



## Navigating the Challenges of Doctoral Journey: Voices of the Students Pursuing their Studies Abroad

Dr. Syed Abdul Waheed \*

\*Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Okara, Okara, 56300, Pakistan. [s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk](mailto:s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk)

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### ABSTRACT

Doctoral students face certain difficulties and challenges while participating in academic and research activities during the course of their PhD studies in a foreign university. They make attempts to seek cooperation from the academic communities to find a way out and to cope with the emerging situation. The present study aims to examine doctoral students' experiences of such difficulties and challenges, their experiences with the language while engaged in their doctoral studies, orientation to their study program, and the academic environment of the university. A phenomenological approach was used to explore doctoral students' experiences. Fifteen participants were purposively selected from public sector universities located in different cities in Austria. They were interviewed and field notes were taken. The interview transcripts were analyzed by reading the text several times and identifying the emerging themes. The finding of the study revealed that most of the difficulties and challenges were a function of the lack of preparation before coming to Austria, the relatively different academic and research culture of the host universities, and a lack of orientation to the university system after arrival. Learning the German language was found to be significant in social life but it was not a challenge in the academic life of the students within the university. The study has implications for international students who should plan their studies, get an orientation to the studies immediately after arrival, and should be flexible in learning the language for social and academic integration.



### Introduction

The doctoral students are selected through an exclusively competitive process in which personality traits, academic background, and research skills play a significant role. In foreign institutions, executing doctoral studies is an exciting opportunity as well as a challenging errand (Cowley, & Ssekasi, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Generally, international students undergo various challenges while staying and studying abroad, including academic challenges, cultural shock, health issues, and personal problems (Leong, 1984; Adler, 1986). Particularly, students face the challenges of individual sacrifice, academic departmental problems, lack of support from the institution, financial issues, and dissertation accomplishment challenges (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Khalil, 2022; Protivnak & Foss, 2009; Spaulding & Rock-inson-Szapkiw, 2012; Sverdlik, Hall, & McAlpine, 2020). Many difficulties occur because of doctoral students' relationship with the research and academic community within their direct institutional environment. (Bista, 2016; Bista & Gaulee, 2017; Cowly & Ssekai, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Pyhalto & Lonka, 2013).

For all international students, particularly the initial time is considered very critical. Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, and Van Horn (2002) analyzed local American students by the international equivalents and concluded that because of dissimilar higher education systems, the preliminary six months of

international students proved more stressed. In this regard, various factors are held liable for the nerve-racking initial period, including international students' inherent country culture, the locals, poor assistance from host institutions, challenges in initiating relationships, and many other correlated experiences abroad. (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Khalil, 2022; Lee & Rice, 2007).

Vis-à-vis Asian students particularly, Hofstede (2001) determined that cultural components can illuminate why Asian students come across challenges and difficulties among Western countries predominantly at the initiation of studies. Brog, Maunder, Jiang, Walsh, Fry, & Di Napoli (2009) claimed that Asian native doctoral student in the UK averts working single-handedly and tends to get more directions from their advisor. Furthermore, an international student approaching from a country where he performs as a submissive learner faces challenges in enduring his doctoral studies in any Western country as the students here are energetic learners and involved in student-centered and activity-based teaching and learning environment, producing independent learners through critical thinking (Cahusac, 2021; Cowley & Ssekasi, 2018; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Khalil, 2022; Evans & Stevenson, 2010; Sverdlik, Hall, & McAlpine, 2020).

Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, and Creighton (2003) conducted another research on doctoral students of UK and Israel-based students of Anglian Polytechnic University and claimed that as students shift into dissimilar learning cultures to meet their disparate learning expectations, these prospective difficulties arise. To rationalize the degree award of doctoral students, more individual and innovative contribution is required in an applicably significant research project to add current knowledge. Additionally, Kinge-Ilner (2002) expressed certain conditions that may impede the improvement of doctoral students' continued work. As students anticipate executing their scholarly tasks independently, they have to do an effort on their own in their study place, laboratory, or library. Consequently, they have to tolerate aloneness and isolation because of the dearth of social relationships and interaction. Therefore, they gain rarer opportunities to get feedback and appreciation for their research exertion.

