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RESEARCH PAPER

The Research Experience: A Study of Challenges Faced by M. Phil/MS Scholars at the Universities of Islamabad, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The research investigated the hurdles that M.Phil and MS students encounter while working on their research thesis in Social Sciences. The study adapted a quantitative method, surveying scholars across five public and five private universities in Islamabad through a structured questionnaire. A group of 100 participants was chosen via simple random sampling. Before launching the full survey, we tested the questionnaire with 20 students to refine it for clarity and reliability. After collecting the data, the analysis was done using SPSS software version 24.0, and appropriate statistical tests were employed, such as the independent sample t-test, means, and standard deviations. The findings revealed that crafting a thesis is quite challenging for postgraduates, regardless of whether they attend a public or private institution. The struggles appear to be largely the same for both groups. These challenges encompass a lack of robust research support, hurdles in writing particular thesis chapters, insufficient advisory support, and not making full use of available library resources. Based on research findings, it is recommended that universities should offer structured research training, better supervisory assistance, and improved library services. Further, it is suggested that institutions should implement specific programs empowering research students to conduct and publish good-quality work, particularly in prestigious academic journals. Such initiatives would be a boon to everyone involved, from students and faculty to educational policymakers and librarians, striving to enhance research quality.

| **KEYWORDS** | Thesis Writing Practices, Writing Problems, Supervisor Guidance, Librarian's Role |

Introduction

This research explores the difficulties that Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) and Master of Science (MS) students face while writing their theses in the universities of Islamabad. The research phase is a crucial part of postgraduate studies. It helps students grow academically, think critically, use rigorous methods, and add new knowledge to their field (Chen et al., 2021). Over the past few years, Islamabad has seen significant expansion in the realm of higher education, fueled by the rising need for advanced degrees like the MPhil and MS. Leading universities, such as Quaid-e-Azam University, COMSATS University, Allama Iqbal Open University, the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST), and Riphah International University, have helped to foster a highly competitive and resource-rich academic atmosphere. Despite this, students pursuing postgraduate studies still encounter a range of hurdles when it comes to writing their theses. These challenges include inadequate support from supervisors, a lack of sufficient training in research methods, and limited access to current academic materials (Nguyen et al., 2022). To truly hold students' varied experiences in public versus private universities, we need to take a comparative look. Public universities often struggle with tight budgets and outdated facilities, all of which can hold students back in their research. On the other side, private universities usually boast better resources and more responsive administration, but the steep price tag can be a major hurdle for students from less privileged financial backgrounds (Rahman & Song, 2022).

When it comes to creating a thesis, academic writing is crucial. Strong writing makes sure your ideas are clear, well-structured, and meet the high standards of scholarly work, which is vital for conveying intricate research findings. Even though writing a thesis is super important, many students struggle with things like making a good argument, pulling together different sources, picking the right methods, and keeping their writing organized (Sadiq et al., 2024). Moreover, to make it worse, many universities do not offer much help with academic writing (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). This research adds to the conversation about graduate studies by highlighting the main obstacles M.Phil./MS students encounter while working on their thesis. The results are meant to help shape university policies and offer hands-on advice for advisors and students, to enhance research training, writing assistance, and overall student welfare.

