific research area or category, as the options are limited. PhD candidates should diligently search for journals that match their research focus, refer to those journals, and follow their specific submission requirements.

Another major challenge is in the financial aspect of publishing. Research journals often come with substantial publication fees, which can be quite a financial burden for doctoral students. Given that publication in an HEC-accredited journal is a mandatory requirement, many journals have increased their publication costs, making it particularly difficult for doctoral candidates to afford these costs. A third important problem arises from the sheer volume of doctoral students seeking to publish compared to the limited number of recognized journals available. Consequently, many students stand in long queues waiting for their research papers to be published. This backlog significantly delays the issuance of doctoral degrees, with some students having to wait months or even a year before their papers are published and degrees are awarded. Many of these doctoral students have expressed their experiences.

Participant “A” is employed in a private firm, earns a modest salary, and has been working intermittently to complete his PhD in a reasonably significant period. His ambition is to secure employment opportunities after his doctorate. However, he faces constant challenges in his academic journey due to the university's administrative process and strict regulations. He describes these difficulties as follows.

"I completed the research evaluation phase and was awaiting my viva voce defense, but due to financial constraints, my research papers remained unpublished. I cannot afford the journal's prominent publication fees at this time. It was a prerequisite for my doctorate and I received it. As a result, the delay in the publication of the works extended beyond my final defense of the doctoral thesis, ultimately affecting my schedule to receive my degree."

Participant “B” was A government employee who works in the law enforcement sector, where duty is required around the clock. He has no spare time for research, and despite these serious challenges he has managed to share his insights on publishing a research paper.

“As a civil servant, my research time was very limited, and I was faced with the daunting task of completing my doctoral dissertation and the two research papers mandated by the HEC. I was engrossed in the dissertation process and could not manage to publish my dissertation. After submitting my thesis, tight time frames prevented me from publishing the papers immediately. As a result, despite my tireless efforts, it took a long time to get my degree.”

Participant "C", who was employed as a computer operator in a private company for the past eight years at a meager salary, faced considerable financial difficulties due to which he and his family were unable to support themselves. It was difficult to do. He hoped that completing a PhD would provide better prospects and a more stable future in a reputed company. Unfortunately, his ambitions were hampered by a disagreement with his supervisor, who insisted on being credited as the first author of his research paper. Participant "C" expressed his disappointment and regret in the following manner.

“I expressed my desire to publish my papers in academic journals to fulfill the HEC requirements for my doctoral degree. However, when I completed all the work alone, my supervisor insisted on authorship rather than mere co-authorship, which I found unacceptable. This led to an argument, and my supervisor became increasingly angry and resentful of my attitude. Moreover, the situation became more complicated because the controller of examinations and my supervisor were close friends. This relationship seemed to create additional hurdles in the publication process and evaluation of my doctoral dissertation, which resulted in significant delays in completing my doctoral degree.”

Participant "D", a dynamic young woman employed in a private college, recently entered into a marriage with her cousin, who is currently unemployed. Despite her dynamic energy, she encountered a difficulty in which she found herself on a waiting list, unable to proceed with the immediate publication of her work due to a lack of available funds.,

“Paying the publication fee promptly was a huge challenge for me, which made me wait for months on the publication waiting list. This delay due to my financial crisis had a major impact on my educational journey. It not only delayed my life but also affected my mental and physical health, leading to a significant decline in my health. Due to this delay, my in-laws also started questioning when I would complete my PhD, causing me to face pressure and criticism from all sides. The financial crisis that caused the publication delay had far-reaching effects on various aspects of my academic and personal life.”

Participant “E”, a devoted father of two children, actively manages an NGO focused on the rehabilitation of orphans. He found himself in a situation where external pressure was mounting to publish his research paper in a high-impact journal for immediate publication. Several influential university officials sought to add their names as co-authors, as publication carries significant weight in reaching higher academic ranks within universities. In response to this situation, he expressed his thoughts as follows:

“It has been almost two years since I submitted my doctoral dissertation, and I guess my dissertation reports have been received. However, some university officials are pressuring me to include my name as a co-author in my research paper. I am willing to consider their request, but they are insisting that I publish my paper in a high-impact factor journal even though the publication costs are beyond my financial means.”