In connection with Pakistani scholars, Zaheer and Zia (2013), while pursuing a study about thirteen abroad studied Pakistani doctoral students regarding their perceptions about the validity of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Ph.D. programs, concluded that scholars articulated those Pakistani students, the language had been the most prominent problem. Although amongst them some had also gone through the language courses, however, it still occurred as being the chief problem. There is another example of scholars enrolled in Chinese universities who were quite unhappy due to the Chinese language because it was hard to learn. In contrast, the native individuals could not understand any other language that might be adopted for communication. Furthermore, the study concluded that language arose as a concern for those studying in some other countries, including Germany, Austria, and particularly China. For international students, it was the key factor of displeasure regarding their social life in China. In Austria and other countries, especially for social life in institutions, Pakistani doctoral students need proficiency in the German language. In the present study, almost every doctoral student reported as better or outstanding in English linguistic expertise, which is 'adequate' to accomplish his doctoral studies in a country like Austria. Anyhow, if someone does not understand basic German, he cannot communicate and incorporate properly inside or outside the university. However, in the present study, most students do not understand the basic German language.

Furthermore, Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman (2008), during their research on Chinese students, argued that there are possibilities that the understandings of students with dissimilar destinations and belonging to other cultures will differ. Redmond & Bunyi (1993) argued that Asian students face an enormous distinction regarding cultural expectations while studying in America and England. Commonly, they are pondered as a "popular choice" for scholars' foreign adjustment experiences. Moreover, Lee and Rice (2007) explained that these studies target to inspire the discussion regarding international students' issues as an essential step in developing their experiences. Brown and Aktas (2012) argued that there is a dearth of knowledge on the experiences of international Muslim students despite the acknowledgment that faith can influence a travel experience. Furthermore, mostly the research regarding international students' experiences is conducted in the context of North America though most of such research conducted in the UK and Australia reasonably resonates to some extent with the same results (Bista, 2016; Bista & Gaulee, 2017; Cahusac, 2021; Cowly & Ssekasi, 2018; Khalil, 2022; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Lee, 2010; Sverdlik, Hall, & McAlpine, 2020).

Nonetheless, most such studies overlook an enthusiastic analysis of the difficulties and challenges of doctoral students as an essential component of worldwide doctoral studies that determines many of the factors discussed in the available literature. For example, Lee (2010) affirms that students' determination is generally employed to evaluate the worth of students' learning experiences. Anyhow, this is not an effective criterion to judge doctoral students' study experiences because determining graduation percentages misses capturing the hard experiences and unusual resolution of that student who persists in his studies. Tomasz and

Denicolo (2013) comprehensively reviewed the current literature regarding doctoral students' experiences in certain OECD countries, predominantly the UK, and found that though there has been some progress; doctoral experiences yet grasp mysteries and unexplored dark corners. Furthermore, (Lee 2010) explored international students' attitudes and experiences about the US host institute and asserted that he pays special attention to the difficulties and challenges of students' host environment abroad and suggests that their experiences can counter determined by their own heritage country because of cultural and language issues.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study explores the challenges and difficulties of Pakistani doctoral students studying in different areas of studies in various public sector institutions of higher education in Austria. In the present study, participants' socio-academic experiences have not been explored from the wide-ranging perspective of a larger society. It merely includes the academic challenges and difficulties of doctoral students at a particular stage, directing these scholars to integrate within the academic as well as social spheres of their relevant departments and programs of study in the universities of Austria.

### **Research Questions**

In the context of Austrian universities and the background of the doctoral students, the following research questions were designed to address through the present study:

1. What difficulties and challenges do students experience while engaged in their doctoral research and how they coped with them?
2. How do doctoral students experience German and English language during their study program in Austrian universities?
3. How do doctoral students perceive orientation to the study program and academic environment in Austrian universities?

### **Methodology**

Although several approaches exist for executing phenomenological research, this study employs Van Manen's (1997) approach to researching lived experiences of doctoral students on certain grounds. The phenomenological approach of Van Manen (1997) is predominantly acknowledged for its substantial contributions to health care, human sciences, and education, concentrating on the teacher-student relationship. The current study is guided and concerned with phenomenology to uncover, understand and interpret lived experiences of doctoral students and explore the meanings of lived experiences endorsed by the participants. Phenomenology is a process that probes how an individual exists in the environment he is living in. As Van Manen (1997) identified, phenomenology aims to reconstruct lived experiences into some textual expressions of their essence to such a degree that its effect is instantaneously reflective appropriation and reflexive re-living of something significant and meaningful.

