

## **Post-Submission Dilemma: A qualitative Analysis of Doctoral Candidates' Health Worries and Missing Job Opportunities due to Delayed PhD Degrees**

**<sup>1</sup> Farooq Ahmad\*, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Syed Abdul Waheed and <sup>3</sup>Dr. Nadia Gilani**

1. PhD Scholar Department of Educational Research & Assessment, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan  
Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan

**\*Corresponding Author:** farooqtugt1@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The aim of the current study was to explore the implications of delaying the PhD on the health worries and the Job opportunities in terms of education, and experience within the university among the students in Pakistan. Long turnarounds are usually as a result of bureaucratic inertia, retirements of supervisors and administrative jerks thus slowing the progress of academics as well as careers. Qualitative design and gathering of the first-person narratives among 20 doctoral students and three focus groups of 33 respondents were used. It was found out through analyses that there was a correlation between long tenure in the doctoral degree and high levels of stress, anxiety, high blood pressure and diabetes. Furthermore, belated certification hindered the entry into the labor market and restricted the opportunities of placement in critical academic/professional positions. The paper highlights the need of universities to optimize administrative processes, improve communication efforts as well as offer an effective mental health care network. These measures are necessary in helping to complete degrees in time, reduce health risk, improve the employability and general well-being of doctoral degree students.

**Key Words:** Delayed PhD Degrees, Health Worries, Post- Submission Dilemmas, Student Well-Being, Job Opportunities, Academic Stress

### **Introduction**

The terminal degree is the most prioritized level of learning in the modern system of higher education. Educational backgrounds comprising of intellectual dynamism and enduring appetite to research create a learning agent that is of essence to socio cultural progress (Kovacs et al., 2024). This is because the rate of globalization has increased, and several universities and colleges have been founded, and therefore there is an urgency to enroll non-homogeneous national students in graduate-level studies (Tian & Zhang, 2024). The establishment of early PhD was first given in the middle of the nineteenth century at Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, which was then mimicked by the universities in the United States; the graduation of James Morris Whitten in Yale University in 1861 became the first in American practice. The Yalian milestone sparked the institutions across the globe to launch their own similar programs and the scope of the early phd projects ended up in span to the developing countries including Pakistan (Bok, 2024; Cude, 2000). Although they still combine the conceptual and practical aspects of education described by Yale, present-day PhD programs are designed with respect to the location-specific and discipline-specific needs (Bok, 2024; Buchanan, 1995). The boom in the demand of postgraduate education in the late-twentieth century compelled universities to accept a more significant number of the cohort of students; however, a significant proportion of doctoral students still face delays in their graduation (Clark, 2023; Dressel & Thompson, 1977).

### **Literature Review**

Van de Schoot, Bartel, Campher and colleagues (2013) determined three main areas that could protract the accomplishment of PhD which include institutional or environmental settings, quality of supervising relationships and student traits. As far as the institutional or

environmental dimension is concerned, Van de Schoot et al. indicated that such components as discipline of study, departmental climate, and access to the resources count. Supervisor quality has to do with rate of contact and offering of academic and emotional support. Additional variables, that is, the personal variables, such as gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, motivation, previous academic background and future career goals also proved to affect time to-completion. The results of Van de Schoot et al. are supported by two other studies developed by Ahmad et al. (2023a, 2023b) and Waheed et al. (2020), respectively.

These antecedents, in turn, form the basis of the study conducted by Sarwar, Zeeshan, and the co-authors (2018), who used qualitative research to study procrastination among the postgraduate researchers of Pakistan. Their reviews showed the fact that the delays had their cause in the factors associated with students (low motivation, family and financial problems, work duties), supervisor-related problems (lack of expertise, insufficient communication), and institutional ones (poor infrastructure, administrative sluggishness). Similar conclusion was made by Irshad (2021), who, based on the quantitative data in KPK, stated that the duration of PhD could be considerably affected by the abilities of students, the support of institutions, and their scholastic achievement.

Bacha et al. (2021) also identified some issues which are characteristic of English-based PhD programmes in Pakistan. Faculty with limited expertise, poor equipment in the laboratories, poor internet access, restricted international networks, and too many requirements of the courses have been listed as the hindrances which slow down the performance and delaying completion.