Participant “F” works as a low-paid civil servant in the Department of Vocational Education, and supports his four children who pursue their studies in various public and private sector universities. He devotes a significant portion of his income to meeting their educational expenses and daily needs. Despite his financial constraints, he has been trying for a long time to get his research work published in an HEC-approved journal, which is a requirement enforced by both HEC and his university. However, this process is fraught with challenges. Many HEC-approved journals have a long waiting period for publication, leading to significant delays. Some journals also charge substantial publication fees, which he cannot afford. His research supervisor even suggested a special journal for publication, but the associated costs remained beyond his means. As a result, his doctoral thesis defense has yet to be scheduled by the Controller of Examinations, despite his thesis evaluation reports having been received long ago. He expresses his situation as follows:

“The evaluation reports of my doctoral dissertation have been received by the Controller of Examinations of the University from the external and internal evaluators. However, the viva voce examination is pending due to the non-publication of my research article related to my doctoral studies. Regrettably, I lack the additional funds necessary for this purpose, especially in this era of inflation. Nevertheless, my research supervisor insists on publishing this article in a certain journal which has a very high publication fee. His insistence illustrates his personal need, either for his promotion or as an attempt to surpass his peers in the academic rankings.”

Participant “G”, is a 30-year-old man, who is working as a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) in the Pakistan Army, specifically as an Education JCO in the Human Resource Development Center (HRDC). Although unmarried, he is working diligently to complete his doctoral degree. He submitted his doctoral dissertation for assessment within the stipulated period, and the assessment reports have also been received. However, due to the delay in the publication of the research article related to his doctoral studies, the examination department of the university did not conduct the viva voce of his dissertation. This step is mandatory before the submission of the doctoral dissertation, as required by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) regulations. He described his feelings of suffering in the following way:

“I am serving as an Education JCO in the Pakistan Army and got permission from GHQ to be admitted to the doctoral degree program. My department graciously relieved me of my duties to ensure the timely completion of my PhD. I took full advantage of this opportunity and submitted my thesis within the stipulated time. After that, I was posted out to another army cantonment for military service and spent about 18 months in an area that had communication challenges. On my return, I immediately received news of my thesis. I understand that my thesis evaluation reports have been received, but the research article is yet to be published. Although I completed the research paper and submitted it to my supervisor for review, he not only assured me of an immediate review but also, he had also promised to facilitate its publication in a journal approved by HEC. Unfortunately, these plans could not materialize. Now, I am making efforts to deal with this situation, but it will require a lot of time and additional financial arrangements.”

Participant “H” is a dynamic young entrepreneur who runs his private educational institute in his hometown. He aspires to make it a modern educational institution. To gain knowledge about educational theories and management principles, he enrolled in a doctoral program. He diligently completed his dissertation within the university's allotted time for his PhD program. However, the non-publication of his research article has hindered the defense of his doctoral thesis. The reason for this setback is that the journal in which his article was intended to be published has been banned by the Higher Education Commission (HEC). He describes his feelings of despair as follows.

“For the past decade, I have owned my private educational institution, full of plans and ambitions to modernize it. To acquire the necessary knowledge, I enrolled in a PhD program, diligently completing all the research work within the specified time. I also prepared my research

article and received acceptance from a journal for publication. However, my plans came to a halt when the Higher Education Commission (HEC) banned the journal for its illegal actions, and my research publication remained unpublished. Now, it looks like I will face a considerable delay in getting my work published in another HEC-recognized journal.”

