Identifying Factors of Research Delay at Postgraduate Level

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Abstract

Research work is an essential requirement at postgraduate (MS/MPhil) level. It is observed that in Pakistan many postgraduate students remain unable to get their degree within their stipulated time. Most of them complete their degree with a certain delay; however some of them have to leave their degree unfinished. There may be different factors responsible for this delay. For the researchers it is important as well as interesting to identify those factors. Purpose of this study was to identify the factors causing delay in research work completion at postgraduate level. Sample of the study comprised 40 supervisees and 16 supervisors from four public sector universities of central Punjab, Pakistan. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect the respondents' perception of the factors responsible for delay in the completion of research work. These factors included three aspects, namely, supervisee related factors, supervisor related factors; and institution related factors. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis technique. The factors related to supervise involved: lack of motivation, their job related assignments and duties, post-marriage domestic responsibilities, poor language skills, and financial constraints. The factors related to supervisor included: busy schedule of the supervisors, lack of experience in supervision, lack of knowledge in the relevant field, less positive attitude towards quality research work, and inability to use modern tools of communication. The factors related to the institution (university) comprised procedural delays, non-alignment of the functioning of different administrative bodies, irrelevant rules and regulations in thesis submission process, lack of research infrastructure, and poor research culture. On the basis of the findings, it was suggested that the job holder researchers may obtain study leave from their respective departments and need to be actively engaged in research related activities for in time completion to their research projects. On the other hand, supervisors may acquire up-to-date knowledge and skills regarding research, and the use of modern tools of

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communication. The universities may improve the existing research related infrastructure and introduce measures to overcome factors causing delay therein. The study is likely to sensitize supervisees, supervisors, and the management to eliminate or, at least, reduce the factors causing delay in thesis completion at postgraduate level.

Introduction

Delay in the completion of dissertation at postgraduate (MS/MPhil) level is a phenomenon of common concern in the local and global research activity. There are numerous factors of delay which hinder the completion of research projects (in some cases it is halted at all). These factors may be related to supervisees, supervisors and the university management. If the stakeholders are well aware of these delay factors in research work it may help complete the research projects smoothly within stipulated time period (N. Lessing & Lessing, 2004; Phillips & Pugh, 2010).

Majority of the postgraduate researchers face several challenges in completing their research projects like domestic responsibilities (particularly for married researchers), job related assignments, lack of motivation, financial constraints etc. Supervisory practices are among the major factors of research delay. Supervision is a complex socio-psycho-academic interaction which takes place between two or more parties having converging or diverging interests. Hence, a well-balanced level of interests among them is vital for the successful and timely completion of postgraduate research work. Poor supervisee-supervisor relationship would result in poor quality of research work as well as the delay in completion. In addition to supervisee-supervisor interaction some other factors like the role of university management (Abiddin, Ismail, & Ismail, 2011) may be involved in this delay. Major responsibility of the institution is to ensure the availability and the accessibility of essential resources for creating a sustainable research culture. It is necessary to make provisions for postgraduate researchers to work in a conducive and comfortable environment (Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016).

It is evident from the literature that the research students at postgraduate level have to deal with a variety of issues that directly or indirectly affect the completion time of the research work. There is a dire need to identify, and seek solution for, the factors which hinder timely accomplishment of this task. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explore the key factors of delay in research work at postgraduate level in public sector universities of the Punjab (Pakistan). Keeping in view the difference in nature of research in social and pure sciences the study was delimited to the social sciences. To achieve more focus the study was further delimited to Department of Education.

This study may help sensitise the supervisees, supervisors, and university management on the factors that hinder postgraduate research work causing delay in degree completion.

Population and Sample of the Study

The present study was descriptive in nature and the qualitative research design was considered appropriate to conduct the research. All the supervisees from the discipline of Education, who had recently completed their theses and their supervisors from the public universities of the Punjab (Pakistan), comprised the population of the study. Four universities from central part of Punjab were conveniently selected. Forty (40) supervisees (10 from each university) and 16 supervisors (four from each university) were conveniently selected, to make sample of the study.

