

FACTORS INFLUENCING ON SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY: EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVES FROM INTERNATIONAL PHD CANDIDATES

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Abstract

The doctoral experience is complicated and complex, and while the accomplishment and well-being of doctoral students are progressively investigated in research into higher education, there is still much to explore and learn on this subject. This study presents the results of a qualitative analysis from a renowned university's past and present international doctoral female candidates' perspectives on factors affecting doctoral advancement. This research was carried out to explore the enablers and obstacles to timely progression and how do PhD students overcome those challenges. This study used interview and personal reflection as methods of data collection. Using a qualitative software, NVivo (12), the data obtained was analysed through thematic process presented by Clarke and Braun, (2013). Collected data that drew out information on themes, categories and code that characterized the kind of support (enablers) and difficulties encountered by students in their studies. From the thematic analysis of the interview and reflective journal, six key themes emerged, which are the role of the motivation for higher education, internal and external enablers, internal and external barriers, strategies for overcoming the barriers that deliver a holistic image of students' perceptions on the factors that affect PhD advancement. The results are presented with the support of tables, figures and other narrations. The role of supervisors is often emphasised as a promoting factor in the advancement of PhD. Another major factor was financial support. In facilitating development, facilities were not critical considerations, but were part of overall satisfaction. Other references in terms of time commitments, motivations and social emotional capital required to pursue a higher study. Although some people find the PhD journey easy, some find not easy, in various phases of the PhD, different combinations of obstacles, enablers and success factors will work together to help them achieve the goal of successfully completing the degree.

Keywords: Commitment, doctoral advancement, enablers, obstacles, supervisors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, interest in the topic of higher degree research completion has gained tremendous attention in higher education circles. According to recent study, completion of the PhD is a dynamic task, there are several obstacles to students (Salinas-Perez et al., 2019). There are several variables that influence the successful completion of a PhD. For example, studies show that financial assistance and form of financial assistance (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2012), relationship between student and advisor, mentorship and the process of thesis (Young et al., 2019), Their contribution to study and writing research papers (Humphrey, Marshall, & Leonardo, 2012), positive attributes of students (Ho et al., 2010), participation in research sessions and conferences (Bolli et al., 2015) will assess success both in their academic programme and in their professional career.

Some of these enablers and obstacles are exposed by a brief literature review summary by Furneaux (2018¹). In this current study, these variables are used as a conceptual framework to discover motivation variables, allowing causes, obstacles and success factors to complete a PhD successfully.

Table 1.1 *Summary of short literature review (Furneaux, 2018¹)*

	Internal	External
Enablers	Clear motivation Sensemaking Perception of making progress Self-awareness Grit Emotional stability	Relationship with supervisor Social support Integration Financial support Larger institution
Barriers	Lack of motivation Isolation Understanding the rules Lack of self-efficacy Transitioning from profession to academia	Requirements and thresholds Inadequate supervision Lack of financial and social support Poor work life balance

2. METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this current study is to investigate the main factors that influence the progress of a renowned university's international female doctoral students. The key method of gathering data was semi-structured interviews with ten international female doctoral students who wish to share information about the experiences and the difficulties they face / faced during their PhD and how they address or resolve those difficulties. This study is designed to find motivation for PhD, internal and external enablers, internal and external barriers, strategies for overcoming the barriers. For this the current report employed qualitative analysis. In 2020, the participants were interviewed, and the interview lasted about 30 to 40 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and later were transcribed verbatim using Trint and were manually corrected. Pseudonyms are used in this research in order to maintain confidentiality.

The following questions were asked to the students, and other questions were also asked when considered appropriate (e.g. demographic data to substantiate the true comprehensiveness) and; Why do people undertake a PhD?, what factors make completing a PhD difficult?, What resources enable for the successful completion of a PhD?, how were the barriers to completing the PhD overcome?. To evaluate the answers an inductive thematic analysis approach was used. A purely qualitative, detailed and complex account of the data is given by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used in this study. The transcripts and the reflective journals were imported to the qualitative software package NVivo (12). Based on the objectives of this study, relevant themes and codes were assigned. From the thematic analysis of the interviews, four key themes emerged, which are the role of the motivation for higher education, internal and external enablers, internal and external barriers, strategies for overcoming the barriers that provide a holistic image of student perspectives on the factors that affect PhD completion.

The participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Rowley, 2012) in order to conduct interview and gather personal reflection. Interviews are considered as valuable to understand individuals' spirits and experiences (Kvale, 2007) and reflections are imperative to gain insights into a person's emotional state and opinions (Jasper, 2005), they appear appropriate for the purpose of the present study. The study was conducted at varying stages of the candidature who completed the study and could give rich data through interview and who started recently sharing experiences of PhD through reflection.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDING

By reading the transcripts several times, the text has been manually corrected and acquires the meaning of the whole. Although the thematic analysis considered both latent and manifest material in the collected data, before progressing to the next level of data analysis, it was able to choose between manifest (developing categories) and latent content (developing themes). In this research, measures suggested by Braun and Clarke in 2013 were followed to examine and find the causes of success or failure influencing the completion of a PhD. The same collection of methodological interventions is used from transcription to final analysis in thematic analysis.

Data was primarily coded under four themes as discussed above in research methodology according to the conceptual framework by Furneaux (2018¹). Within these categories 42 codes were identified. Participant (case) is linked to specific data sources for the analysis and writing up. In this method, the final stage of data analysis is related to reporting the outcome. The results are presented through story lines, tables, and diagrams.

3.1 Demographic Information of participants

Analysing demographics also significant (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) as there is a gender consequence for the accomplishment of doctoral programme. International female students with full/partial scholarships and full time on campus nature of the candidature, the backgrounds of the participants give few variations in school of study, marital status, and stages of PhD.

3.2 Hierarchical chart



Figure 1.1 Hierarchical chart for all codes

The overall hierarchy of codes can therefore be seen in Figure 01. The figure indicates enablers have been discussed the most, followed by motivational factors, barriers and resilience. Enablers have a large effect on the completion of the doctoral degree and that external enablers have more control than internal enablers. Frequently addressed areas of enablers are associated with the supervisory support, attending workshops, supportive colleagues. In addition, motivation has a greater effect, surprisingly intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are equally significant. Family commitment and work life balancing discussed as major barriers which could be overcome by hard working, perseverance and scheduling activities.

3.4 Motivations to do the PhD

This subject explores both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators that inspire a person to pursue a PhD. Surprisingly equal number of internal and external motivators have been found in this study. Career opportunities and personal qualities are the primary codes defined by participants in the research. This might be largely due to their familiarity of being and becoming scholars in their home country.

Career opportunities: Actually, I wanted to become a lecturer or a researcher that is why I applied for a PhD (Interviewee).

Potential academic institutions with promising opportunities include becoming a professor in the field and consulting with other financial institutions. Further the opportunities to become as head of the department, and dean of the faculty motivated me to do PhD (Interviewee).

Personal qualities: *Actually, I have devoted myself to completing my PhD, so I do hard work. Perseverance is the personal attribute that leads me.....(Interviewee).*

I think the first thing is the capability I can work very well and the hard working, and I think I'm curious to learn about the things (Interviewee).

3.5 Enablers

Enablers refer to external and internal forces that encourage and support the ability of a person to pursue their PhDs. According to the findings, it is apparent that participants in the interview, there are more external enablers facilitated them to perform well in their studies. They have considered scholarship, supportive colleagues, supportive supervisors, and family support.

The comparison of the results of the current research with the literature shows that certain aspects did not manifest in the current study. However, few more enablers emerged to advancing information related to this field.

Table 3.1 Comparison of literature and current study findings

	Literature	Findings from current study
Internal Enablers	Clear motivation Sensemaking Perception of making progress Self-awareness Grit Emotional stability	Hard work and Perseverance Self-motivated Grit Emotional stability Sensemaking Perception of making progress
External Enablers	Relationship with supervisor Social support Integration Financial support Larger institution	<i>Attending Workshops and course units</i> <i>Award for publication</i> <i>Publications</i> Scholarship Supportive colleagues Supportive supervisors Family support Larger institution Integration

Note. Emerging findings are blue and italicised, the text of literature-compliant findings is unchanged, findings that did not appear in the data are labelled with a strikethrough.

