



BECOMING A PH.D. SCHOLAR: A STUDY OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Doctorate is a highly esteemed academic degree. PhD education is crucial in today's knowledge driven economy because it help to create new knowledge and skills for the benefit of the economy and for the intellectual society as a whole. Although obtaining a doctorate is a challenging path. The demands are high and the journey can be challenging both mentally and physically. PhD students frequently encounter number of challenges and unexpected barriers and difficulties in the developing nation like Pakistan during their PhD studies, which make it difficult for students to finish their PhD programs on time. Therefore, the current study sought to investigate how scholars perceived their PhD studies and also brought attention to the difficulties that the scholars encountered when working on their coursework and research. Data collected from PhD students of public and private universities of Karachi by using qualitative research method approach. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Prominent themes are emerged through the application of thematic analysis that includes 1) PhD as a pathway to social and financial Status, 2) Academic experiences includes a) Supervision experiences b) Challenges in research process c) Learning Avenues d) Key Challenges in Publication e) Coursework experiences and requirements 3) Personal adversities includes a) Programme Cost: Highly expensive programme b) Health associated Issues c) Balancing job expectations and academic demands. The research results indicate issues students faced at PhD program that need to be resolved so they can concentrate on their studies instead of dealing with these inconveniences.

Keywords: PhD scholars, Academic Problems, Research, Doctoral Degree.

1. Introduction

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) represents the pinnacle of academic achievement, signifying not only mastery of a specific discipline but also the ability to contribute original knowledge through rigorous research. In today's knowledge-driven global economy, PhD education is a critical driver of innovation, economic growth, and intellectual societal advancement (Guerrero et al., 2016; Perkmann et al., 2013). Nations worldwide recognize that a robust higher education system, particularly doctoral training, is essential for scientific, technological, and industrial progress, which in turn aids in poverty alleviation and overall societal development (Iqbal, Saeed, & Abbas, 2012). Consequently, PhD holders are pivotal in developing and sustaining high-skill ecosystems and enhancing global competitiveness (Knight & De Wit, 1997; Marginson, 2001).

Despite its esteemed status, the journey to obtaining a doctorate is notoriously challenging, demanding significant mental, physical, and emotional resilience (Brailsford, 2010). Doctoral students frequently



encounter a myriad of obstacles that can derail their progress, leading to extended completion times, high attrition rates, and negative impacts on their well-being (Gardner, 2009; Golde, 2001). While the challenges of doctoral education are a global phenomenon, their nature and intensity are often magnified in developing nations, where systemic issues such as limited financial support, inadequate research infrastructure, and weak publication cultures prevail.

In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has taken significant strides to enhance the national education system and promote higher education (Abid & Khan, 2017). However, a substantial gap remains between policy aspirations and the on-the-ground realities faced by PhD scholars. Existing research indicates that Pakistani doctoral students face formidable barriers, including severe financial constraints with 92% of respondents in one study citing financial burden as their primary issue (Iqbal, Shams, & Sanfratello, 2020), as well as supervisory challenges, difficulties in research and publication, and the struggle to balance academic demands with personal and professional responsibilities (Ekpoh, 2016). These obstacles not only impede timely degree completion but also take a toll on students' physical and mental health.

While international literature has explored various facets of doctoral student experiences, there is a paucity of in-depth (Ali & Ahmed, 2023), qualitative investigations specifically within the Pakistani context, particularly in urban centres like Karachi, which hosts a diverse mix of public and private universities. Much of the existing research has been quantitative or has focused on singular issues such as funding or supervision, often overlooking the holistic, lived experiences of scholars as they navigate the entire PhD journey, from coursework and research to publication and personal adversities. Therefore, a systematic, nuanced understanding of how PhD scholars perceive their doctoral studies and the multifaceted challenges they encounter is critically lacking.

To address this gap, the current study seeks to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of PhD scholars in Karachi, Pakistan. Specifically, it aims to bring attention to the difficulties scholars face during their coursework and research processes, as well as the personal adversities that intersect with their academic pursuits. By employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, this research delves into the scholars' own voices to answer the following primary research question: What are the experiences PhD scholars gain and what difficulties do they confront in their PhD program in Karachi, Pakistan? The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for university administrators, supervisors, and policymakers to create a more supportive, efficient, and humane doctoral education environment.

Research Questions

Q1- What are the experiences PhD scholars gain and what difficulties do they confront in their PhD program in Karachi, Pakistan?