### **Description of Participants**

All the participants of this study were accessed resolutely who were students in universities of Austria. Hence, fifteen doctoral students from Pakistan studying in various Austrian universities in the public sector comprised the sample. The study participants' age varied from thirty to thirty-six years. Five participants accomplished their last professional or academic degree from other European countries before their departure to Austria for Ph.D. studies. Therefore, a questionnaire was mailed to them to acquire participants' demographic information. Participants who replied to that questionnaire and indicated their willingness to interview were selected. Afterward, the intended participants were individually approached to conduct their interviews regarding their experiences of challenges and difficulties being doctoral students at some particular university. Participant recruitment was accomplished till the data grasped saturation. Saturation was gained when participants did not describe any further dimensions regarding their experience.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process was accomplished via semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions complemented by one demographic questionnaire and interview guide. Solid descriptions of lived experiences of doctoral students at their university were the primary source for data collection. The researcher conducted the interviews in a relaxed, conversational style, enabling the participants to speak flexibly without any effect. Though every participant was familiar with English, Urdu participants' mother language enabled them to converse profoundly and express their concerns more naturally and enthusiastically.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

The data analysis is an exhaustive process; therefore, the researcher undertook numerous steps of data analysis at various points. Van Manen (1997) asserts that phenomenological analysis intends to

elucidate the meaning and essence of lived experiences of participants. This was accomplished by unveiling indispensable themes entrenched in the text, which reflected the study challenges of students and depicted the underlying meanings within identified themes. As Van Manen (1997) affirms, phenomenological themes can be comprehended as the configuration of experience; therefore, when one analyzes a phenomenon, he is trying to conclude what these themes are. The researcher endeavors to accumulate themes throughout his conversation with the study participants engaged in interpreting their experiences. After interpreting all participants' transcribed voices, the researcher involves in dialogue with the whole written text and interprets the entire experience. Gadamer (1986) stated that when a researcher interprets the text's meaning, he interprets an interpretation.

Considering this process, the researcher listened carefully to the whole recorded interview before transcribing and analyzing it. After listening cautiously and repeatedly to the audio recordings of participants, the researcher transcribed them into text and read them frequently to grasp the central themes and reinforce the researcher's understanding regarding the configuration of structure and experience. Eventually, all transcription was probed to identify conceivable themes using the 'selection and highlight' qualitative analysis approach. Hence, the researcher constructed all emerging themes to unveil the requisite experiencing difficulties and challenges. The following section describes these emerging themes.

## **Results**

The subsequent results of the analysis describe the experiences of participants regarding challenges and difficulties while conducting their research practically. The doctoral students further elaborated on their experience with the English and German languages and certain areas in which they had a dearth of orientation in their home country and from a host university. They gave different suggestions for improvement of an existing situation. They described how they perceived the orientation of the university environment and their program of study and how the dearth of orientation swayed their stay and study in Austria. From their interview transcripts, the emerging themes, such as working on the Ph.D. project, language barriers, and lack of orientation, are elaborated, considering the participants' experiences.

### **Working on PhD project**

For doctoral students working on a Ph.D. research project, undoubtedly, is an essential activity that envisages the challenges and difficulties the students may face and endeavor to find out the way to step up toward what comes next regarding their research project. The present study describes doctoral students' numerous experiences that they underwent while involved in pursuing the dissertation as well as other related activities inside the academic environment of their university. The theme 'working with Ph.D. project' enlightens the experiences of doctoral students during their scholarly activities. While performing experiments in the laboratory, doctoral students require adequate funds to access the essential material. Ibrahim was a Ph.D. student in his 6th semester of medical and biological sciences and was pursuing a research project self-sufficiently. He viewed, "*In life sciences, funding is the foremost issue. It is hard enough to purchase the material as it is very costly...everybody has to face this issue from the time when the Ministry of Technology had been dissolved.*" Ibrahim, in addition, described the significance of necessary material in laboratories for experiments:

*If you are given material lesser than your requirement... you will have to manipulate experiments with less material... and you cannot repeat an experiment... Often you have to face the "do or die" situation. Moreover, if you employ this technique first-time, there will be more possibilities of error.... hence, you will need more material.*

Alter in study rules also create misperceptions for faculty and students, and the student's progress can slow down. Maryam, a student of Ph.D. at a university of business and economics, explained this specific situation:

*In universities, the rules and regulations are changing very swiftly. Professors are not clear that which rules to be followed. As being very old, my co-supervisor told me that I must have a bird's eye view of rules and regulations because he could not recall the altering rules. Currently, four regulations are being observed for students of Ph.D. i.e., 2012, 2007, 2005 and 2003.*

The academic life of students, as well as other related matters, is significantly influenced by their social life in a university. Generally, the nebulousness in understanding the Austrian law added "uncertainty and confusion" for some participants to manage their social matters, which suffered them to in several situations,



including their studies. Maryam had to face such situations; she revealed:

*Here the laws are run via the interpretation of interrelated people, and everybody interprets it as per his or her individual perception...in this country, almost fifty percent of people perceive something whereas the other half know anything else...believe me, it has always been nail-biting for me.... the law's ambiguity in this country is a dilemma indeed... as here rules intertwine the students; hence, how their work can be prolific.*

Does the assessment of the student also a victim of this sort of ambiguity? It is renowned that attending and assessment of workshops, seminars, and study courses are part and parcel of a doctoral program. At different levels in a doctoral program, students' learning is assessed in different forms. The particular university and teachers of that field of study who teach the course or seminar accomplish this task. Students respond distinctively to the teachers' way of assessing their learning outcomes. Danyal, in a course, *"achieved grade 1 'Excellent' with an ease...as his teacher was soft-hearted"*. He commented that *"If everybody is granted grade 1 without truly testing his/her actual learning level, then there is no need to evaluate the students."* Generally, *"if students are already mindful that nonentity will assess which is being learned from their course, then students will not study the course deeply."*

### **Working independently or in a team**

Systematic collaboration is considered significant to settle the issue concerning the shortage of funding that intends to share resources and skills at the individual and organizational levels. While illuminating the possibility of teamwork, Ibrahim remarked, *"Here professors do not have any mutual collaboration. Commonly, they do their work in laboratories independently... Notwithstanding, most of the collaborators are not willing to collaborate...whereas others have no funds for this purpose."*

Furthermore, for doctoral students, it is comparatively difficult and even sometimes challenging to do research independently and individually in comparison to those who work on some research project as members of a research group or a team. For instance, Ibrahim explained, *"As you observe that I have employed two or three of techniques in my whole project while I have to spend one year for being familiar with one technique. On the other hand, I can't be dependent on just one technique for getting published this research which means that I require more time."* He elucidated the situation with another example, *"If one is working on a certain research project alone that would be more challenging for him. He would have to plan, proceed and even write up his experiments single-handedly and likewise publish his research alone."*

In contrast, many students perceive it 'healthy' to work on some research project, not as a part of that project team but working on their research alone. To further brief it, Yasmeen one of the students of Ph.D. 4th semester in a university of technology who was working on a project independently, elaborated, *"Though I was one and only who was working alone instead of project team however the environment for the project was very fine fettle. It alludes that environment inspires, motivates, and evokes you to take further steps."* However, a few students perceived *"discrimination"* whilst working with their project team. Generally, for the research project, doctoral students are engaged, and the project management *"fully supports"* them. Yaqoob was also a student in the 6th semester at that university; he observed:

*If doctoral students work on some research project where their 'supervisor' is employed, then every assignment is completed swiftly. Every single type of perceptible and economic support is made available...However, they neglect the students who are doing the study with their funding...These students are neither provided time nor any support... The supervisors are only interested in where the finances come from.*

Yaqoob further put examples of certain *"discrimination"*. Because of being *"unemployed"* in any research project, *"they provided him a very old computer which often remained malfunctioning."* On the other hand, as some *"new employee"* joined that project team, *"he was warmly welcomed, and a first-rate computer and marvelous new chair were arranged for him if already not accessible."* These project employees have well-organized meetings. However, the project administration *"are not willing to own us and take our responsibility"* they declare, *"As we are not paying you, thus we ask you about nothing."* Likewise, the previous year *"he went on an exhibition necessarily by train in more than eight hours,"* but *"the employees arrived there by air only in less than one hour."*

Conversely, if a student of a Ph.D. pursues self-finance, he may face a lot of challenges. Danyal was a 2nd-semester student in physical sciences and did not have funding status or scholarship described, *"I was*

*anticipating getting a sufficient amount from my project within one year...However, this expectation still does not seem to become true. I have no hopefulness to bring forth this wish soon..."* Consequently, after experiencing the "unfulfilled expectations and wishes," he realized that *"we should be well aware that how much finances are required to study and live here and to feel comfortable."* It reveals that one should plan his studies well before he arrives at any foreign university.