Professionalism vs Personal Conflict

Universities in any country are generally considered to be important educational centers and catalysts for national development. This impression stems from the fact that professors, with their teaching skills, and students, with their receptivity to learning, represent the pinnacle of academic and creative excellence. Their research skills play an important role in the development of the country. However, when disagreements arise between these stakeholders, it is disappointing to witness the abandonment of professional norms and ethical conduct. In educational settings, the expected decorum is given little importance. The resulting conflicts often turn into archaic conflicts, where understanding takes a back seat. Participants engage in acts so intense that they astound observers. Surprisingly, the agitators seem indifferent to the effects, especially the negative effects on students. These conflicts not only disrupt the learning environment but also show a lack of professionalism, where personal conflicts take the place of commitment to fostering a positive learning environment. The harm done to students seems to elicit little remorse from those embroiled in conflict, with a disregard for the well-being of those it aims to educate and nurture.

A focus group of four doctoral students, who are teachers in government schools in Punjab, submitted their thesis twenty-four months ago and are currently facing several challenges. These students, who belong to recently established public sector universities, comprise the founding students of the doctoral program. Despite completing the doctoral dissertation submission process, they find themselves facing serious problems related to external and internal evaluation of their doctoral dissertation. Secondly, they face challenges arising from personal conflicts. A professor in one department filed a petition challenging the entire doctoral degree process, including admission, proposal submission, and submission of the doctoral dissertation.

Thirdly, professors accuse each other of harassing their students. These allegations go beyond mere accusations, leading to them filing FIRs against each other at the police station, seemingly driven by personal motives rather than genuine concern for the welfare of the students.

That resulted in the stoppage of the process of evaluation and they became the victim of it.

Finally, the Vice-Chancellor constituted a committee to investigate the concerns raised in the petition. The committee conducted a thorough inquiry and confirmed the authenticity of the entire process, saying that all the procedural requirements were fulfilled by the department. And all the allegations are baseless, nothing but personal enmity. However, when the tenure of the Vice-Chancellor ended, a new Acting VC took over, and the matter was once again handed over to a new committee. These obstacles delayed the resolution of the case, which is still pending, and the professors continued to accuse each other.

A student expressed his concerns with great sadness, saying, *"What will happen to our careers, we don't know. The situation is full of uncertainty."* His words are full of ambiguity and the sense of hopelessness is palpable. He has begun to think that all his efforts are at stake and that the university lacks specific guidelines for the future of his doctoral degree. Another doctoral scholar expressed:

"I find myself in a state of confusion, my mind filled with uncertainty about the potential waste of all my time, effort, and money. In this context, professors seem to prioritize their interests. They act as if they are the owners of the university, with no one questioning them, busy day and night solely for their benefit."

The third doctoral candidate reflected,

"I'm left with a sense of bewilderment, a sense of uncertainty in my mind about the potential waste of my time, effort, and finances. In this scenario, professors seem to prioritize their interests. They act like they are owner of the university, accountable to no one, They are busy day and night only for their benefit."

The fourth scholar elaborated,

"I believe they will not confer the degree upon us. You may consider me a pessimist, but I am deeply disturbed by the behavior of the university officials. They are engaged in quarrels and making serious accusations against each other through our fellow students. Not only are they accusing each other of harassment, jeopardizing their honor and that of the students, but they are also bringing legal pressure. This is highly inappropriate, and any erosion of character between students and faculty in such circumstances is unacceptable."

The attitude of university officials towards doctoral candidates has eroded academic trust. They feel like pieces on a chessboard, moving from one position to another, impatiently waiting for a solution.

One of them, a former employee of the same university, maintained a hopelessly optimistic stance, and his words echoed with deep anguish,

“I am confident that I will get my degree, but the conditions created by the university are sad, unimaginable and unbearable. I never imagined when I started my doctoral journey the university would exploit the students financially, morally, and temporally.”