Sub Questions.

- a) How do students perceive the worth of PhD program and what factors influence their decision to continue with this degree?
- b) What are their learning/educational experiences?
- c) What problems and challenges PhD scholars face during research process?

2. Literature Review

The world has now become a global village and circumstances changing constantly. Many countries are in the process of transitioning and moving forward to a higher education system that demands both specialization and cooperation. The demand for higher education has increased worldwide in recent years. Developing countries have recognized that higher education is the most essential method of scientific, technological, and industrial advancement, which is necessary for poverty eradication and societal development (Iqbal, Saeed, & Abbas, 2012). Higher education plays major role in social and economic development (Guerrero et al., 2016). According to Perkmann, Tartari, McKelvey, Autio, Brostrom, D'este, and Sobrero (2013), higher education serves a significant role in attracting the educated people, transferring knowledge, and supporting the knowledge-based economy. Pursuing a higher degree can be a significant step toward personal empowerment. Economic independence, strong self-efficacy, higher confidence, reduced reliance, and more career options are among the other advantages of being highly educated. Considering importance of the higher education, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) has been taken the lead



in enhancing the nation's educational system and promoting higher education across (Abid and Khan, 2017). The development and maintenance of high-skill ecosystems in society is largely dependent on PhD holders. Within academic circles, the Ph.D. degree has historically been associated with advanced study and superior research methodology. It is essential factor of global competitiveness Knight and De Wit (1997), Scott (1998), and Marginson (2001). Although doctoral students are most intellectually sophisticated in the higher education system, they are also the least likely to complete their primary academic objective, which is to obtain doctorate (Golde, 2001). A PhD program is crucial for producing new information and skills that benefit the entire economy in a globalized knowledge economy. PhD candidates should expect to receive training in problem solving, research and even academic writing from postgraduate education programs. Completing PhD is considered a significant investment in human capital because it is highest degree (Mangematin, 2000). It is impossible to guarantee of success in doctoral education without encountering obstacles and challenges (Brailsford, 2010). According to the related investigation, doctorate students experience a wide range of challenges when finishing their doctorate programs. But if they face too many obstacles without assistance, they may give up on their degree programs (Gardner, 2009).

As mandated by the HEC all university students, both graduate and post-graduate, must successfully finish their thesis in order to be eligible for degree. But the majority of students struggle so much in this area that they are unable to finish their degrees by the deadline (Ekpoh U. I., 2016). However, in Pakistan, the obstacles and problems faced by students are not thoroughly investigated. Therefore, this study will be useful in exposing the obstacles and problems that the scholars face in this area. Teachers at universities that supervise research students will find this study useful. They will be able to identify the challenges students face in finishing their doctoral dissertations, and they can lessen those challenges while providing additional assistance. Scholars found that the biggest obstacle in Pakistan was obtaining financial support, as 92% of the respondents indicated this as their primary issue (Iqbal, Shams, & Sanfratello, 2020). Previous researches revealed many challenges and some ways in which students are assisted as they begin the program and pursue their PhD program identified in both Pakistani and international literature. Furthermore, as per the researcher's knowledge, little investigation has previously been conducted in the context of Pakistan, to ascertain the difficulties and challenges that PhD scholars encountered. Therefore, this systematic research is carried out as a result of the gap has been identified.

3. Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research method was employed to achieve the objectives of this study. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2006), this method is used to gain a deeper understanding of circumstances and events from the perspective of participants. The study utilized a narrative inquiry approach, which is appropriate for gathering detailed accounts of participants lived experiences. As Pachler (2009) noted, the narrative technique helps organize new perceptions and knowledge by raising awareness and facilitating learning.

Target Population and Sample

As demonstrated by Zikmund (2003), the target population refers to the specific group applicable to a particular situation. The target population for this research was PhD scholars from public and private sector universities in Karachi, Pakistan. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- PhD students engaged in the analysis and write-up stage of their dissertation
- Previous year's dissertation submission participants
- PhD students in the field of education
- Willingness to participate in the study

A purposive sampling strategy, as explained by Bryman & Bell (2007), was employed to ensure authentic and rich data collection. The final sample comprised 25 PhD students from eight universities in Karachi.