### **Language Barrier**

For doctoral students, one of the significant factors was a foreign language, although, inside the university, it was not deemed essential for scholars' study matters. The German language is frequently spoken in Austria. In contrast, Pakistani doctoral students accomplish their higher education in their inborn country or any other country where the medium of instruction is English. Hence, they are unfamiliar with the German language. Generally, students decided to pursue studies in Austrian universities as English was 'sufficient' for it. But they revealed their dissimilar experiences with English and German languages while studying in changing cultures. 'Language barrier' is a theme that affirms participants' perspectives on whether the German Language is an obstacle or not. Maryam, a Ph.D. scholar of an internationalized most developed Austrian University, described her 'bad experience' regarding the German Language in her social life. Yet, she was of the view that it was not a barrier in her university. She described:

*One must not plan to stay in a country like Austria for three or four years. As you are not familiar with the local language, you are often unable to discern the mindset of anybody. But in university, regarding doctoral students, I think no particular language barrier is there... Everything, i.e., the websites, the whole information and material, even a piece of notification or notice, is provided in English translation... However, it isn't easy to partake in all social events.*

Instead, Haris had difficulty acquiring appropriate information for the admission procedure. Hitherto, he had obtained his Master's degree abroad in a country where English was the mother language, and he was unfamiliar with German. Here in Vienna, he had spent over two years. He stated, *"As maximum of the informative material is provided in German consequently, there is also another language barrier concerning related information."* He proposed, *"At the university in the earliest days, commonly students are unfamiliar with the German language. Thus, in my opinion, to evade any adverse situation, they must be given information in manifold languages.* Likewise, the doctoral students presumed there would be a prearranged set of progressions in English waiting for them once they got admission to their preferred international university. Yet *"over time, they perceived all these problems when they faced."* Ibrahim was a student in Vienna; however, despite staying in the city of Vienna for above three years, he was unfamiliar with German Languages. He remarked:

*Initially, I acquired courses from an alternative university because there was no English course available in my department... Although it proclaims as being an international university...In all departments, they must cope with certain courses in English...And also, they should re-organize their Ph.D. studies program.*

Concerning orientation to the culture and language of Austria, Ibrahim articulated his perception of the dire need to offer the facility of learning the German language without a charging fee. Most study participants favored launching the initial German courses by the university to integrate the external students into the interior environment to get initial knowledge of the local culture. As sometimes both cultures contradict each other, they should cope by conveying their Austrian culture. They should give the orientation on 'how emergency services can be used by foreigner students' to benefit themselves. Even though Danyal understands the constraint of the language barrier yet, he experiences it differently:

*In an abroad country, one has to face the language barrier...You cannot integrate easily...And you prefer to live isolated because you are unable to communicate... Anyhow, I do not face such issues here... The people here are pretty good, assisting and socially interacting with you as far as possible.*

Instead, as laboratory technicians do not speak English, working with them makes it very difficult to communicate and develop mutual understanding. Yousaf, one of the students at the veterinary university who has to stay most of his time in different laboratories, remarked:

*A lot of laboratory staff speak the German language. Even the literature for guidelines for a specific instrument/gadget is in their own [German] language... Along these lines, we either fail to learn properly*

*from the experiments or require more time to learn in laboratories...*

Divergent to that situation, Yaqoob, a student of Ph.D. at a technology university, has to work for many hours daily in a laboratory perceived that the whole scientific staff and our colleagues, speaks English fluently however, he faces “problem while communicating with the non-technical staff.” Some of them were unable to speak English however, “neither they nor I *do feel bad.*”

Conversely, Younas was unfamiliar with German despite spending two years there. He "feels bad" whenever his colleagues from Austria" constantly "converse in German, despite noticing that he cannot understand it. In his company, only a few people belong to dissimilar backgrounds. To a great extent, they are Pakistani and Austrian. Inside the university, during social gatherings, the foremost barrier for him is that nobody is there who belongs to his research field. The other main barrier is language. Along with all their colleagues who are German-speaking, he feels such as "they are insulting him. He also sometimes perceives "they do not care" and "don't *welcome him*" as they don't regard that he cannot speak German, and they continue the conversation in their language.