Development of Research Tool

A semi-structured interview schedule was used as research tool for data collection. The tool was developed by the researchers themselves in several steps. The researchers of this study started with reviewing the literature (research articles, theses and relevant books) to explore other research tools related to the (themes in) present study. Afterwards, they identified themes related to the objectives of the study. Initially, sixteen themes were found. These themes were exhaustively discussed with five experts from the Department of Education, University of Sargodha for structuring and henceforth validating the research tool. In the light of the suggestions given by the experts, the researchers added four more themes along with regrouping previous themes. Finally, 13 themes were decided to be included in. The interview schedule was field tested on four respondents before going for actual study; these respondents were not included in the main data set.

Data Collection Process

The data were collected by one of the researchers personally. The researchers sought the respondents' willingness for their volunteer participation as subjects in this study. In the beginning of each interview, the participant was briefed about the nature and process of the study. After addressing their questions and concerns, and getting permission of the participants to audiotape the conversation the interview was started. By allowing participants to ask questions and voice concerns during the preliminary conversation, the researcher established a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere of trust. All questions were asked in the same order as presented in the interview schedule. During interview, the respondents were urged to share their personal experiences to highlight the research delay factors. These included: their personal experiences during research work, financial constraints, supervisee-supervisor relationship experiences and their job related issues during the research process.

Analysis of the Data

The data were analysed by employing thematic analysis technique. The researchers listened to the audio recording of the interview carefully many times and wrote down the responses of the respondents. This process was verified in its entirety by another researcher. The researchers synthesized themes out of the responses of the interviewees. The themes were arranged rank-wise in descending order on the basis of the frequency of the responses. Following themes had been included in the interview schedule and sought for in the respondents' responses.

1. Supervisee-Supervisor Working Relationship
2. Lack of motivation among supervisees
3. Cultural constraints regarding gender
4. Impact of job related assignments of supervisees
5. Post-marriage domestic/family responsibilities
6. Hurdles in data collection
7. Distance from the university
8. Financial and domestic issues
9. Workload of supervisor
10. Institution-related factors
11. Complexities of research process
12. Less competent students
13. Change of supervisor

Results

Results are presented in the following according to the themes mentioned above.

Working relationship between supervisor and the supervisee

The supervisors collectively narrated that the major delay factor in research was the improper working relationship between the supervisors and the supervisees. One of the respondents told, *"It is very important for completion of thesis that the supervisee must have good relations with the supervisor. Thus, both of them will be in an ideal position to get their job done in the finest way"*.

A vast majority of the supervisees told that they enjoyed positive working relationship with their supervisors. However, some counter statements were also reported by some supervisees. For example, one of the respondents stated that, "*Although positive relationship of supervisor and supervisee is vital for successful completion of the research work yet I lack mutual understanding with my supervisor"*.

Lack of motivation among supervisees

The supervisors highlighted that lack of student motivation was the fundamental factor of delay in research (dissertation) completion. Students usually lost

motivation during the research work. All the supervisees affirmed that lack of motivation created problems. After completion of course work, they felt relaxed and lost their motivation.

Cultural constraints related to gender

All of the supervisees told that the female had to face some social restrictions. They couldn't move freely with respect to both time and place. They couldn't stay till late in the evening with their supervisor; and also for data collection in the field. Counter statements were also reported; like, one respondent opined that, *"There is no problem in doing research work with the supervisor having opposite gender. I am a female researcher and I feel no issue in doing work with male supervisor in research work. It depends upon the family back ground. If a female belongs to traditional family then she faces more problems which may result in delay in the completion of research project".*

Fifteen out of sixteen supervisors stated that females had to face difficulty in traveling. Some families did not allow their daughters go outside alone. Females were bound to go out for research work with a male member of their family. Usually female researchers faced more issues as compared to their male counterparts. One of the respondents explained, *"In understanding the research material there is no gender difference but in social issues the females face more problems as compared to male students".* Another respondent stated, *"Yes, there are differences. The females show more responsible attitude than male students. They try to avoid involving in detailed discussion with their supervisors. However, they are found making cross argument most of the time. They also face certain restrictive issues in time adjustment with supervisors".* Another supervisor expressed, *"In my point of view there is no gender biasness at postgraduate level".*

