

## Difficulties while Conducting Research in Academia: Taking M.Phil Students' Perspectives in Public and Private Universities

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### Abstract

*The thesis work has been the integral part of the MPhil in Education program. However, it has been observed that students are in a great fix regarding the completion of their thesis work. So, the purpose was to investigate the difficulties encountered by the students during research at MPhil level. Their experiences were further examined on the basis of their gender and university type. The data was collected by the survey. The conveniently selected sample consisted of 300 MPhil students including male and female, studying in public as well as in private universities. The data was collected through a questionnaire which was a 4-point Rating Scale comprising 25 items. It has 3 factors: i) supervisor' selection, ii) supervisors' support, iii) institutional support. The descriptive statistics for calculating the percentage of students' perspectives as well as Inferential Statistics (Mann-Whitney U tests) was used to find out the difference on the basis of students' gender and university type. The results revealed that majority of students selected their supervisors themselves willingly, but few of them forced to select their supervisor on their teachers' referrals, research topics were allotted to students by supervisors themselves. Their supervisors were not easily approachable as they were unable to give students the due time because of their academic and administrative burdensome responsibilities, even neither the concerned HOD/ director is available at ease for students nor they are provided the access to paid e-libraries. By keeping in mind, the importance of thesis in accomplishment of degrees of MPhil students, there is need to conduct further studies to explore supervisors' point of view as some of the problems are concerned with the supervisors' support too, that will help to minimize the students' problems.*

**Keywords:** Research difficulties, MPhil students, Academia, supervisor's support

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## Introduction

University students compile their research work that they perform under the supervision of their research supervisor in the form of thesis/ dissertation. This productive research work represents the original work of the scholars. They try to complete it while utilizing their best critical thinking skills to document it (Smith & Krathwohl, 2005). This process promotes logical thinking and problem solving skills in research scholars as they became able to conduct their own research work after identifying a problem of study by giving it some suitable title. Thesis work reflects students' characteristics (knowledge, skills, and their values)(Matin & Khan, 2017).

In Pakistan, university students start their research work after completing their course work along with the successful completion of comprehensive/qualifying exams. In this phase of their degree they select a topic of their interest with the consultation of their research supervisor, design the study and complete their research by considering accessible population (Komba S. C., 2016).

During this time span, the research students face different difficulties not only in the selection of supervisor, selection of topic as well as regarding supervisor's and institutional support. They face various difficulties such as selecting the suitable research design as well as collection and representation of data in the form of report (Lessing & Schulz, 2003). During last phase of research, students encounter with a lot of challenges in writing their report work(Huang, 2010).

The association of these difficulties may be related to their personal concerns and experiences that they had while implementing their knowledge, their commitment to their work, their socioeconomic conditions, their communication, management skills, stress that they feel in this time span(Bocar, 2009); institutional as cooperation provided from the administration of university, guidance provided not only from research supervisor but also from senior fellows, fund and facilities given to scholars from university side(Safari, Navazeshkhan, Azizi, Ziaei, & Sharafi, 2015); issues with supervisor i.e. relationship of scholar with their supervisor, his knowledge and interest, interaction/communication between them and feedback from supervisor (Yousefi, Bazrafkan, & Yamani, 2015).

Some of the researches have been conducted on this problem in other countries. For example, Ekpoh (2016) stated that students in Nigeria spends more time to complete their postgraduate degree due to the difficulties faced by them during their thesis work. Also the most of the students who take admission in graduate and postgraduate studies are job doers. They do the full-time-job alongside their studies due to their low financing. Igun (2010) argued that the low financing creates stress for them. The most of the time they keep on thinking of and worried for their university fee. This divides their attention towards the thesis work. And therefore their thesis work is affected badly and delayed (Bazrafkan, & Yamani, 2015; Igun, 2010).