He seemed optimistic compared to the other doctoral scholars in the focus group as evident in his words but he was very helpless even though he was employed in the same profession. Even after submitting their doctoral thesis, doctoral scholars are saddened by the ongoing situation in the university. They find themselves helpless at the hands of university officials who seem to be playing with students' emotions and academic careers. These students are eagerly awaiting their degrees, hoping to use them for a better future and contribute to the well-being of their families and children. The current situation is disturbing, and it is disappointing that no concrete steps have been taken to address the problem in the long term. However, there is a glimmer of hope as the university is now handling the matter through a committee, raising expectations that the issues and concerns will be resolved soon.

Reviewers' Situations

Internal and external reviewers are appointed by the University to assess the quality of doctoral theses carried out by students. These reviewers receive compensation for their role, ensuring that the evaluation process conforms to essential research standards and requirements. Interviews were conducted to understand the problems associated with non-payment of internal auditors. The responses obtained highlighted the challenges faced by individuals who experienced delays in their doctoral dissertation reports due to delays in payment to internal and external reviewers.

Participant “A” is employed in a private firm, earns a modest salary, and has been working intermittently to complete his PhD for a significant period. He reported that the completion of his doctoral dissertation was significantly delayed because the university failed to pay its internal and external reviewers promptly. Despite depositing his fees on time as per the date set by the finance department of the university, the discrepancy caused him severe emotional and financial hardship. They shed light on the situation in detail and expressed its negative impact on both their academic progress and economic stability.

“I submitted my evaluation fee to the university's finance department before the last date of my doctoral dissertation, as directed because the university's finance department does not issue NOCs until all dues are paid. The Office of Controller of Examinations also does not submit a dissertation without NOC. However, when the thesis reviewer was assigned, the evaluation process was delayed because the university had not paid the evaluation fee of previous students to the appointed reviewer. He refused to review any more doctoral dissertations until the previous dues were cleared. This situation led to several challenges, both mental and monetary, as I had to make several visits to the university to inquire about my evaluation report. This effect extended to my employment, as these visits had to take place during working hours, and my posting station was located far from the university..”

Participant “B” was a government employee who works in the law enforcement sector. He experienced a delay in receiving the external evaluation report for his doctoral thesis due to procrastination by the university during the period of external evaluation and certain government policies. He expressed his experiences as under:

“I submitted my doctoral dissertation with NOC which is issued by the university's finance department. However, the external reviewer was not paid promptly. The reviewer refused to proceed with the process. until the fees for both former and current doctoral students are settled. I contacted the university authorities and agreed to re-deposit the fees if required and they agreed. During this period, the government of Pakistan imposed a ban on US dollar transactions with foreign countries due to money laundering concerns. As a result, this resulted in an 8 to 9 months delay in the external evaluation of my doctoral dissertation, this was an additional delay.”

Participant "C" has been working as a computer operator in a private company for the last eight years. He faced challenges during fee negotiations with the university's external evaluator, who demanded higher compensation for evaluating a doctoral dissertation than in previous practices. He described his experiences below,

“I submitted my doctoral dissertation and external evaluation compensation based on previous rates provided by the university. However, several months after submission, I was told that my university's finance department was having problems with new external reviewer demands for my doctoral dissertation. The financial stress experienced globally in the wake of COVID-19 may have contributed to

this situation. My university insisted on additional funds from me citing non-payment as per the reviewer's demands. This practice is practiced in many Pakistani universities as well as in other third-world countries, where the university finance department overcharges doctoral students but fails to adequately compensate reviewers, resulting there is a significant delay in the evaluation of my doctoral dissertation."

Delay in reviewing the doctoral dissertation of Participant 'D', who is a dynamic young woman working in a private college, recently got engaged to her cousin, who is currently unemployed. This situation Occurs when a doctoral thesis is refused evaluation and sent back to the University by external reviewers. Participant 'D' expressed his grievance in these witty words:

"Six months had passed since I submitted my doctoral thesis when I contacted the university officials. They delivered the disappointing news that my thesis had been returned by an external reviewer due to non-payment issues involving former doctoral students at my university. As a result, it would have taken another six months to initiate the formation of a new external panel and receive the evaluation reports, which would have led to a delay of more than two years."