Literature Review

This literature review presents current research on the challenges faced by Master of Philosophy (MPhil) and Master of Science (MS) scholars while writing their theses, with a particular emphasis on the Pakistani context. The review highlights issues linked to the research process, supervision, writing skills, personal and psychological factors, substructure, and organized support. Postgraduate students often face challenges at different stages of the research process, such as choosing a topic, reviewing literature, collecting data, performing statistical analysis, and interpreting results. These difficulties are often linked to limited research training and insufficient methodological support. For example, Hashmi (2022) points out that MPhil students in Pakistan struggle with research due to inadequate guidance and resources. Likewise, Fadhila (2023) underscores the complexities students encounter in thesis writing, especially in distance learning programs. Getting proper guidance is essential for finishing a thesis successfully. However, many students say their meetings with advisors are not very helpful, usually because of time limitations and not getting enough direction. (Ali et al., 2021) discovered that feedback that is slow to come and supervisors who are hard to reach slow students down. Similarly, Lita (2023) points out that when advisors and students do not communicate well, it can cause confusion and setbacks. On top of that, (Matin & Khan 2017) found that supervision that is not consistent makes students. Yousefi et al. (2015) also emphasize that negative feedback and a lack of support from advisors make things even tougher for students. Many postgraduate students struggle with weak writing skills, such as grammatical errors, a limited vocabulary, and an inadequate grasp of academic writing conventions. Research (Firza & Aisiah, 2019) revealed that students often find it difficult to structure their thesis effectively and maintain coherence throughout their work. Fiaz (2024) analyzed the grammatical errors in postgraduate theses and discovered that problems with sentence construction and syntax were common. Similarly, (Shaumiwaty & Munandar 2022) noted that students frequently neglect important grammatical elements, which diminishes the clarity of their writing. Money worries, feeling down about yourself, stress, and just not feeling driven can really drag out the thesis writing process. (Gull et al., 2024) found that money troubles stress students out and take their focus away from their thesis. Back in 2010, Igun pointed out that being financially strapped can force researchers to put their work on hold. Santia (2021) discovered just how much a student's self-esteem, anxiety levels, and motivation influence their ability to finish their thesis. Researchers face major hurdles due to a lack of sufficient library resources, inadequate lab equipment, and spotty internet access. As Ige (2014) points out, when infrastructure is lacking, students struggle to get their hands on the materials they need. (Khan & Bhatti, 2012) discovered that when digital resources are scarce, students' ability to conduct research takes a hit. Madhusudhan (2007) drives home the point that fully equipped libraries are crucial for supporting research in academia. Scholars who are not native English speakers often grapple with language hurdles that slow down their thesis writing. Bakhou (2020) explores the academic writing difficulties students experience because of limited language skills. Spiliotopoulos (2002) underscores how crucial language support is for postgraduate students. Writing a literature review involves developing a researcher identity, and problems with forming this

identity can lead to weaker writing. Golde (2007) and Warburton and Macauley (2014) draw attention to the obstacles students encounter when establishing their academic identities.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a quantitative methodology, surveying students from five Public and five private universities in Islamabad. Since the total number of students from these universities was 900, a sample size of 100 was considered acceptable. To gather data on various aspects of thesis writing, such as challenging sections, supervisory support, and the impact of libraries and librarians, a structured questionnaire was formulated. This questionnaire underwent a pilot test with 20 M.Phil./MS students to clarify any ambiguous questions and ensure overall comprehensibility. Feedback from subject-matter experts led to minor revisions of the questionnaire. To ensure reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was applied to the responses from the pilot test. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 24.0, employing both descriptive and inferential statistics, including T-tests. All participants were made aware of the study's aims and voluntary participation, and informed consent was received from each participant. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant authorities, and the data were securely stored for academic research.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Information

The demographics show that women make up a larger portion of the respondents (41%). Of these participants, 60% are enrolled in public universities, while the remaining 40% attend private institutions. It seems that students in the public sector have an easier time getting access. When it comes to their programs, 63% are in MS programs, and the other 37% are pursuing M.Phil. Degrees. Overall, this blend of participants gives us a pretty good, though slightly unbalanced, picture of gender, the type of university, and the type of program they are in.

Table 1
Demographic Information (n=100)

Demographic	Detail	f (%)
Gender	Male	41(41)
	Female	59 (59)
University	Public	60 (60)
	Private	40 (40)
Program	M.Phil	37 (37)
	MS	63 (63)

Problems Faced During Thesis Writing

Research shows that university students don't generally struggle with picking a thesis topic, finding relevant sources, gaining enough knowledge about those sources, managing their time, collecting data, financial limitations, designing their research methods, or formatting their work. Most students (33%) disagree that these are problems, while 26% agree. A majority also do not struggle to understand where to find information, and issues with time management are not a big problem either (24% agree it is, 26% disagree). Similarly, most students (24% agree, 24% disagree) do not feel financial pressures while working on their thesis. However, 27% do find designing their research methods challenging. Formatting the thesis does not seem to be a major hurdle for students, with an average difficulty rating of 2.19. The study gives us some great insights into just how challenging it is for university students to write their thesis.