The completion of research work is affected by the research supervisor too. If the supervisor gives the due time to the supervisory, the supervisory can complete the thesis at ease and within due time. However it is reported by the different studies that supervisory are at difficulty to take and avail the due time as well as guidance from the side of supervisor(Ekpoh, 2016; Mouton, 2011). Duze (2010) stated that the post graduate students face different problems regarding the completion of their theses which include financial problem, problem from supervisor's side in form of lack of cooperation, problems from the side of university administration, family-related issued, work-related issues and others problems related to the writing up of thesis (Ekpoh, 2016).

A crosssectional descriptive study was conducted by Matin and Khan (2017) at 20 educational institutes, to identify problems that students and supervisor both faced in the completion of thesis work in Bangladesh. The results depicted that students did not have proper knowledge, commitment and experience towards the fulfillment of their research work. They faced time bar related issues, their supervisor had

excessive academic workload due to which they had insufficient meeting with their supervisors. They also faced some institutional problems in the completion of their thesis work that were less cooperation, guidance, funds and other facilities provided from the administration of university.

In year 2009, Bocar found that cooperation of academic institutes provided to the students is very important for the timely completion of thesis for research students. Results reflected that personal problems of students as time along with the stress management detracted the students and majority of students found it a difficult task to complete it. In 2006, Bitchener and Basturkmen conducted a qualitative study to find what sort of difficulties postgraduate students found while doing their research. They concluded that supervisors had more understanding as compared to their students regarding the writing of results, both students and their supervisors had limited information about not only the causes but also the nature of difficulties that students faced during thesis work and students had very limited proficiency in the second language. Komba conducted a study at Tanzanian higher educational institutions in 2016. The results showed that research students confronted problems in writing all the chapters of their thesis. As they had no fully command on the academic writing.

As required by the HEC, all the university students of graduation as well as post-graduation have to complete the thesis successfully in order to become eligible for their degree. However the most of the students are at great difficulty in this regard that they are unable to complete their degrees within the due time (Ekpoh U. I., 2016). However, the students' challenges and difficulties are not rigorously explored in Pakistan. So, this study will be helpful to expose the students' challenges and difficulties in this regard. This study will be helpful for the university teachers who are supervising the research students. They will be able to know the students' difficulties regarding the completion of thesis and may minimize the students' problems while taking the remedial steps. Following are the null hypothesis of current study:

H<sub>01</sub>: The students do not face any difficulty during research work completion.

H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference between male and female students' perspectives regarding difficulties faced by them during research work completion.

H<sub>03</sub>: There is no significant difference between public and private university students' perspectives regarding difficulties faced by them during research work completion.

### Research Methodology

The study was conducted by following quantitative approach as it is highly regarded for the objectivity and generalizability. All the students of MPhil in Education of public as well as private universities of Lahore were included in the population. The sample for the data collection was selected conveniently from the eight (4 public as well as 4 private) universities based at Lahore. The researcher developed and validated the questionnaire by taking the experts' opinion. Researcher ensured its reliability while pilot testing, the value of Cronbach's Alpha was 0.87. Questionnaire consisted on four point rating scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) along with three factors namely: selection of supervisor, supervisor support and institutional support (comprised on 4, 12 and 9 items respectively). The data was collected by the survey.

### Findings

The descriptive statistics (percentage) was used to analyze the 1<sup>st</sup> hypothesis whereas Mann Whitney U test was deployed to analyze the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> hypothesis. Their results are presented in following tables:

**Table 1.** *Demographics Characteristics*

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
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Gender	Male	147	49.0
	Female	153	51.0
University type	Public	154	51.3
	Private	146	48.7

The result displayed in table 1 showed that there were 147 male students whereas female students were 153 in number. Similarly, result also indicated that there were 154 students belonged to public universities on the other hand the number of respondents enrolled in private universities were 146 in number.