Similar results have been noted by analysts in other parts of the world on delay in attaining a doctoral degree. Administrative efficiencies, student characteristics, research conditions, and supervisor-student relationships (cited by Akparep et al. (2017), Geven et al. (2018), and Phan (2024)) are the salient variables mentioned by these researchers. In Pakistan though, there are limited works which identify such influences and give clear policy recommendations. Without managing the root causes, mental-health issues, economic disadvantages, as well as opportunities declines in employment can be accelerated (Ahmad et al., 2023a; Lindsay, 2015; Miller, 2013). Moreover, lack of a systematic monitoring institution may increase the completion period further compromising the stress and anxiety of the students (Bair and Haworth, 2004). Post-submission of the dissertation presents sufficient measures of stress and psychological pressure that impoverish the mental and physical health of students even more (Barry et al., 2018; Cornwall et al., 2019; Acharya et al., 2024).

As pointed out by Sverdlik et al. (2018), the lack of doctoral completion violates both the academic and career-related paths. Long stay prevents graduates to be competitive in the labour market. Bran et al. (2024) also saw how candidates feel strained between decline of health and uncertainty of employment. It is therefore necessary to have short-term interventions at institutional and policy levels to overcome these challenges.

## **Material and Methods**

In this particular case study, the researcher is interested in the list of the Doctoral Candidates that had presently moved on with their dissertation reports more than two years earlier hence the researchers are empathetic with qualitative type of research design. The technique is best suited in drawing participant-meaning on the basis of what they have experienced in life, because they are assisted in translating their thoughts into their own created narratives. With Narrative and phenomenological research, the impacts of motivations and activities are available on institutions and individual experiences in all-natural worlds are understandable (Larkin et al., 2021). Narrative and phenomenology analysis is used to describe a real experience of a person, attributing it to the social context of their surrounding (Adams, 2022; Cresswell, 2013)

In this research, narrative, combined with phenomenological methods were applied in order to examine the entire object of study in an abstract point of view. The author examined the contents with both cognitive and emotional considerations of the subjects of the research (Jones, 2022; Skinner et al., 2020; Smith, 2004). The development of narrative research gained energy in the course of the few past years to become a well-established formidable technique of social and organizational studies. This study method gives insight into the various perceptions of employees toward their work in terms of time and location dimensions (CohenMiller, 2023; Cohen & Mallon, 2001).

### **Participants of the Study**

This study involved twenty doctoral students in the social sciences who were covered in three focus groups of at least four people in each group. The researcher very keenly selected the participants who were in need of the studies through personal assessment process which involved the ideas of people known to the research scenario. The key objective of the selection process was to recruit the participants who required evaluation reports and doctoral dissertation defence assessments in two prolonged years and had appropriate qualification.

As it is shown by Creswell and Creswell (2017) & Wilson (2024) narrative design helps participants choose directly involved members of the work environment to gain tangible knowledge about personal histories. The article by Riessman (2008) exhibits great insights regarding the procedures of narrative research in the field of social sciences. The building of the grounded theory is supported, and Patton (2014) who is the proponent of qualitative methods of analysis along with the narrative analysis procedures, the details of which are described.

### **Data Collection**

Data used by the researchers in this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as research instruments. The use of the semi-structured format of conducting the interview helped the contributors to extensively explore certain peculiarities about the dissertation practices and comprehend the widespread issues faced by doctoral students who get their report in a delayed manner. The focus group strategy enabled the scholars to discuss similar experiences and issues of the respondents.

The participants of the study were interviewed and held in focus groups during a period of six months starting in January 2022 and ending in June 2022. The interviews took 40 to 60 min, whereas the focus group discussions needed two hours of the participants. Voice transcripts were used to record all the meetings following an agreement by the participants to record the audio. The choice of the population was carried out via purposive sampling methodology and this included sample populations involved in matters of being under a long wait period awaiting their dissertation evaluation results. The approach embraced yields adequate good-quality data which results into a full understanding of the challenges faced by doctoral trainees.

The interview protocol which relied on Creswell (2018) ) included broad questions that touched upon the wellness concerns of students and their procrastination tendencies and its impact on the preparedness level towards employment. Interview approach is also suitable to phenomenological studies, as it is a method that allows to examine the essence of what happens in the real life in a described manner (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004; Smith et al., 2023; Williams, 2023).

### **Data Analysis**

The research utilized thematic analysis as an approach for finding, examining and showing patterns in qualitative data sources. The researchers utilized a systematic analysis of interview and focus group data based on Braun and Clarke (2006) Six-phase thematic analysis framework. A process based on seven clear steps starts with recognizing the data and adds the

creation of initial codes along with theme exploration before reviewing the themes to define topic names and concludes with preparing the final report.