Table 2
Problems faced during writing a thesis (n=100)

Statements	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Neutral f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)	Mean	SD
Choosing the right topic for your thesis was difficult for you.	33	20	13	26	08	2.560	1.387
Faced difficulties in searching for the relevant literature related to your thesis topic.	32	17	18	26	07	2.590	1356
Acquiring adequate knowledge of the information sources was complicated.	36	27	19	12	06	2.550	1.233
Time management becomes a serious issue for you while writing a thesis.	37	29	13	15	06	2.240	1.264
The thesis writing journey was stressful.	34	27	22	09	08	2.300	1.251
Difficulties in data collection while writing a thesis.	35	23	18	15	08	2.780	4.270
Financial limitations were a hurdle for you when writing a thesis	24	14	28	25	09	2.810	1.300
Faced difficulties while designing a methodology	27	19	21	25	08	2.680	1.324
Organizing the thesis was a very technical and challenging place for you.	45	24	07	15	09	2.190	1.383

Most Strenuous Section for Writing a Thesis

Table 3 shows that writing a thesis poses different challenges for different people. The introduction is the hardest part for many, with 30% of participants finding it difficult. The literature review is also a tough section, as 36% of participants struggle with it. Research methods are another difficult area, with 40% of participants finding them challenging. Gathering data is the most frustrating part of the process, according to 41% of participants. Data analysis is also not easy, with 39% of participants saying it is straightforward. Managing references and citations is also a challenge, with 31% of participants finding it difficult. Discussing and interpreting results is difficult for 27%, and 34% strongly agree that it is hard. The conclusion and recommendations section is the most difficult part, with 25% of participants finding it difficult. The scores range from 2.29 to 2.86, which suggests that the tasks are somewhat challenging but not very hard. It looks like some parts of the thesis writing process could really use more support, especially when it comes to gathering, making sense of, and interpreting the data.

Table 3
Most strenuous section for writing a thesis (n=100)

Statements	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Neutral f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)	Mean	SD
Faced difficulty while writing the introduction section	08	11	22	29	30	2.740	1.367
Faced difficultly while writing the literature review section	05	15	14	30	36	2.530	1.374
Faced difficulties in choosing the appropriate research methodology	04	18	11	36	31	2.640	1.352
Encountered difficulty while developing the data collection tool	03	15	23	25	34	2.480	1.275
Become frustrated in collecting data from respondents	06	17	17	19	41	2.320	1.339
Faced difficulties analyzing research data	03	18	21	19	41	2.290	1.249
Managing the referencing and citation of your thesis created a difficulty for you	06	19	15	29	31	2.600	1.348
Discussion on results and explanation of the findings was tough	04	20	19	23	34	2.430	1.281
Writing the section on conclusions & recommendations was difficult	08	10	27	30	25	2.860	1.310

Perception of M.Phil./MS scholars about the guidelines they receive

The research indicates that most students are content with the assistance they get from their thesis supervisor. Nevertheless, a portion of students express dissatisfaction with the direction they are given, with average satisfaction scores varying between 2.11 and 2.96. A good number of students (38%) find that their advisors offer clear and comprehensive guidance, while 10% feel they are not getting useful advice on literature reviews, and 6% feel they lack sufficient direction in research. Gathering data and properly citing sources are also areas where students could use more support. Communication with advisors is a significant concern for many students, as 29% report some challenges, while 37% are pleased with the communication. More than 30% of students are not fond of the methods used to teach data analysis software and formatting. Frequent meetings are considered very helpful by 37% of students. The study implies that advisors can offer appropriate support to students when it is most needed.

Table 4
Perception of M.Phil./MS scholars (n=100)

Statements	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Neutral f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)	Mean	SD
The Supervisor provide you with clear and complete guidelines	07	30	14	11	38	2.190	1.252
proper guideline were given by your supervisors in the selection of the research topic.	06	35	17	10	32	2.230	1.179
Supervisor provide useful instruction regarding the literature review section.	04	31	10	18	37	2.210	1.233
Received satisfactory guidelines by your supervisor in designing the research methodology.	04	29	18	10	39	2.110	1.153
Data collection instructions and guidelines by your supervisor were clear during thesis writing.	06	29	17	11	37	2.200	1.222
Regular meetings were conducted by the supervisor to discuss the progress	07	29	13	14	37	2.250	1.282
Faced communication gap with your supervisor during thesis writing.	14	13	20	29	24	2.960	1.399
Citation and referencing styles were guided and checked by your supervisor on time.	06	23	15	16	40	2.250	1.297
Clear instructions on data analysis software were provided to you by your supervisor	06	22	28	13	31	2.410	1.233
The supervisor properly followed up regarding formatting and submission guidelines.	05	27	17	16	37	2.290	1.241