Table 1

Respondents' Sample Population

Respondents' Position	Sampling Procedure	Total Number of Respondents	Number of Universities
PhD Scholars	Purposive	25	8

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=25)

Characteristic	Category	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	11	44%
	Female	14	56%
University Type	Public	13	52%
	Private	12	48%
PhD Stage	Dissertation writing stage	16	64%
	Recent graduates (submitted within 1 year)	9	36%
Employment Status	Full-time employed	18	72%
	Part-time employed	5	20%
	Unemployed/student only	2	8%
Marital Status	Married	15	60%
	Unmarried	10	40%
Age Range	25-30 years	4	16%
	31-35 years	11	44%
	36-40 years	7	28%
	41+ years	3	12%

Data Collection Tool: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This approach allowed the researcher to maintain topic focus while enabling participants to share their experiences freely (Thomas, 2015). Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained authorization letters from relevant educational institutes. After receiving institutional permission, the researcher scheduled interviews with participants at mutually agreed times and locations in comfortable educational settings. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before each interview.

Interviews were conducted in participants' native language (Urdu) and later translated into English. To ensure translation accuracy, a back-translation procedure was followed, where a second independent translator translated the English version back to Urdu, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. To maintain confidentiality, participants were referred to as P1, P2, P3... P25.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. As described by Rubin & Rubin (2005), the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times, identifying and coding relevant themes. An inductive approach was taken, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed a priori. Data saturation was achieved after interviewing 22 participants, with the final three interviews confirming no new themes emerged.

Researcher Positionality

The lead author is a PhD scholar herself, which provided insider understanding but also required conscious efforts to bracket personal experiences and avoid imposing assumptions on participants' accounts. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted with the co-author to minimize bias.

4. Results and Discussion:

Thematic analysis was used in this study. A logical and inductive analysis of the themes found or labelled in the interview is made possible by the thematic analysis. The researcher analysed record multiple



times, recognizing and noting important applicable codes and themes, as described by Rubin & Rubin (2005). From their responses different themes emerged:

1-PhD as a Pathway to Social and Financial Status

The findings indicate that all the participants acknowledged the worth of PhD degree. They perceive the benefits of the qualification for their professional and personal upbringings. Moreover, their comments suggested that the broader goal and scope of the doctoral study was seen as a qualification for career growth and financial advancement. The majority of students believe that they will have a better employment prospect than those with bachelor's and master's degrees if they pursue doctoral degrees (Jackson, 2021). As per participants, Ph.D. programs directly linked to high employment and promotions. Participants' statements as given below provide evidence of their perceptions about pursuing the doctoral study.

I am motivated towards PhD degree for career growth and need a good place in academia and like to work as a professor at university level. (P2)

Nowadays, this degree holds significant value as people strive to work diligently to cover their utility expenses in the excessive inflation situation. Possessing this advanced degree may enable me to get better job prospects and enhance my quality of life. (P21)

The majority of graduates expressed that their doctorates degree increased their personal and social value and give them credibility in professional settings. This value will create favourable effect on their professional and social lives. Participants' narratives indicate that doctoral experience will make a substantial personal, social and professional contribution to lives after completion. Teowkul et al. (2009) found that people obtaining master's degrees had distinct motivational reasons than people pursuing doctorates. The findings, in contrast to those of earlier studies, identified a new category: "gain respect from others". The authors claim that doctorate students' need for respect was more obvious than that of master's level students. Participants' narratives are presented below:

I am pursuing a PhD to achieve financial stability. It is regarded as the highest academic qualification that is well regarded in society. Students who have an affinity for research often choose to undertake the PhD studies. It may assist us in progressing within society. (P1)

Due to PhD I can be advance my knowledge, professional skills as well as my social status will increase. This might also provide me other more opportunities for jobs as well. (P16)

Not only my previous capabilities, expertise and knowledge can increase by PhD, but my designation will change after PhD as well. (P17)

Some participants expressed their perspectives about doctoral study as means to gain knowledge, research skills, intellectual abilities and thinking processes. However, within this aim they were aware that the qualification will raise their social and academic status as the highest educated individuals. The participants' positive views regarding the intellectual worth of the doctoral studies indicates that they have clear understanding of the significance of doctoral studies. Doctoral education can be seen as an indicator of proficiency and intellectual and cultural maturity. In the process, students acquire the ability to conduct independent research and enhance their cognitive capacities (Akbulut, Fiahin, & Cepni, 2013; Bernstein, Evans, Fyffe, Halai, & Hall, 2014; Lei, 2008; Parry, 2007). Some participants stated that they want to enhance their professional abilities and to advance their knowledge. According to Kowalczyk-Waledziak et al. (2017), obtaining a PhD enhances an individual's professional expertise.