**Table 2.** *Students' perception regarding Selection of Supervisor*

Sr no.	Statement	SD	DA	A	SA
1	My teachers forces me to select them as research supervisor.	26.7%	43.7%	20.7%	9%
2	Mostly the teachers forcefully referred their friends to be selected as our supervisor.	26.3%	44.3%	20.3%	9%
3	Most of the teachers had no space to select me as a supervisory, with whom I was interested to conduct research.	19.7%	51%	27%	2.3%
4	I have selected my supervisor freely & willingly.	13%	44%	20.7%	22.3%

Table 2 exhibited the results about the students' perception regarding selection of supervisor. Majority (70.4 %) of the students were disagreed with "My teachers forces me to select them as research supervisor". In the same way majority (70.6 %) of the students were disagreed agreed with the statement "Mostly the teachers forcefully referred their friends to be selected as our supervisor". Similarly, majority of the students were disagreed with the statements "Most of the teachers had no space to select me as a supervisory, with whom I was interested to conduct research" and "I have selected my supervisor freely & willingly" as there percentages were 70.7 % and 57% receptively.

**Table 3.** *Students' perception regarding Supervisor's support*

Sr no.	Statement	SD	DA	A	SA
5	My research supervisor welcomes my novel ideas regarding research.	24.7%	33.7%	24.3%	17.3%
6	My research supervisor let me research on my own topic of interest.	8.7%	12%	61.3%	18%
7	My research supervisor has allotted me the research topic himself/ herself.	7%	23%	46.7%	23.3%
8	My research supervisor forced me to extend his/ her own previous work.	20.7%	49%	26.3%	4%
9	My research supervisor evaluates my research work only in the light of his own doctoral thesis instead of University Thesis Manual.	28%	60.7%	8%	3.3%
10	My research supervisor discourages me if I have conflict with his/ her ideas.	15.3%	52.7%	31%	1%
11	My supervisor is easily approachable for me.	24.7%	48.7%	23.3%	3.3%
12	My supervisor gives my proper/ due time.	7.7%	27.7%	45%	19.7%
13	My supervisor is available according to our scheduled time.	10.3%	23%	53%	13.7%
14	My supervisor used to prefer their guests over me.	10.3%	15.7%	58.3%	15.7%

15	My supervisor has already a burdensome of responsibilities so he/ she is unable to give due time.	5.7%	47%	35%	12.3%
16	My supervisor scaffolds me if necessary.	6.7%	50%	27.3%	16%

Students' perceptions regarding their supervisor's support is presented in the abovementioned table. These results are evident that most of the students (58.4%) disagreed that they did not receive any appreciation of novel idea from their supervisors. But contradictory to this majority of them (79.3%) agreed that they select topic for thesis work from their own area of interest. 70 % were students agreed that their supervisors allot topics for thesis work to them. Most of the students (69.7 %) disagreed with the statement "My research supervisor forced me to extend his/ her own previous work". A great number of students (88.7%) disagreed with the statement "My research supervisor evaluates my research work only in the light of his own doctoral thesis instead of University Thesis Manual". Similarly Majority of the students were disagreed agreed with the statements "My research supervisor discourages me if I have conflict with his/ her ideas" and "My supervisor is easily approachable for me" and the percentages were 78% and 73.4%. But opposite to this most of the students agreed with the statements "My supervisor gives my proper/ due time", "My supervisor is available according to our scheduled time" and "My supervisor used to prefer their guests over me" as their respective percentages were 64.7%, 66.7% and 74%. Unlike to this, most of the students disagreed that "My supervisor has already a burdensome of responsibilities so he/ she is unable to give due time" and "My supervisor scaffolds me if necessary" as their corresponding percentages were 52.7% and 56.7%

**Table 4.** *Students' perception regarding Institutional support*

Sr no.	Statement	SD	DA	A	SA
17	The students has not convenient approach to the concerned campus principal/ director.	4.3%	25.7%	66.3%	3.7%
18	The university administration is not helpful regarding the allocation of resources like internet facility, VPN address etc.	9%	43.3%	35%	12.7%
19	The university has not provided us any access to paid e-libraries.	9.3%	37%	29%	24.7%
20	The university has not provided us any room where we could sit & work regarding out thesis.	18.3%	44%	28.3%	9.3%
21	Our department laboratory is not fully equipped or updated.	20.3%	37%	23.3%	19.4%
22	The university library has not adequate/ needed books collection.	12.7%	48.3%	32.7%	6.3%
23	The university library do not provide the needed books on demand.	12.3%	44.7%	30%	13%
24	The university library has not given us access to their e-library.	16.7%	38.7%	31.3%	13.3%
25	The university library has no electricity back up.	22.7%	39%	27.3%	11%