## Results and Discussion

### Delayed PhD Degrees

The paper has shown that the causes of delays to complete PhD are, in most cases, both unforeseeable and institutional. Some of these delays are unavoidable ones; the passing away or sickness of the evaluators suddenly, retirement of the important officials of the university, etc. and others are created by the bureaucratic sloth or that created by the changes of policies and by administrative indifference. Such disruptions make it very difficult both psychologically and logistically to the doctoral students.

**Participant A** reported that he had not heard anything back at the university since he submitted his thesis. At some point, he learned (in non-official channels) that the outside evaluator was dead, several months before. This brought about the need to acquire a different reviewer, which introduced more delays and cost. *"I had done my thesis and waited months without making a response. But eventually I learnt that the evaluator was dead and the university did not even notify me of this fact,"* he said.

In the same way, the assigned evaluator of Participant B died in the middle of the process and therefore, **Participant B** had a similar problem. The university delayed on its part to verify death thereby increasing the duration of the delay hence enhancing his panic statement, more so when subjected to a forthcoming NOC deadline. *The news I heard by the mouth is that the evaluator is not responding and now it turns out that he is dead months after. I was not long off my NOC date and the pressure was just too much to take he remembered.*

**Participant C** is a serving police officer who had acted on the impetus of furthering his education but his degree had stalled owing to the retirement of the Vice Chancellor. This was because when the selection of evaluation panel was to be done, the university legislation demanded that the VC authorize it first, which meant that until a new appointment came, he had to wait months. He explained his sorrows as: *"I was waiting to defend my thesis, yet nobody could accept the panel since VC is retired. My head was helplessly waiting."*

**Participant D** narrates his incident of dealing with the internal examiner who was held criminal against the criminal offense after judging his dissertation. There was no information provided by the university regarding the delay in the defense of the case and this made the legal proceedings of the case to create months of anxiety, emotional toll and academic stagnation. All stopped after a couple of months when the examiner was taken in handcuffs. He said, *"I was not provided with a time table even by the university."*

The comments of **participant E**, who was a teacher of the public sector schools and a father of three kids, concerned the disadvantage he experienced when being summed up by the external and internal reviewers in a different way. It did not help the situation when he collided with the road accident, which badly injured his supervisor who was guiding him on the revisions. Lacking the support, he felt increasing fatigue and pressure both on the academic and personal level. *"I was in the middle of the revisions, when my supervisor suffered a severe accident. I did not know what to do and whom to address with."*

Finally, **Participant F** was a federal civil servant who was also in the process of defending when his research supervisor retired owing to health challenges. He had no help to go through university procedures on his own. All was accomplished, except the defense. After that *"my boss retired and nobody cared,"* he added.

Taken together, they demonstrate how structural weaknesses, random happenings, and management weaknesses can considerably extend the progress of doctoral processes. The delays are inconvenient not only in academic developments, but also in the emotional state, career and life of other interests of the candidates. The untold stories remind us of the dire need of institutional reforms and more effective support structures to avoid unnecessary extensions and facilitate the doctorate experience.

### Health Worries

The evaluation process takes a long time in most cases and thus it makes a PhD degree in Pakistan a very challenging task. Such delays that occur mainly in receiving reports of the internal and the external examiner even after submitting a thesis subject the doctoral students to a substantial amount of stress. Bureaucratic barriers just add to this anxiety hence causing both mental and physical health disorders. Continued feeling of indecision brings about some physical effects like sleep deprivation, cortisol surge, hypertension and impaired immune system.

One of the greatest causes of these health issues is failure to communicate and emotional support by university. The students become lonely most of the time and this has adverse impacts on their mental health. They endure in silence without proper guidelines or a platform on which they can air their concerns.

A father and an administrative officer were one of the participants and he recalled the type of delays he experienced during his defense of the thesis which resulted in poor health outcomes. Such a gesture is not known to have yielded any results as administration did not respond in the wake of numerous attempts. The uncertainty also made him have hypertension, anxiety, and even diabetes.

A second respondent is a female primary school teacher who gave the following experience of how the administrative and financial challenges have driven her to the edge of committing suicide. The stress of being a working girl and carrying out her PhD made her think of quitting her life. Finally, the image of her family helped her to go on.

The third example was the case of a doctoral student, a woman who felt intense mental distress as the consequence of the intentional delay of a higher education officer. Blood pressure became elevated and the person was very irritable. She became mentally agitated where she faced the official aggressively and she regretted the action because it affected her emotionally.