I'm doing PhD to advance my career, to improve my research abilities, personal growth, transform my teaching and intellectual abilities, due to high market demand. Currently, most organizations prioritize hiring PhDs. (P9)

PhD is not only a degree, it transform the intellectual level and thinking process of a person that's why I was inspired to pursue this degree for educational purposes, & a desire to achieve a higher degree, broaden my skills, knowledge and require a promotion in my current position. (P25)

2-Academic experiences: Significance and Associated Challenges

Finding indicates multiple dimensions of scholar academic experiences including interaction with supervisors, meeting the publication expectations, bearing the cost of the programme and recognitions and appreciation.



a) Supervision Experiences. Participants shared their experiences regarding supervision. All participants shared pleasant and negative experiences about supervision. They mentioned that supervision is very important part in the PhD journey, for students, good supervision is essential since it affects both their academic performance and personal growth. Good supervision helps students set specific goals, develop their skills and build confidence in their abilities by offering direction and suggestions for improvement. Below are the participant narratives:

Due to the outstanding guidance of my supervisor, I received throughout my PhD, I was able to navigate the research process smoothly, otherwise, pursuing a PhD would have been quite challenging. (P1)

My supervisor effectively communicates all the necessary information to me. I always feel comfortable and easy in the presence of my supervisor. My supervisors' teaching style is easy so that I can easily understand the hard things. (P13)

The characteristics of a good supervisor or good supervision were also discussed by the participants.

Supervisors should have subject knowledge, supportive, as well as exhibit good behaviour towards students. (P9)

In my opinion few qualities that should be every supervisor possess. It is important that they exhibit kindness towards students, demonstrate empathy towards their personal and academic concerns, value students' time, listen to their perspectives and empower them to express their thoughts on studies and research projects. (P13)

Participants reported experiencing elevated levels of stress, tension, anxiety and various health concerns due to inadequate supervision. Furthermore, subpar supervision is linked to increased stress and health issues among students, which can have a direct impact on quality of anticipated research outcomes and the achievement of candidature milestones (Haag et al., 2018). Participants shared the challenges and their experiences regarding supervisions as,

When I started my research work I did not receive satisfactory guidance from supervisor, he responded rarely and infrequently, I had no alternative but to wait for the supervisor's response; was the only option. (P4)

Supervisors hold crucial position in the research process, as their assistance and support enable us to complete our theses within the designated timeframe but their negligence and insufficient direction lead us to unforeseen challenges, resulting in a loss of time and money. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to manage the students' time and energy effectively. (P16)

Because of inadequate guidance, drain our energies feel stressed and helpless. This not only impacts on our academic development but also affects our physical health and emotional well-being. (P23)

Participants shared their experiences regarding positive and negative supervisory practices. Some of the participants are satisfied and do not have any problems but some highlighted many issue. All students have some expectations regarding good supervision, more specifically participants highlighted that supervisor should helpful, kind, respectful, knowledgeable and careful about the time, money and success of the students. In doctoral experiences, supervision is regarded as one of the most important components (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018). Gardner (2009) and Gube, Getenet, Satariyan and Muhammad (2017) asserted supervisors have a significant impact on students' academic success, perseverance and satisfaction.

b) Challenges in the Research Process: A Reflection of Weak Research Culture. Participants shared the experiences about research related issues. Finding shows that during research work students' encounter different challenges. Participants highlighted areas where they face difficulties in research. Scholars' statements are given below:

Thesis work is challenging task and teachers at universities mostly have less time, cannot give more time to students so I didn't find a way to take extra help for my thesis work. Our teachers have a responsibility to properly assist us, and we can conduct our study appropriately. (P5)

I feel difficulty in literature analysis is the most important but difficult part of the research and afterward data collection as well, both parts are time and energy consuming. Data collection takes



too much time. I have waited for participants for hours. I saw a very tough time in data gathering process. (P13)

Majority of participants expressed that they had trouble in gathering and analysing data. Participant (P2) and (P19) highlighted that they have to face difficulties during data collection, data analysis and no technical support is provided from the institutions.