Impact of job related assignments of supervisees

All of the supervisees agreed to state that research's employment was a significant factor in delay of research work. The researchers who had their jobs, had less time available for their research; and the researchers who were not doing job, could spend more time in research work. As a result they would be completing their work earlier than their counterparts. One of the respondents narrated, *"If a scholar is in service, he or she will not able to give sufficient time to their research work which will create problem. I am not doing job; so, I have completed my work within time".*

Fifteen out of sixteen supervisors stated that job related assignments were a very crucial factor that cost in research delay because jobs demanded certain responsibilities to be met; and the research was also a time taking job. However, one of the respondents viewed, *"If you are committed, then nothing affects your research work".*

Post-marriage domestic/family responsibilities

The supervisees unanimously told that it was a big deal; because married researchers had additional responsibilities. They had to face more difficulties because of their family (and children) responsibilities; for issues in social life, health, and with spouse. They were less able give proper time to their research. The respondents viewed that the supervisees, who were not married were more likely to complete their work within time.

Majority of the supervisors stated that the marital status affected the research process. Supervisees usually had no additional funding for their research. Married researchers had auxiliary responsibilities; they had to support their families, look after their children, deal with the health issues and many more. One of the respondents said, "*Yes! It can affect the pace of research work. Sometime during research, married female students leave or delay their research due to their non-supportive in-laws*". Another respondent stated, "*In my opinion to be married or unmarried is not a strong factor in research delay*".

Hurdles in data collection

Most of the supervisees told that they faced some issues in data collection. Sometime people did not respond at all. They felt hesitant to respond. Female researchers had some family issues; they were not allowed to go out of home often, and to meet the opposite gender for data collection. Sometimes it depended upon the topic and the respondents hesitated to express their views accurately on emotional, social and political issues. In data collection, traveling was also a big problem. It worsened financial capacity. One of the respondents told,*" There is no research culture in this region and it also depends upon topic".* One informant stated that there was no issue at all in data collection, if researchers were seriously committed with their research.

Fifteen out of sixteen supervisors told that students faced some issues in data collection. One respondent explained, *"It is a time taking job but I help my students in data collection because people do not respond to the research students easily. Mostly we use references to meet the respondents for data collection"*. One of the respondents told that "*There are some issues in data collection because of poor research culture in Pakistan. The respondents do not respond willingly. Actually, the researcher has a misconception; they think that whenever and/or wherever I will go for data collection the respondents will free for him/her and respond him/her at the spot but the things are different*". Another respondent told that "*I think if you are committed, then no issue can affect your study*".

Distance from the University

Thirty eight out of forty supervisees stated that distance from the university had been affecting their progress during research work; this was regarded as one of the

factors of delay in research work. One respondent said, *"Yes! It is a problem. Sometimes traveling takes too much time, and the time of meeting with supervisor is affected"*. Contrary to this, two respondents differed saying that distance from the university was not an issue. Another respondent expressed, "*At this stage if scholars have (mutual) understanding with their supervisor then there is no issue of distance from the university. The researchers can contact their supervisors via telephone, Skype and E- mail"*.

Almost all the supervisors told that the distance from the university affected students' regularity during research work. One of the supervisors articulated that "*During course work students were regular but in research work they relaxed; due to distance they were not regular, as traveling took much of their time"*. Another said, "*If a student is committed then distance does not mater"*.

Financial and domestic issues

Thirty three supervisees confirmed that financial and domestic issues had been severely disturbing their research work. Domestic responsibility required time and attention but man is not a robot/machine to keep on working at a sustained pace. Seven respondents denied it; they described that they had not been facing any domestic or financial problems while completing their research work. Majority of the supervisors viewed that the financial and domestic issues of the supervisees hindered in their timely completion of research work at postgraduate level.

Workload of supervisor

Majority of the supervisees reported that workload of supervisors was the main reason of the delay in students' research work; because if a supervisor had too many research students besides other duties, they would remain unable to give justifiably proper time to individual student research projects. One respondent told, *"a supervisor has multiple tasks to perform, he bears workload but he manages the time. It is misunderstanding of the students about their supervisor. S/he is available at any time. It depends upon students that how they work and manage the time with supervisors"*.