Participant "E" is a young girl who covers her education expenses by working online while staying at home. She ran into trouble when the university demanded an internal assessment fee, taking several months to collect the required amount. This resulted in a delay in the evaluation of her doctoral thesis. She expressed her sorrows desperately:

"I received an email from the university's finance department and a few days later a letter by post, both urging me to pay the internal assessment fee. Unfortunately, I was going through a financial crisis during this period, which made it difficult for me to raise the required amount for several months. After arranging and submitting the fee, I later found out that the internal assessment fee is the responsibility of the university, not the doctoral student. This revelation dismayed me, prompting me to reflect on the corrupt practices within our institutions that cause so many hardships to doctoral students."

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring the issues that face doctoral students in Pakistan after submission of the thesis with specific focus being laid on publication demands, faculty politics and latitudes of time taken in assessing evaluators being paid. The findings trace three thematic areas, which are interrelated but separate, and which are grounded on the lived experiences of doctoral learners and were supported by previous empirical studies

Delay and Publication Requirements.

The initial research question considered the impact of the mandatory publication requirement on the experience of doctoral students. The results show that the mandatory publication of one or two research papers, which is mandatory by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), is a significant cause of delay. The students complained that they cannot find the appropriate journals, face long cycles of review, and conflicting editorial demands. These findings are consistent with the existing research that indicates that publication requirements, although aimed at improving the quality of research, can be a source of unnecessary pressure on students and increase the duration of the process (Lei and Chuang, 2009; Hernandez-Gonzalez et al., 2020; Waheed et al., 2021).

Importantly, the findings indicate the lack of alignment between policy intents and discipline-specific facts. Although other disciplines, especially those that focus on applied sciences, can generate publishable information more easily, other disciplines, especially those in theoretical or contextually dependent areas, have difficulties with satisfying the expectations of standardized output. The same observation is reflected in the ideas of, stating that standardized publication policies do not reflect the disciplinary differences and can increase disparities among doctoral applicants. Thus, the present research confirms the necessity of distinction in the publication policies that should be based on the norms that are subject-specific instead of a strict, unified requirement.

Professionalism, Power Relationships, and Tensions.

The second research question was dedicated to the antecedents of faculty conflict and the implications of the same to doctoral progress. The results establish that the negative attitude toward individuals, the existence of structured hierarchical power relations, and the lack of professionalism among the members of the faculty significantly hinder the process of obtaining degrees in time. Delays within the administration, lack of signature, and uncooperative attitude of supervisors or committee members were also reported by students very often, as well as in international literature on the doctoral attrition (Chiang, 2003; Cotterall, 2013; McAlpine and McKinnon, 2013).

This work adds value to current literature by demonstrating that these conflicts are not only interpersonal, but also very steeped in the systems. The lack of alignment between supervisors and supervisees, which Golde (2005) and Leijen et al. (2016) reported, directly affects the emotional state of doctoral students and their academic intentions. In the Pakistani context, power concentration in faculty committees is frequently reflected in the form of gatekeeping behavior, which in other cases is influenced by personal grievance as opposed to scholarly judgment. The noted fact

highlights the need to implement structural changes, outside training sessions, to instill ethical and professional supervisorial cultures.

Administrative Delays and Evaluator Compensation.

The third research question was the students' perception on the delays in the evaluator remuneration. In line with the research conducted by Woolderink et al. (2015) and Aina (2015), the current results show that bureaucratic inefficiency and slow financial procedures slow down the ability to evaluate the thesis in a timely manner. Delay in payment is a deterrent to external evaluators, particularly international scholars who participate in the review exercise, hence prolonging the graduation process of students.