Yasmin, one of the doctoral students in the 4th semester who have very initial knowledge of the German language, explains that we encounter the language barrier in our "growth" if we wish to integrate with Austria. She puts an example, "*If in German she studies law, she cannot understand anything, but comparatively in any English-speaking country she can understand a lot.*" She was a student at an Austrian technical university; she experienced:

*I may integrate with my supervisor and into the community of my department; however, I cannot integrate for a long time without learning German. Furthermore, language demands money and time that I can't afford...As I have to stay here for four years, I should not learn German...Also, I think language is not a barrier to a Ph.D....However, language is the chief barrier to one's integration...It is just a circle. One doesn't know the language if he doesn't adopt a community, and he doesn't adopt a community because he doesn't know the language.*

Generally, in day-to-day "research and academic activities," German language isn't a barrier. Anyhow, Ismael, a student of technology and engineering at an Austrian university, could not learn German even after staying there for over three years stated, "*Learning German is very significant. I should learn it; however, I did not learn...Though I did not face any prejudiced attitude... It seems as if the natives appreciate when anybody speaks German*". Commonly, he did not face difficulties in courses suggested in German as the concerned teachers taught in English with students' consent in class. Often, his teachers asked him whether he would join the class so that they might prepare their lectures in English...He affirmed, "*People questioned me why I did not learn German, stating I did not do well and needed to learn.*"

Salman probably suffers too much "isolation" for not being German speaking. He is a doctoral program student in the 5th semester of the medical sciences. He conveyed, "*One is socially put aside if he doesn't speak German. Their system, religion, and culture are all different...I haven't idea how they become aware of my acts when I assemble with them.*" He thinks it is the "*big barrier in integration,*" as he "*fears that somebody may mind it if I speak somewhat else, which is understandable.*" He feels a "gap" and is unaware of "*what is the issue*" in communication. He attempts to "*communicate*" them according to his "*understanding*"; however, "*someway he guesses that there is a "communication gap" and still he is pursuing the answer to that question.*"

From the participants' opinions, it is concluded that regarding the accomplishment of scholarly activities inside the university, German was not the challenge predominantly in internationalized Austrian universities. Nonetheless, social life was challenging there, and for this solution, they learned basic German though it was insufficient for communication in some understandable manner. That had bound them either to stay with the Pakistani group or with local or international students who speak English.

### **Lack of Orientation**

International students can't adjust quickly if they are not given orientation about the doctoral program, research, academic culture, institutional environment, and university's evaluation system. Furthermore, they should have attained that orientation before arrival in the host country. In the theme 'Lack of Orientation,' participants' experiences describe how scarcity of orientation caused a lot of challenges and difficulties at Austrian universities.

Compared to those doctoral students who have endowed scholarships and got admission before coming to Austria, some students arrived as employees to work on some paying research project in a university or research institute, and after arrival, applied for Ph.D. admission. Harris one of these participants, affirmed, "*Consequently, in the earliest period, I failed to focus as I had to face the difficulties*

*of designing research and pursuing admission altogether, which I ought to tackle individually."* Even his academic courses and research project started after gaining admission ten months afterward his coming to Austria. Further, he stated, *"It might have been very comfortable and better for me if our courses had been started ten months ago."* Ishaq further described:

*It was probably because of our misguidance and misunderstanding through our employed organization. Before our departure, we questioned what was compulsory to do about our admission. They answered that you would easily get admission upon arrival, but we failed to get admission instantly.*

Likewise, Jamil also *"had to fight his extreme"* to gain the certificate from his previous institution to ensure his admission to an Austrian university. This certificate approves admission to the selected degree programs in an issuing country. He explained, *"If the organization in which I am employed had already updated me regarding the prerequisite for that certificate well in time at my selection ten months afore my coming, I might have had an appropriate time to provide it someway."* Furthermore, he was not referred to appropriate persons in the office of students' affairs, which also delayed his admission procedure. Similarly, Danyal had to change his department one year after, but ill-advisedly his first two semesters had not been included in the fresh academic program because of insufficient information because he misinterpreted that *"my two semesters of the first year would be included in my fresh program."*