The most important in research is data collection and it is the most difficult part. I mostly feel difficulty when respondents are afraid to provide data and not clearly explain the problems from which they are going through. The same situation with organizations they mostly refused for participation. (P2)

In research work I got difficulty in quantitative data analysis. The use of different software is difficult for me. (P19)

As per the participants statements indicates that they faced different issues during research work. Universities do not have proper training system for data collection and not provide any guidance to students that how they have to take access in the institutions.

In my view, there ought to be some policy or rule for institutions to cooperate with researchers when they gather information for the research purpose only. (P7)

In universities, there is no proper training system for students on how to gather data from participants. They're often expected to figure it out on their own, which can lead to confusion and mistakes. (P17)

Participant (P20) asserted that in methodology section of research there is a lack of instruction about data gathering process.

The teachers instruct students both quantitative and qualitative research methods, but they did not provide guidance on how to gain access to participants for data collection. (P20)

I faced many issues while conducting surveys for my quantitative data collection. Respondents not properly filled questionnaires or half-filled or some time left it empty. In this case data analysis becomes more difficult for us. (P25)

c) Learning Avenues: Interest and Insufficient Availability. The majority of participants indicate an issue of isolated learning since their main learning source available to them was individual meetings with their supervisors. They stressed the value of seminars and workshops to experience collaboration and learning from others. They claimed that by attending these educational seminars and workshops, they are able to learn many things, engage with other people, enhance teamwork, boost their confidence and learn from a variety of innovative leaders and experienced speakers around the globe. According to Gunnarsson et al., (2013) research seminars in doctoral education are an ideal opportunity to give students the chance to receive varied feedback from departmental and disciplinary "luminaries," as supervision in postgraduate education seems a lonely task, as it is primarily an activity involving only the supervisor and the student. Below are some of the participants' narrations.

I like to attend seminars and workshops; it is good to attend, helpful to build the confidence and provide more learning opportunities in new environment. (P7)

Seminars, workshops, conferences are good to improve learning in a variety of ways, such as by allowing us to work together, enhance collaboration with various teachers, students and speakers. It is helpful to the researchers to present their papers. (P13)

Participants emphasized the requirement of more academic learning opportunities. They stated that these learning resources are conducting very less in number and of high cost.

Workshops and seminars are beneficial in advance learning. At PhD level I truly need for it but our organization is conducting very less seminars for us. (P1)

I like to attend mostly conferences, but they are sometimes out of my budget and extremely costly. Universities should have organized more seminars or workshops, but it should be inexpensive that all students can easily attend and avail these educational activities. (P17)

According to the participant (P4) and (P12) attending seminars and workshops should be relevant to coursework and research work that they can be helpful in studies and develop research abilities



Workshops and seminars are essential, but they must be relevant to the coursework. So that we can take benefit from these and readily apply them to our studies. (P4)

More seminars, particularly on new research methodologies should be conduct in the universities to develop research abilities. (P12)

Participant (P11) suggested that academic institutions should collaborate with one another and extend invitations to each other's students to engage in their events, thereby promoting the exchange of knowledge. According to Bhandari (2013) research seminars and other apprenticeship models create socialization processes that enable the validation of role identities.

I think all educational organizations should have to collaborate with each other and inform about their events to other organization and invite other universities' students as well by this effort knowledge can share by overall system. (P11)

According to the aforementioned statements, participants acknowledged the need for additional learning resources, such as more seminars, workshops and conferences that broaden their understanding of academic areas.

d) Key Challenges in Publication. Findings indicate that during the publication scholars encountered many issues, which is a mandatory requirement of HEC. The nature of issue varies from participant to participant. Some were failed to publish their papers due to lack of coherency, lack of knowledge and proper assistance. Findings indicate that mostly students encountered challenges during papers publication. According to Li (2016), for instance, doctorate students' participation in SCI journal publication creates a highly dependent relationship and tension between them and their supervisors, which may have impact on their degree completion. Participants have indicated that the requirements for publication, coupled with the related financial expenses, represent the most significant challenge that students face during their PhD studies (Raza & Mahmood, 2024). The following are the respondents' statements:

I did not receive any support from my university for publication. I struggle a lot to publish papers and pay a lot of money to journals. (P3)

Article writing is already a difficult task; however, managing the financial aspects of publication presents an additional significant burden. I paid for each paper that I published, and it is hard to publish papers without payment. (P25)

Participant (P1) claimed that quantitative research papers are more easily acceptable than qualitative research papers.