Students' perceptions about institutional support presented in abovementioned table. Majority of the students (70%) were agreed that "The students has not convenient approach to the concerned campus principal/ director". But opposite to this most of them (52.3%) were disagreed with the statements "The university administration is not helpful regarding the allocation of resources like internet facility, VPN address etc.", "The University has not provided us any access to paid e-libraries", "The University has not provided us any room where we could sit & work regarding out thesis", "Our department laboratory is not fully equipped or updated", "The university library has not adequate/ needed books collection", "The university library do not provide the needed books on demand", "The university library has not given us access to their e-library" and "The university library has no electricity back up" as the respective percentages were 62.3%, 57.3%, 61%, 57%, 54.4% and 59.7%.

**Table 5.** *Comparison of students' perspectives on the basis of their gender*

Gender	N	M	U	P
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Male	147	164.47	-2.743	.006
Female	153	137.08		

From the above-mentioned data, it is revealed that mean score of male students ( $M=164.47$ ) is statistically significantly higher than the mean score of female students ( $M=137.08$ ) and  $U = -2.743$  ( $p = .001$ ). As  $p < 0.05$ , so it is concluded that the null hypothesis is rejected “There is no significant difference between male and female students’ perspectives regarding difficulties faced by them during research work completion”.

**Table 6.** Comparison of students’ perspectives on the basis of their university type

Gender	N	M	U	P
Public	154	143.97	-1.343	.179
Private	146	157.39		

From the above-mentioned data, it is exposed that mean score of students studying in private university ( $M=157.39$ ) is statistically significantly not higher than the mean score of students studying in public universities ( $M=143.97$ ) and  $U = -.48$  ( $p = .001$ ). As  $p > 0.05$ , so it is concluded that the null hypothesis is failed to reject that was “There is no significant difference between public and private university students’ perspectives regarding difficulties faced by them during research work completion”.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The current study was conducted to identify MPhil students’ perspectives regarding difficulties faced by them during research work completion either enrolled in public and private universities based at Lahore. The results revealed regarding “*supervisor’s selection*” that the majority of students selected their supervisors themselves willingly. However, few of them reported that they were forced to select their supervisor on their teachers’ referrals. It has been further come to known regarding the “*supervisor’s support*” that the research topics were allotted to students by their supervisors themselves. They were not discouraged if they have a conflicted idea to their supervisor. On the other hand, it has been reported by them that their supervisors were not easily approachable as they were unable to give students the due time because of their academic and administrative burdensome responsibilities. They also prefer their guests over students regardless the students’ scheduled appointment. On the other hand, it came to know regarding “*Institutional Support*” that neither the concerned HOD/ director is available at ease for students nor they are provided the access to paid e-libraries. However, the libraries are well equipped. It has been further revealed that a significant difference was found between the male and female students’ perspective. These results are consistent with the study conducted by Duze in 2010, as he stated that the post graduate students face different problems regarding the completion of their theses which include financial problem, problem from supervisor’s side in form of lack of cooperation, problems from the side of university administration, family-related issued, work-related issues and others problems related to the writing up of thesis. Results of Matin and Khan’s study conducted in 2017 were also consistent with current research that students did not have proper knowledge, commitment and experience towards the fulfillment of their research work. They faced time bar related issues, their supervisor had excessive academic workload due to which they had insufficient meeting with their supervisors. They also faced some institutional problems in the completion of their thesis work that were less cooperation, guidance, funds and other facilities provided from the administration of university.

It also been concluded that male students faced more difficulties while completion of their research work. On the other hand, students either belonged to public or private universities equally faced difficulties during their research work.

By keeping in mind the importance of thesis in degrees accomplishment of MPhil students, there is a dire need to conduct further studies to explore supervisors' point of view as some of the problems are also concerned with the supervisors' support too, that will help to minimize the students' problems.

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