Role of Libraries and Librarians

Table 5 shows what students thought about the library's resources and assistance during their thesis work. A significant portion, 39%, did not think there were enough resources, like the HEC Digital Library, giving it an average score of 2.26. Opinions were split on data analysis software, with 35% having no strong feelings and 21% finding it good. Citation management software fared better, with 26% agreeing and 12% strongly agreeing they were satisfied. Services such as plagiarism checking were more divisive, earning an average score of 2.72. Students were not fond of separate workstations for researchers, with 32% strongly disagreeing. The library's overall research atmosphere was also poorly received, with 39% firmly stating it was not helpful. However, seminars and workshops run by librarians were better received, with 25% agreeing and 19% strongly agreeing they were beneficial. Opinions on librarians' awareness of new research trends were split, averaging a score of 2.65. Additionally, 31% felt indifferent about librarians being helpful, while 30%

strongly disagreed. These findings indicate that library services could be enhanced to better support researchers.

Table 5
Role of Libraries and Librarians (n=100)

Statements	Strongly Disagree f (%)	Disagree f (%)	Neutral f (%)	Agree f (%)	Strongly Agree f (%)	Mean	SD
Enough resources including HEC digital library and other E-resources were available in your Library.	39	22	20	12	07	2.260	1.284
Data analysis software was available in your Library.	25	10	35	21	09	2.790	1.281
Training on the citation management software was given by your Librarian.	22	13	27	26	12	2.930	1.327
Library offers a service to check the plagiarism of your thesis.	21	27	20	23	09	2.720	1.279
Single workstations for the researchers were available in your Library.	32	25	22	15	06	2.380	1.245
The library provided you with a conducive environment during your research journey.	39	18	24	11	08	2.310	1.308
Librarians organize seminars and workshops on research to assist you in thesis writing.	24	07	25	25	19	3.080	1.433
The Librarian of your University was well aware of the new publications and research trends.	29	17	27	13	14	2.650	1.373
Your Librarian was a good resource person to assist you in your thesis writing journey.	30	17	31	02	20	2.650	1.445

Comparison of Private and Public Sector Universities

Table 6 illustrates the differences in perspectives between respondents from public and private universities regarding the obstacles M. Phil and MS students encounter while writing their theses. To pinpoint any variations between students at public and private institutions, an independent samples t-test was conducted. This test yielded a non-significant result (t=0.58, p=0.56), indicating no substantial difference between students at public universities (average score of 2.53, with a standard deviation of 1.02) and those at private universities (average score of 2.42, with a standard deviation of 0.73). In essence, this suggests that students across all universities face these writing hurdles to a similar extent.

Table 6
Comparison of Private and Public Sector Universities

Private and Public sector universities	Public Sector		Private Sector			
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Problems faced by students	2.52	1.02	2.42	0.73	0.58	0.56

Discussion

Writing a thesis is a challenge for university students, with lots to think about, like picking a topic, reviewing the literature, choosing the right research methods, getting enough support from their advisor, and having access to good library resources. Fortunately, quite a few studies have looked into these issues, giving us some helpful information.

The research shows that most university students do not usually struggle too much with the main parts of writing a thesis. These include things like picking a topic, finding and grasping the right sources, handling their time, gathering data, worrying about money,

designing their research, and formatting. To be specific, a third of students (33%) said these things were not really problems for them, while a little over a quarter (26%) did think they were. In addition, when it came to managing time, it was not seen as a big obstacle. About the same number of students admitted to having trouble with it (24%) as those who said they did not (26%). Opinions on financial strain were evenly split; with 24% saying it was a problem and the same number disagreeing. However, nearly a third of the participants (27%) found creating research methods to be a real headache. On the other side, formatting was not too difficult, averaging a score of just 2.19. This matches up with other studies that suggest students can handle some parts of writing a thesis, but research design is still a major hurdle (Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch, & Sikes, 2005; Gardner, 2009).