### Job Opportunities

In Pakistan, employment opportunities are directly associated with educational levels, and the doctoral degree has the most prominent impact. However, long queues to doctorate award compromise the chances of the candidates' attaining jobs or improving in the paid jobs in either the academic or even the government sector. Despite graduating after all necessary academic requirements have been fulfilled, including most exceptionally the dissertation, long periods having passed before the thesis components have been evaluated can occasionally jeopardize admission or advancement to a higher paying academic position or government job.

Participant A who is a government teacher submitted his doctoral dissertation two years back and is still waiting to be evaluated. Though there is a preference given to the employees with doctoral degrees to be promoted in the department, his case has been a victim of bureaucratic delays bringing his chances to being promoted very low. The participant complained that *"I was denied promotions, although it could be explained by what seemed to be called an institutional inertia."*

Participant B is a primary school teacher who is pursuing means of teaching at the university level after attaining all the requirements of the PhD level, just that she has not attained

the degree officially yet. She explains that *"I still miss opportunities of getting employed in many new universities in Punjab as the administration is a bottleneck."*

Another participant C is a civil servant who expected to enjoy the monthly PhD pay allowance RS. 10,000. Although she had submitted her thesis some months ago, she is still pending as a candidate and this gives her stress and disappointment as her efforts have not been rewarded by the system as her academic work is not yet identified. She said, *the money part was not the big issue, but to be recognized on years of labour was very important to me."*

Participant D is a principal in a high school and submitted his dissertation merely a couple of months back when he has two more years to retirement. He has invested more than a million rupees (Rs.1 million) in his PhD and the university is not evaluating his PhD in time. He is afraid that he will not receive the fruits of his degree before retirement, as he puts it, *"I may end up retiring as a PhD who never got a degree in my file."*

Participant E is a junior teacher, and he also submitted his doctoral dissertation 20 months ago and also waits to be evaluated. He had gotten the hope that the PhD allowance would sponsor his kids schooling but today he feels that he is burdened financially and emotionally due to the inaction of the university. *"I have children who question me on the point, why I study so much when everything remains the same"*, he said with a sigh on his face.

The female participant F is a head of an educational institute and pursuing a PhD to facilitate better work. By the time she had finished the dissertation, she failed to defend it because of the ever-present publication challenges that were exacerbated by the fact that HEC failed to acknowledge the journal of choice. She termed the process as never-ending, beleaguering: *"You spend time meeting one requirement and they give you another one, it is like you are climbing a staircase and it constantly gets longer."*

The same feeling was also expressed by many other respondents, who brought to the fore the fact that employment, financial issues, and incessantly postponed developments go hand in hand. Several of them felt powerless and blamed it on what they termed as institutional mismanagement and lack of accountability which have turned academic dreams into a long-drawn battle. Despite the fact that religious faith discourages radical answers, the spirit of stagnation and pessimism are still strong.

## Discussion

The current research evaluated the consequences of doctoral backlogs in Pakistani higher education by questioning three major research questions regarding academic completion of the theses, health issues and job prospects within Pakistan. The first was a question on what was taking long in the completion of PhD. It was found that a set of anticipated and unanticipated institutional conditions brought such delays. To a large extent, unforeseen retirement or death of a supervisor or external examiner, non-appointment of essential officials like the Vice-Chancellor and a change in university policies prolonged the degree periods significantly. The challenge was complexed by bureaucratic inefficiencies, long periods of supervisory leaves and changing administrative guidelines. These barriers caused intellectual and affective pressures on the doctoral students who used to be caught into circles of procedure.

The presence of longer periods of time spent in doctoral training is a well-known phenomenon in the environment of higher education around the world (Ahmad et al., 2023a; Akparep et al., 2017; Phan, 2024). Similar challenges associated with this phenomenon are observed in the experience of institutions of a number of countries of the world, and the existing literature attributes it to the interaction of institutional, supervisory, and individual factors (Wright & Cochrane, 2000; Melián et al., 2023). However, due to lack of comprehensive data-collection models in many universities, the extent of the issue is often miscalculated (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Although greater focus in scholarly and policy areas has been devoted to it, study

procrastination and administrative hindrance is largely under-researched. Furthermore, the situation is also typical that candidates have to wait even after writing the thesis; the departments and examination offices tend to delay the process of reviewing the work and certifying it.