Lacking knowledge of the official and formal procedure to change supervisors may delay the research process. Ismaeel, a Ph.D. student at a university of technology, waited for one year to get a second supervisor for being unfamiliar with its procedure; thus, he *"did not follow his case"* as he assumed that his case would be treated as routine. He explained, *"I was not conscious that I would have to pursue it; I assumed that my topic had been changed and approved."* Later, he was informed to do his research in a computer science department; however, his previous supervisor wished he would continue work in material physics. Eventually, he attained the second supervisor after one year and six months. Ismaeel described, *"Still, I am not sure whether my work does not correlate with material physics...and astonish why it happens here."*

Usually, the universities have Ph.D. and doctoral programs; thus, students often remain topsy-turvy about which option to decide. Yousaf, one of the students in the 5th semester at veterinary university remarked, *"I was in a fix either to choose Ph.D. or doctoral program. No one provided me comprehensive information in this regard."* And *"Even we were not aware of the dissimilarity between these two."* No disciplined way was available there to gain information in this regard. He was provided very initial information by his supervisor, and finally, he selected the doctoral program.

The above examples from the participants' stories prove that doctoral students following Ph.D. in abroad universities require orientation sessions before their departure to any host new university or the native country. In contrast, particular measures should be taken for doctoral students before leaving to join a specific university in any foreign country.

### **Discussion**

While pursuing their research and academic activities at the university, study participants had to face certain challenges and difficulties throughout their Ph.D. studies. They endeavored to manage emergent situations by seeking support from their scholarly community. Likewise, Jazvac–Martek et al. (2011), in one of their study questions: "what types of difficulties were experienced by them [students] and how did they respond to these difficulties?" stated that students endeavored to demonstrate "their readiness to deal with difficulties via networks which they cultivated outside and inside of their formal academic environs." Similarly, in the present study, the doctoral students come across as "addressing difficulties via networks" inside their "formal academic environs" of the university department.

Furthermore, it was also noticed that many challenges and difficulties were due to an absence of planning before departure to Austria, in comparatively different research and academic culture in a university, and the absence of orientation to doctoral students predominantly in earlier time afterward their arrival is also an addition in this regard. In their study Khanal and Gaulee (2019) described similar pre-arrival challenges, "for example, obtaining precise info, understanding the whole admission procedure, and preparing visa acquisition documents." Some participants faced certain problems because of the essence of relations to the academic community. It agrees with the study findings of Phalto et al. (2009) and Vekkailla, Pyhalto, and Lonka (2013) that difficulties for doctoral students occur due to their relationship with the research and academic community in the instantaneous environment of their institution.

In the present study, a few doctoral students underwent academic isolation. Gunnarsson, Jonasson,



and (2013) executed a qualitative study to probe the students' disagreement experiences with their supervisors from England and Sweden. Comparing the results of this study, they concluded that the supervisors were comparatively unfamiliar with the most up-to-date field of research, which caused frustration in students. In contrast, the students observed their supervisors had less knowledge than themselves. Furthermore, Kingge-Illner (2002) described that “generally Ph.D. students are not given much attention in German universities. They are even not being integrated into special studies courses. Often, they fail to get the assistance of their supervisors.” Furthermore, Muhar, Visser, and Brada (2013) elaborated that “not every supervisor is experienced enough, proficient and ready to involve in transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. Co-supervision from alternative institutes can assist in encompassing the partial capacity and adding inputs from distinguishable perspectives available.”

In the present study, the doctoral students described the challenges and difficulties which they came across while doing PhD research as a foreigner. It was distinguished that participants who were performing experiments in some laboratories required ample funds to acquire access to the essential material to perform experiments. Wossgott, a representative of doctoral students, articulated in his interview with Austria *'der Standard newspaper'* on *February 1, 2008*, that lack of exchange of scientific collaboration and scholarly colleagues is a difficulty in Austria. Pecher (2009) described that “adopting the open access admission policy for higher education institutes and current development in that area significantly decreased the funding for every student.

Furthermore, pursuing Ph.D. research independently and individually is further challenging for doctoral students compared to those working on some research projects as a research group or team member. Pecher and Thomson (2004) described that academic disciplines significantly differ. For example, in natural sciences, doctoral students do research collaboratively as teamwork. In contrast, research in the humanities and social sciences does not ensure greater opportunities for integration into the research community. Chiang (2003) also described that because of the importance of adjacent interaction, teamwork, and feelings of collaboration, the whole atmosphere of the department seems lively, casual, and friendly. Anyhow, while working with a project team, some students perceived “*discrimination.*” Findings propose that the discernment of imbalanced treatment is the key factor that influences the attitude of international students.