Eleven among the sixteen supervisors narrated that workload of the supervisors was also a significant factor to delay students' theses. Indeed, the supervisors are to perform a number of tasks and sometimes their business affects students work. Supervisors are also human beings; they also have to face issues (like researchers). A considerable number of the supervisors told that the supervisors had no issue to manage students. One respondent told that *"I think that the workload of supervisors is not a research delay factor. It is a student who is more concerned with their research. If they are motivated then supervisor gives more time to them"*. One supervisor firmly upheld, *"No! A supervisor knows very well that how many students he can supervise so he takes the supervisees as per his convenience. So, it is not an issue"*. Another one referred, *"I*

give time to my students according to their needs and it also depends upon their working speed".

Institution-related factors

Thirty four of forty supervisees detailed that they were not satisfied with the management of the department (regarding the affairs related to students' research work). According to them, there were some issues on the part of the department. For example, delay in Board of Studies meetings for the approval of student research proposals and allocating them the supervisor. One supervisee reported, *"I did my work along with all these issues. The Board of Studies did not approve my topic in first instance; then I started my work again and my supervisor was changed because of the superannuation (retirement) of the previous one"*. Another supervisee reported, *"Yes! Sometimes supervisor allots the research topic without the consultation of the scholars. In this respect, the scholar takes much time in mutual understanding with his supervisor; and this causes delay in research work"*. Nine out of forty respondents viewed that their department procedures did not cause delay in their research work at postgraduate level.

Large majority of supervisors maintained that there were some institutional factors which caused delay in completion of student research work. One of them claimed, "*Yes! There are some issues of AS&RB (Advance Study & Research Board) which are responsible for the delay in research topic approval"*. Seven respondents were of the view that there were no departmental issues. One respondent told, *"I have no comments about the issues; it varies from department to department and institution to institution. Some institutions facilitate their students and some do not"*.

Complexities of research process

Twenty five out of forty supervisees said that research work was a difficult and time taking job. One of them stated, "*It is practical work and practical work takes time"*. One respondent indicated, **"It sounds difficult because the research culture has not been developed enough in Pakistan and students usually do not know ABC of research before postgraduate level"*. Fifteen respondents pointed out that it was not a difficult work; as they previously had an experience of doing thesis at their master level; so they did not consider it very difficult. One of those who had no experience of research work at all, specified, *"I did not have any concept of research before MPhil but I showed interest in research and I learnt things rapidly"*. Another supervisee confirmed, *"In the beginning, it takes time to understand research but if you manage regular meetings with your supervisor you will be able to do your work within the specified period of time"*. Almost all of the supervisors were of the view that the research work was complex, especially, for those supervisees who were taking theses for the first time.

Less competent students

The supervisors were doubtful about supervisees' competence level. However, they unanimously agreed to state that most of the students were not well acquainted with the research work at postgraduate level. They believed that the students did not have clear understanding of the research process; and the supervisors faced difficulty in developing research propensity among them. They said that the research work was a full time job but students took it too easy. That was why at a specific time after course work, they started feeling anxiety and lost their interest in it which eventually caused the delay. Supervisors observed that the students were not clear about the methodology of research. One supervisor shared his observation, "*In the beginning, students think that supervisor is a person who writes their thesis like course notes. They are unable to understand the role of supervisor; that he is like a guide and mentor. They expect that supervisor should select the topic, make the synopsis, make the research tool and analyse the data etc.*" Another supervisor argued, "*Students believe in spoon feeding and they are unclear in their concept about research work*". One more respondent stated, "*Most of the students lack in research understanding but gradually the supervisors help them to overcome the issue*". Likewise, another respondent was of the view, "*The students take the research as an academic (course work) study. They are habitual of last night preparation of exams so they think that research is like getting an academic degree*".

Change of supervisor

Both supervisees and supervisors viewed that the change of supervisor had been an immensely embarrassing issue for both supervisors and supervisees. When it happened to be, it psychologically affected both supervisor and supervisee. The mutual understanding between the supervisor and the supervisee had been perceived vital for smooth functioning of the research process. The change of supervisor consequently resulted in severe delay in research work of postgraduate students. Both the supervisor and the supervisee, under time limit stress found it difficult to develop a good mutual understanding with each other. It caused ultimately added massive delay in the completion of student research project.