Quantitative papers are mostly easily acceptable than qualitative, this is the truth, so I did not get any difficulty in publishing papers. (P1)

Participants highlighted that publication is not an easy they face numerous rejections, pay high prices and wait for a long time for journal responses.

Publishing is not an easy job. I faced many problems while publishing the article. Some journals do not respond properly and have high fees; free journals do not accept papers easily. I personally advise that universities should provide platform where students can easily publish their papers. (P13)

I have published two articles, but it is not easy to get published and my articles were rejected several times. (P6)

For PhD degree publications are must, it has many benefits, but it also elongates PhD program's duration, increase students' financial requirements and publication stress. (P14)

Furthermore, participants recommended that universities ought to provide students appropriate mentoring regarding the publication process. Students suffer excessively during publication due to of inadequate guidance. They highlighted that their motivations become diminished as a result of lack of proper guidance for publication.

During publication supervisor support is important because they have experience of doctorate studies and publications. According to HEC requirement we have to publish papers in good journals. Lack of honest guidance can lead students to frustration and hard time. (P17)

The publication process needs proper guidance. At university, we don't get enough guidance



from teachers. It is the duty of institutes or supervisors to guide students properly where we should publish paper, but due to lack of guidance we wasted too much time to find out good journals, and we publish in wrong journal to save time and money. (P18)

Participants (P18) further stated that,

Proper guidance can save our time and energy. Publication is a stressful process. Our motivations to write papers become diminished if we do not get proper guidance of publication. (P18)

e) Coursework Experiences and Requirement. Study findings shows that participants have some requirements regarding courses. Some participants asserted that they want to enhance their research abilities, need to learn new research methodological techniques but everything is not covered in present courses in short time period. They want extra research related courses and pointed out that they want to learn more about all the chapters of research especially all types of research methodologies, data collection process, data analysis and about publication. The majority of PhD candidates will become future scientists. They should thus become familiar with scientific research techniques (Sala-Bubare et al., 2018). Participants' narrations are given below:

At doctorate level studies there should be more research related courses rather than other courses. For every research type we should have separate course in which teachers properly guide everything about it. (P1)

In my opinion further research coursework needed to be offered in which we can gain additional knowledge regarding research methods. Some outdated courses should dropped and new ones that teach about the data collection and publication process should be added. (P13)

Few participants also asserted that they need some novel courses as well that can helpful in their daily academic and job situation like health-related courses, mental fitness courses, ethical courses and different technology related courses. Participants' statements are given below.

New coursework should be added in light of global circumstances. There should be more new courses offered, such as different technology related courses. (P10)

All of the courses we currently provide are insufficient at this level; additional courses on anger or stress management, health, or physical fitness courses should be added. Since our job is teaching, these courses enable us stay strong both emotionally and physically. (P11)

Some ethical and wellbeing related courses ought to be required for students' coursework, as professionals in the teaching profession, we should be aware of societal ethics and how to handle any ethical dilemma. (P19)

Some participants expressed less interest in their course work and stated that it is the time-consuming process that's why the PhD become too much time taking process. PhD degree should have focus on research according to participants. Participant claimed the experience of excessive stress while completing the coursework. Participants' statements are as follows:

In my opinion, coursework is a time-consuming process; if we add more courses, we will need more time to finish the assignments and complete the degree. (P7)

I took nearly more than one and half years to finish these courses. I experienced too much stress during coursework. (P18)

3) Doctoral Students: Personal adversities

a) Highly expensive Programme and Lack of Financial Support. PhD in the context of this study was found a very costly degree including from the admission to end of degree (program fee, research process fee, foreign fee, publication fee). In this regard participants spoke about the funds that should be provided at PhD level to enable them to continue easily studies. Mostly students showed their concern regarding funds associated with their research project. According to Saidinia (2013), the main problem is the lack of funding for research projects. As per shams, Sanfratello & Iqbal (2020) the biggest obstacle in Pakistan, identified by the students was the financial load with 92% of the respondents citing it as their major issue. Statements are as follows:

Many responsibilities on the scholar create a stressful situation and the financial stress leads toward other health issues. I think we are at that stage of study that university or HEC should recognize



us and define some funds for us. (P9)

In PhD studies the absence of any type of scholarship creates difficulties for those students who deserve it and have many responsibilities to fulfill. (P10)

Financial support is very important element for us. During my graduation process I got some financial relieve from university but at this level of higher degree I did not getting any financial support. (P15)

Participants asserted that PhD studies are very costly, higher authorities should allocate research funds for students at PhD level they need financial assistance for their studies and research work.