The second research question refers to the outcomes of delays in evaluations on health and well-being of students. The findings indicate that learners often have long-term stress during the time when the internal and external reviewers take to provide reports on the examination results. Such wait heightens uncertainty, helplessness, which ends up in anxiety, sleep disturbance and physical evils like increased stress hormones and depressed immunity. Another sizeable chunk of the respondents also gave the report of emotional exhaustion caused by lack of proper communication and institutional support in the post-submission stage. The results are similar to those of previous studies which report mental-health degradation, emotional misery of doctoral candidates who face prolonged examination durations (Barry et al., 2018; Acharya et al., 2024). Such emotional pressures are further reinforced by the loneliness that is brought about by poor administrative protocols and lack of direction which has a negative impact on psychology and self-esteem.

The third and the last research question addressed the magnitude through which the procrastination of completion of the doctorate has on the professional ambitions and the labour-market opportunities of students. The participants stated that the delays in their careers disrupted their careers, hindered their progression, and reduced their competitiveness. With long delays being common, much of the time the candidates have lost the chance to get positions which assumes having an obtained PHD, and therefore have to settle on marginal or temporary jobs. The empirical literature supports this phenomenon as delayed PhDs have an adverse effect on the employment rates, the possibility of getting promotions, and the right to postdoctoral or faculty opportunities (Goldan et al., 2023; Holland Zahner, 2023). This failure to join the workforce at an early age also leads to frustration and disappointment of graduates who had used a significant amount of time and resources in their studies.

Findings observed in the current research show that delays in the completion of the doctorate in philosophy (PhD) programme in Pakistan raise serious personal and professional issues among its candidates (Chun et al., 2024; Jenkins et al., 2018). The literature reviews point to three facilitating processes: active tracking of the progress, positive supervisor-student relationship, and institutional governance structures (Chun et al., 2024; Jenkins et al., 2018). All this can contribute to the better coordination of supervision and simplification of the assessment process of the milestones. At the same time, based on empirical evidence, it is shown that the candidates implement adaptive behaviours like part time jobs, collaborative networking, and professional advancement as an interim measure to remain intellectually productive during the waiting period (Chun et al., 2024; Jenkins et al., 2018).

On the whole, the evidence supports the necessity in institutional reform efforts, increased administrative transparency and organized networks of support to enhance the doctoral experience as it is observed in Pakistan. The delayed completion of the Phd and its emotional pressure, tangible sequelae, as well as stagnation in careers is a burning problem, which needs immediate response of universities and policymakers.

## Conclusion

The current research clarifies the complex issues facing the doctoral students in Pakistan, particularly those which are associated with long study duration. A qualitative analysis of their life experience allows concluding that the extended period of time further hinders academic progress and at the same time influences mental and physical condition and further job opportunities. The results of the data have indicated three prevailing themes namely delays PhD degree, health worries and job opportunities.

PhD backlog created either by unseen circumstances like death of an examiner, administrative changes, or bureaucracy increase the mental pressure and the doubt of candidates a great deal. These barriers in institutions delay graduation and increase emotional and academic pressures.

Major concern was shown to health-related consequences. Several candidates claimed that they got stress-related health complications such as anxiety, insomnia, hypertension, among others, which are very severe. Lack of institutional support during key points in the doctoral process will these difficulties and it will cause a vicious circle formed by stress and intellectual inertia.

The paper has also highlighted how long PhD durations affect professional development negatively. The delays exclude chances in job applications, promotions and universities placements, and it leads to anxiety and failure to advance career goals. There are a lot of candidates, who disappointedly face the professional and professional paralysis: having completed all the academic requirements, they become disappointed in life.

The study proposes immediate change in the institutional policy, better supervisor-student interaction, simplified administrative work and open assessment process in advocating these concerns. Colleges need to acknowledge that post-submission is a matter of urgency and establish a college environment, which puts the priority on a high quality and on-time completion. Not only the academic life will get better through such reforms, but the overall health and career of the students will be more successful as well.

Finally, a doctoral student should be assisted by the program involving a systematic and responsive system to facilitate academic excellence, psychological well-being, and a career along with it in the long run.

## **Recommendations**

Universities are required to improve their organizational effectiveness and offer solid institutional anchoring to their doctoral students. This entails provision of psychological health facilities, proper communication between students and faculty members and a nurturing academic system. These interventions are capable of mitigating stress, enhancing well-being as well as helping to complete PhD in a timely manner. The future-based research is recommended to use mixed or quantitative methodologic to prove these results on a larger scale. Finally, higher education establishments are expected to introduce modern policies, as well as introduce systematic assistive packages to make students achieve academic and professional potential.

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