Discussion

Present study intended to explore the factors causing delay in student research work at postgraduate level in the public sector universities of the Punjab (Pakistan). This was done by surveying the perceptions of supervisees (who had recently completed and defended their research work) and supervisors on the delay in completion of student research work within stipulated time. The data revealed that the supervisors and supervisees highlighted same (gravity of) factors considered to be responsible (through the literature) for the delay in student research work at postgraduate level. These factors include 'supervisor-supervisee relationship', 'lack (or

loss) of motivation of supervisees', job related assignments of supervisees', 'post-marriage domestic/family engagements of supervisees', 'financial issues of supervisees', 'supervisees' distance from the university', 'workload of supervisors', 'cultural constraints regarding gender', 'hurdles in data collection', 'institution-related factors', 'complexities of research process', 'less competent students' and 'change of supervisor'. In support of above mentioned factors, Ngozi and Kayode (2014) stated that research process was a time taking task; therefore, most of the students could not complete their postgraduate thesis with in their required duration. They further emphasised that the delay in thesis writing process was mostly from the student's side, as it was evidenced in the present case; and poor skills in research, pitiable writing abilities, less resources and less tendency about research among students were considered as the major sources of it.

As this research had discovered, many researchers had revealed that good relationship between supervisees and supervisors resulted in successful and timely completion of student research work (Abiddin et al., 2011; Bennett, Mohr, BrintzenhofeSzoc, & Saks, 2008; Boucher & Smyth, 2004; Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Kron & Yerushalmi, 2000; Lange & Baillie, 2008; Miehls, Everett, Segal, & du Bois, 2013). As per opinion of some researchers (Atieno Okech & Rubel, 2007; Kiley, 2011), the cause of non-completion rate of thesis is lack of supervisory training. It was suggested that the gap between low completion rate of research work and high completion rate of research work can be minimized through conducting workshops, seminars and trainings; some other remedial measures such as allocating co-supervisors, had been proposed. Baum (2010) stated that addition of co-supervisors would also be very fruitful to complete research work of the students in time. According to the opinion of a number of researchers (Harwood & Petrić, 2016; A. Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Li & Seale, 2007; Soheilian, Inman, Klinger, Isenberg, & Kulp, 2014), supervisors had positive attitude towards supervisees and they were very willing to supervise students in their research work; they also managed their time for the students. But at the same time the supervisors did rightly expect some valuable work from the students; and when students did not fulfil the expectations of their supervisor, then the supervisor justifiably would show dissatisfaction upon their work; but this eventually which lead to demotivation of the students; and this might cause delay in research work. So, students should try their level best to come to the expectations of their supervisor. Another important factor identified by Crall (2011) was the unethical behaviour of the supervisors with their supervisee which would also be triggering the delay in research work through demotivating the students. So, supervisor must be ethically trained and would remain always highly vigilant to culminate a healthy research culture at the universities.

Conclusion

This study among many factors emphasized heavily upon the positive working relationship between supervisee and supervisor. In the work of multitude of researchers over the globe this had been found indispensable for timely completion of research work. Any problem in this relationship would be yielding in the delayed completion of student research work. This factor had been ranked as top factor by both the supervisors and supervisees in present study. Lack of motivation of supervisees was ranked as second factor of delay in research work. Job of supervisees was ranked third among the factors that of delay in research work. Post-marriage domestic/family responsibilities of the supervisees were another prominent factor of delay in research work. Financial and domestic issues of the supervisees were also believed to cause delay in research work, as per opinion of both supervisors and supervisees. Supervisees' residential distance from the universities correspondingly caused a delay in research work. Supervisees viewed that the workload of supervisors would be resulting in the delayed research work. Procedural delay on the part of institutional management & administration was also noted one of the important factors of delay in research work. Lack of student competence and varied innate complexities in the research process were found to cause the delay in completion of student thesis at postgraduate level.

On the basis of these findings, it was suggested that the job holder researchers should obtain study leave from their respective departments and get themselves actively engaged in their research projects for in time completion of their degree. On the other hand, supervisors may acquire up-to-date knowledge and skills regarding research and the supervision; in addition, they should be well aware of the use of modern tools of communication. The universities should improve the existing infrastructure, particularly related to the research supervision; and should introduce measures at institutional level to overcome the factors causing delay therein. The study is likely to sensitize supervisees, supervisors, and the university management/administration to eliminate or, at least, reduce the (gravity of) factors causing delay in thesis completion at postgraduate level.

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