Most importantly, this paper provides a new point of view: financial delays do not only sluggish the assessment process but also cause mental trauma among students, who think of financial delays as negligence on the part of the institution. The same past studies (Axelby et al., 2022; Harshé, 2022) also emphasize the fact that students in developing countries are disproportionately affected by financial and administrative bottlenecks in universities. Therefore, the current paper demonstrates the necessity to adopt simplified financial practices, electronic surveillance tools, and an accountability infrastructure.

Conclusion

The current qualitative research will provide an in-depth analysis of the problems faced by doctoral candidates in universities in Pakistan after the submission of their dissertations. Three major concerns were identified (a) the inequitable burden created by the nature of the publication requirements in different disciplines; (b) faculty struggles and unprofessionalism that create obstacles to academic development; and (c) late payment to the evaluators, which makes dissertation evaluation challenging and causes anxiety in the student.

Altogether, these results highlight the importance of the systematic reforms in the academic, administrative, and policy domains. Universities need to become more accommodating, implement discipline-conscious publication rules, implement strict forms of accountability to control faculty behavior, and revamp financial and assessment systems to be put into proper order. The response to these issues will not only enhance the rate of doctoral completion but will also increase the general integrity and credibility of doctoral education in Pakistan.

The mixed-method or experimental design of the future research will help examine causal processes that underlie post-submission delays and extend the scope of research by including the viewpoints of policymakers, university administrators,

supervisors, and assessors. This thorough investigation will be helpful in developing evidence-based interventions that can improve the doctoral education systems and ensure the completion of degrees in a timely and effective manner.

Implications of the Study

The research aimed to investigate the problems and challenges experienced by students pursuing doctorate programs in Pakistani universities once they have submitted their theses. The implications on the policy, institutional practice, and future research are indicated by the findings.

According to the results that doctoral students feel quite unsure and nervous because the assessment of their thesis does not show real-time information. It is suggested that the universities should introduce a virtual dashboard that will be available to all stakeholders, which are doctoral students, supervisors, Controllers of Examinations, BASR members, and vice chancellors. This type of dashboard would alleviate stress and misunderstanding since it would show all the phases of the post-submission process and projected timelines of completion, which would make the whole process more transparent.

As the findings showed that the irregularity of the BASR meetings and the lack of clarity in communication continue to extend the post-submission time, the study suggests reinforcing the independence of the BASR and its functioning. Frequent and timely meetings as well as timely informing by written notices, institutional dashboard, or formal WhatsApp groups would minimize unwarranted delays. Directly related to the administrative lapses that the narratives of participants revealed would be ensuring that the appraisal phases are covered by set timelines.

The research has found that there are two significant systemic challenges. To start with, the results have shown that technical and policy-based barriers, including the standardization of publication requirements in all fields or the issue of delayed payments to the evaluators, have a wide impact on influencing the completion of degrees in time. Thus, the research suggests revising the publication policies so that there is fairness in discipline and so that efficient financial processes are introduced to achieve efficiency in the payment-related blocks.

Second, the participants reported the moral and ethical difficulties of the supervisory behavior, such as inconsistent guidance, unprofessional attitude, and pressure tactics. Considering these results, the research recommends the change of accreditation and evaluation norms by the national agencies, especially the Higher Education Commission (HEC). The problem can be mitigated by minimizing the use of publication-based indicators and enhancing the accountability systems on supervisory behavior.

The current study has mostly reviewed the lived experiences of doctoral candidates; however, the results indicate that the reasons behind the delays are complex and need additional empirically-based research. Experimental, longitudinal, or mixed-method designs would be utilized in future studies to determine causal pathways and increase the external validity of the findings.

Lastly, the results highlight the importance of engaging the stakeholders holistically. The policymakers, senior university officials, supervisors, departmental heads, Controllers of Examinations, BASR directors, and deans should be incorporated in future research in order to come up with a comprehensive picture of institutional barriers. The comparison of the studies within the universities might show the systemic variations and allow defining the most effective methods that facilitate the completion of doctoral degrees in a timely manner and in an efficient way.

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