PhD is very expensive degree since we are spending too much finance; I think at least research funds ought to be given to scholars who could use them further in their research work. (P5)

If universities provide some financial relief, we can focus more on our studies. I am doing job by this only I can pay my fees. (P11)

Participant (19) highlighted that now a day due to high Inflation has made a living more difficult of earning person who has to fulfil the responsibilities to family and education, this led to worry and stress, this financial stress leads to other illnesses and that ultimately causes more worries in life.

Currently, the high inflation rates have made it increasingly challenging for individuals who earn a living to meet their family and educational responsibilities, resulting in heightened worry and stress. (P19)

b) The Silent Struggle: Health Associated Issues. Research findings highlighted one of the most crucial aspects of life is health. Participants asserted that a number of health problems arose during the course of the studies due to neglect the health while studying in favour of working persistently to finish assigned projects and assignments or research work, statements are as follows:

I was feeling stress and anxiety during my studies. I got some health issues due to stress and tension of studies, my work delayed, I also got many issues during research work, my supervisor was not cooperative, felt helpless this create more feeling of stress due to all this hard time, I experienced constant tension, hair and weight loss and blood pressure problems. (P3)

I experienced a number of health problems including constant vertigo, back pain, stress, emotional issues and vision problems. These health issues are the gifts of PhD studies. (P13)

Participant (16) asserted that universities do not take students' health into consideration.

Nobody is bothering or concerned about our health during PhD studies, our health is negatively affected by the high pressure of PhD studies, but no one seems to care about it. (P16)

Participant (P18) and (P19) highlight that often face health problems due to the pressure of managing financial difficulties alongside rigorous academic obligations.

For me it is not easy to attain PhD degree, we are sacrificing lot of money, time and hard work to achieve this degree, especially our health as well. Universities are not providing any financial assistance so overall process is stressful. (P9)

The extended duration of PhD studies with academic financial burdens, study pressures and publication related challenges, often led us to numerous health problems like depression and anxiety. (P18)

Due to demanding nature of work at PhD level participants highlighted the feeling of stress, tension and anxiety during studies due to different reasons. Different studies shows that stress can cause a number of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, low cognitive function and panic attacks (Hussain & Khan, 2022; Kuiper et al., 1986; Pascoe et al., 2020; Schonfeld et al., 2016; Shankar & Park, 2016). Participants reported different health related issues

I would like to say due to unsatisfied attitude of teachers, over workload, high fees and dissatisfaction with the learning environment effect on our mental health, learning does not means that we destroy our mental health and peace. (P19)

I got some emotional and physical problems I always feel angry due to neck and back pain. I think that PhD studies directly or indirectly effects on our health. (P22)

In light of the above-mentioned narrations the majority reported experiencing health problems during



PhD studies.

c) Balancing job expectations and academic demands. Students have many responsibilities to manage, as each situation comes with its own demand, academic pursuits have specific requirements, while employment duties have own set of challenges. The study findings indicate that scholars are encountering challenges of balancing professional and scholarly responsibilities. Scholars encounter the difficulty of balancing various responsibilities simultaneously. In addition to their rigorous academic tasks such as finishing assignments, adhering to research timelines, studying for exams, and creating high-quality publications many also work part-time or full-time jobs to manage living costs and other essential expenses. Furthermore, they might have family obligations that demand both emotional and practical involvement. Each domain academic, professional and personal comes with its own expectations and deadlines, turning time management into a significant challenge. The pressure to achieve academic goals, excellence in studies with meeting work commitments and attending to family needs can result in considerable stress. Participant claimed that pursuing a PhD is challenging and full of struggle that they are unable to adequately give time to their families because of the extreme work pressure. Participants' narrations are as follows:

Pursuing a PhD is a rigorous and time-consuming process, require long hours to finish assignments, carry out research, prepare projects, presentations and manage various academic duties. (P2)

For females it is really challenging to allocate sufficient time to everything but no choice we have to manage it. (P5)

Workload scheduling is important during the PhD studies but it is also difficult. I experienced fatigue and stress due to the massive workload, multiple assignments, mentors pressure, group projects, paper writings so many things at this point, I stressed out. (P15)

With a job managing time is very hard. I have to give my full time to my job and afterward to my studies so it is obvious that something will suffer and that is my studies. (P18)

A small percentage of interviewees also stated that they are able to balance time between employment and education because of the support of their families. According to some participants, they do not have many issues managing their time because their families are supporting them in studies and household work so they are not overburdened with household duties.