Almost all the participants revealed themselves as greenhorns in German regardless of one to three years of staying and studying in Austria. Due to that, they mostly experienced a dearth of communication and mutual understanding with their colleagues who are German speaking. This reverberates with the argument of (Pitts 2009) that foreign language directly relates to the quantity and quality of interaction and relations with the students of the host country and native people. Likewise, Arcangeli (1999), while explaining the experiences of students of an American college who studied for three months in (Salzburg) Austria, elaborates that as they were studying as a foreigner for the first time were shillyshally in communication with local speakers.

Maryam had a “*bad experience*” in her social life concerning the German language; however, she was not considering it a chief barrier at her university. Brown (2009) discussed in resemblance to certain experiences that the lowest level of students' social interaction with other students is a significant theme in educational research. Amongst international students, the language barrier is perceived as a conspicuous stress-producing issue that affects students' overall socio-academic experiences. That affects students' self-respect (Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012; Khalil, 2022) and also causes a hurdle to establishing relationship of friendships particularly with their host student, particularly with their host students particularly (Cahusac, 2021; Cowley & Ssekasi, 2018; Khalil, 2022; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Dewey, Bown, & Egget, 2012; Sverdlik, Hall, & McAlpine, 2020). Zaheer and Zia (2013) executed a study regarding thirteen abroad-qualified doctoral scholars in Pakistan. They concluded that scholars observed that the chief problem faced by Pakistani scholars was language. However, a few had to go across language courses.” language was one of the major problems for Pakistan scholars. However, some of them had to go through language courses. They were students in Austria, China, and Germany.

### **Conclusion**

Participants of this study came across certain challenges and difficulties. It is being concluded that largely the challenges and difficulties during the Ph.D. project, including German, occurred due to a dearth of preparation and planning before departure to Austria, comparatively dissimilar research and academic culture, and a dearth of orientation in the university, especially during initial time afterward arrival. Consequently, two students academically remained extremely isolated as, in university, no one was proficient in their study field, including their supervisor. Furthermore, scientific collaboration or dearth of funding slowed the science students' research process. Working alone proved more challenging than working together with a project team. Generally, the German language was not an obstacle to pursuing

research. However, it was a barrier to students' social life inside the university. Hence, in German, most students were incapable of studying different courses. Almost all participants revealed themselves as a novice in German regardless of staying in Austria for over 1 to 3 years. From the stories of participants, it was perceived that the doctor students did not want to learn the German language. Anyhow, delivering them essential orientation regarding their social and academic life at a suitable time, especially immediately after they come to Austria, may enable them to muddle through the emergent challenges and assist them in better adjustment.

### **Implications for research and practice**

The qualitative component containing group and individual narratives, i.e., focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, would furnish comparatively rich data about doctoral experiences. Additionally, to have a further comprehensive understanding regarding doctoral experiences, female students peculiarly consisting of the Muslim community, the significant population might be addressed through further studies to investigate the dissimilarity in experiences transversely the gender. It was noticed that, to the greatest extent, the challenges and difficulties encountered by doctoral students were predominantly either because of the dearth of orientation in the concerned university or due to a dearth of preparation before they arrived in Austria. Hence, funding agencies, predominantly HEC, should ensure orientation about the structure and whole system for doctoral and Ph.D. programs, including how they can accomplish different requirements regarding the program of study. Though, doctoral students have not faced a lot of language issues.

However, during academic studies, most of them failed to interact properly with fellow students and Austrian colleagues who enjoyed speaking German in social life inside or outside of their university. Consequently, they faced a dearth of communication and isolation. HEC should arrange German language courses for doctoral students at minimum level A2 before departure to Austria. Furthermore, the orientation of the Austrian social system and culture would help integrate them into the concerned university and their social life during the initial stages of doctoral studies.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is difficult for the researcher to elude and entirely eradicate his subjective involvement and interference because it is inevitable in phenomenological-orientated studies. Furthermore, the meanings as well as interpretations constructed in this study drawn up to phenomenology are unfixed and limited and presumed to be deficient and tentative. One needs repeatedly jump back to lived experiences to be accessible to critical and essential questions. The researcher made his utmost endeavor to be conscious of his own biases and demonstrate openness with consideration of the certain context.

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