When it came to particular parts of their theses, students faced a variety of challenges. About thirty in hundred students (30%) found the introduction tricky, and slightly more (36%) struggled with the literature review, which aligns with other research highlighting the literature review as a significant obstacle in academic writing (Hart, 1998). A significant number of students found the research methods (40%) and data gathering (41%) stages particularly difficult. Analyzing the data also proved to be a challenge for 39% of them. Difficulties with managing references and citations were reported by 31%, while interpreting their results was a hurdle for 27% to 34%. These findings resonate with those of (Peralta et al 2025), who underscore the intricate nature of handling and interpreting data in thesis work. Even the conclusion and recommendations section posed difficulties for 25% of the respondents. Overall, the difficulty ratings, ranging from 2.29 to 2.86, suggest moderate challenges that would likely benefit from more focused support, especially concerning tasks related to data.

Students generally seemed happy with their thesis advisors, giving them scores ranging from 2.11 to 2.96. About 38% of them felt their advisors gave them clear directions, but there were still some things people were not thrilled about. For example, 10% were not too happy with the help they got on literature reviews, and 6% felt let down when it came to getting direction on their research. Some students also mentioned problems with getting help collecting data and with citing sources properly. About 29% had some trouble communicating with their advisors, though 37% were pleased with the communication they had. In addition, over 30% were not super impressed with how they were being taught how to use data analysis software or with the instructions they received on formatting. However, 37% of students valued having regular meetings with their advisors, which highlights how important it is for advisors to stay involved to help students do well (Lee, 2008; Grant, 2005).

The study found that library resources and assistance were viewed less favorably by 39% of graduate students, with 35% finding them insufficient. Findings by (Connaway & Dickey 2010), who discuss limitations of digital and physical library resources in supporting graduate students. Data analysis software was rated mixed, with 35% neutral and 21% positive. Citation management tools were more satisfied, with 38% satisfied. Plagiarism checking services were divided, and separate research workstations were unpopular. The general research atmosphere in libraries was criticized, while librarian-led seminars and workshops received a better reception. Librarians' awareness of new research trends was also mixed, with a notable proportion indifferent or dissatisfied. The results suggest improvements in library services and researcher support are needed. (Connaway & Dickey, 2010). After comparing the challenges faced by thesis writers from public and private universities using an independent samples t-test, we found no significant difference (t = 0.58, p = 0.56). Students from both university types reported facing similar levels of difficulty (public university students: average difficulty = 2.53, standard deviation = 1.02; private university students: average difficulty = 2.42, standard deviation = 0.73). This suggests that the obstacles encountered during thesis writing are largely the same for students across different types of institutions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the challenges faced by Master of Philosophy and Master of Science scholars in writing their theses, highlighting areas that need improvement. These include choosing a topic, reviewing literature, crafty research methods, analyzing data, and writing conclusions. Thoughtful and discoursing results are the most challenging tasks, highlighting the need for more help. The study also highlights issues with mentorship, with students often feeling unsatisfied with the clarity, consistency, and depth of support they receive. There is a significant difference in communication between students and advisors, highlighting the need for organized help programs and regular advice. Library resources are also a concern, with limited access to digital libraries, unsatisfactory study zones, and a deficiency of helpful librarian support. Public university students have less resources, while private university students frequently lack access to experienced counselors. This highlights the need for equal and reliable support in all universities. Universities should create inclusive and comprehensive plans to address these challenges, including updating policies, offering supervisor training, upgrading library resources, and providing particular help for difficult thesis-writing tasks. By addressing these concerns, universities can create a helpful environment for M.Phil./MS students, helping them overcome problems and succeed scholastically.

Recommendations

Addressing the hurdles that MPhil and MS students encounter while working on their theses could be effectively tackled by offering specialized academic writing assistance. This should be coupled with customized workshops focusing on research methods, data analysis software, and proper citation practices, all underpinned by a structured system of guidance from their supervisors. Libraries also have a role to play by updating their services, such as boosting digital accessibility, broadening the range of available research databases, furnishing dedicated research areas, and equipping their staff to keep pace with the latest research developments. These proposed measures need to be consistently put into action across all higher education institutions in Pakistan, backed by a national policy that prioritizes academic writing skills, state-of-the-art digital infrastructure, and thorough supervisor training. Implementing these changes could significantly enhance the quality of research and boost completion rates over time, ultimately enriching the students' research journey and scholarly contributions.

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