I manage my time, my family is supportive so I easily concentrate on my studies and job as well. (P4)

My family is really helpful and I don't feel any pressure from them. At work my management is cooperative, whenever I want to take leave for study purpose they allowed me without detecting my salary. (P20)

5. Limitations of the Study

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings:

1. Geographical and disciplinary scope: The sample was limited to PhD scholars in the field of education from Karachi. Findings may not generalize to other disciplines (e.g., sciences, engineering, humanities) or other cities/rural areas of Pakistan.
2. Sample size and selection: While 25 participants are appropriate for qualitative research, the purposive sampling strategy may have excluded diverse perspectives. The study did not include students who dropped out of PhD programs.
3. Cross-sectional design: Data were collected at a single time point. A longitudinal design would better capture how challenges evolve across the PhD journey.
4. Self-reported data: Participants' accounts are subjective and may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability (e.g., reluctance to criticize supervisors).
5. Researcher bias: The lead author's status as a PhD scholar provided insider perspective but may have influenced data interpretation. Peer debriefing and bracketing were used to mitigate this, but complete objectivity is impossible in qualitative research.
6. Translation issues: Despite back-translation procedures, some nuances from the original Urdu interviews may have been lost or altered in English translation.



7. Lack of gender-disaggregated analysis: While the study included both male and female participants, small subsample sizes precluded meaningful gender-based comparisons.

6. Conclusion

The finding of this study leads to conclusion that all of the participants firmly believed that their doctoral degree would make substantial personal, professional and social contribution to their lives after completion this degree. Study findings indicate that in Pakistan context, the pursuit of PhD is frequently a rather solitary attempt. Many students face limited chances to engage in other learning activities or collaborate with fellow peers due to the necessity of balancing demanding job commitments and family duties. The high academic fees add an additional layer of stress, compelling many students to work while studying to manage tuition and living costs. This financial strain, coupled with their other obligations, results in minimal time or energy available for active participation with academic communities and the exploration of further educational opportunities. Consequently, the path of doctoral studies becomes significantly isolated and challenging for many. Many students emphasizing the need of effective supervision that guide in managing intricate research but also for achieving success in the publication process. Many students with limited research experiences enter in the PhD program and require additional assistance, require more learning opportunities and specialized courses to build their skills. Furthermore, they emphasized for a strong research culture within their institutions. This study highlighted that PhD studies have a direct or indirect impact on scholars' health, because of the entire stressful process and requiring them to sacrifice many things, including their health, in order to achieve this degree. An encouraging and well-organized academic setting not only promotes effective research but also aids in alleviating stress, thus preserving overall mental and physical health.

7. Recommendations

Following recommendation have made to overcome the issues and take action to improve the quality of higher education degrees.

1. The scholars pursuing doctoral degrees have responsibilities to recognize and carry out their role as a scholar to contribute for the betterment of society as well.
2. It is recommended that supervisors ought to fulfil their responsibilities through effective guidance, comprehending their perspectives and being mindful of their time and energy. This approach helps prevent students from experiencing stress, loneliness and feelings of helplessness.
3. It is further suggested that HEC or universities ought to provide students an easy access for data collection in the public as well as private sectors institutions.
4. It is recommended for teachers to guide and share their data collection experiences with students that will influence doctoral students' research growth and decrease field related issues.
5. It is also advised that universities ought to provide students a financial supports during studies or in research process. HEC or universities should allocate some funds for research process.
6. To enhance the research culture, universities ought to offer more seminars and workshops to help students to advance in their specialties, advance the abilities of collaboration, enhances research knowledge and skills of research scholars.
7. Universities ought to assist students in the publication process by provide them research facilities academic guidance, collaboration opportunities, funding and platforms for presenting and publishing their work.
8. Curriculum designers include more research related courses and also introduce other new courses that are helpful in their jobs and society benefits in the PhD program to improve students' research and job efficacy.
9. It is recommended that students ought to give any type of rewards or incentives at during PhD studies.
10. Students should take care of their health during studies. Stress at work and in studies can have an impact on one's health.
11. Scholars ought to learn time management skills or strategies for overcoming social and personal difficulties.
12. Investing in teachers' ongoing professional development is a crucial suggestion for raising the standard of higher education.



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Contribution of Authors

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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