The following narratives clearly illustrate how the potential of the participants to succeed has been supported by internal and external enablers. Attending workshops and course units, award for publication, and research paper publications are new findings emerged from the study.

My principal supervisor he was very quick, once I send the paper, maybe within a day he addresses all the things and provided comments. They were very supportive professors. So, I think they have many experiences by supervising many PhD and master's students. They were helpful for me to get the permission and lab works and the field work, by providing financial support and other things and also helped me to address the reviewer comments, publishing my papers and the thesis correction. (Interviewee).

So when I read the thesis of the Dr. xxxx and the work he has done during the PhD carrier and how he has published the papers and how he accomplished the target in spired me and I started publishing and got awards for my publications. Also workshops I attended were helpful (Interviewee).

I am an enthusiastic person. Actually, I have dedicated myself to completing my PhD, so I do hard work. Perseverance is the personal attribute that leads me, though I have some difficulties (Interviewee).

I had a renowned researcher as a supervisor, my master's degree, he encouraged me to do a PhD particularly abroad (Interviewee).

However, not all candidates reported positive experiences between supervisors. Two participants reported that they were restricted by not meeting the "right" supervisors.

In term of providing expert information, my supervisor was unable to contribute much. I was also left behind in order to fix it on my own. (Interviewee)

3.6 Barriers

According to the findings, it is apparent that participants in the interview and in reflection, there are more external barriers hindered them to better perform in their studies. Interestingly, the factors highlighted by them are significantly different. It might be some interviewees are single and have no family commitment, got peer support, started their studies before COVID 19. Although, some had difficulties related to their field of study eg; chemical, equipment and permission seeking issues they could finish it within three years. On the other hand, the PhD experience perceived by some others were married with children including newborn babies, arrived during pandemic situation made them PhD journey much challenging.

The comparison of the results of the current research with that of the literature, shows that certain aspects did not manifest in the current study. However, few more barriers emerged to contribute to the current literature which might add value.

Table 3.2 Comparison of literature and current study findings

	Literature	Findings from current study
Internal Barriers	Lack of motivation Isolation Understanding the rules Lack of self-efficacy Transitioning from profession to academia	Isolation Understanding the system and adopt to environment Lack of motivation Transitioning from profession to academia Lack of self efficacy
External Barriers	Requirements and thresholders Inadequate supervision Lack of financial and social support Poor work life balance	Chemicals Finance Laboratory instruments <i>Nature of study Field work and Lab work</i> Permission from relevant authorities <i>Unfamiliar environment</i> <i>Family commitment</i> <i>Give birth</i> <i>Language</i> Work-life balance Inadequate supervision

Legend. Emerging findings are blue and italicised, the text of literature-compliant findings is unchanged, findings that did not appear in the data are labelled with a ~~strike through~~.

The following narratives clearly illustrate how the potential of the participants to succeed has been hindered by internal and external barriers. Language, unfamiliar environment, family commitment and give birth are new findings emerged from the study.

Initially it was bit terrible, because this is a new environment for me. It's completely different from the environment at the university, which I done my bachelor's study and some language barrier as well, because normally we use our language my mother tongue is not English however later I found it easy and I could finish it within three years. (Interviewee).

Concerns about family engagement and responsibilities, which had some influence on the studies. In addition, gave birth during my candidature period and this obviously affected my performance. Managing time is challenging aspect (Interviewee).

In March 2020, we arrived in Australia where all international boarders were closed due to COVID 19 and most of the parts were shut down. My husband was, thus, unable to find employment. When we arrived at Australia campus was shut down, therefore I could not get familiar with system and get support of peers immediately but now it is somewhat ok (Interviewee).

While initially few participants faced some difficulties, however the overall experience is realised by the interviewees as easy this may be, some are single and had no family commitment, so they had plenty of time and focused entirely on their studies and publication. On the other hand, the PhD experience perceived by reflection is tough / hard because of the family commitment and giving birth in the initial stage of her PhD, which gave her a hard time and make her PhD more challenging.

3.7 Resilience

This theme answers this study's last research question. It discusses factors that help a person resolve the obstacles that influence the completion of a PhD. The resilience contributed to overcome the barriers. However, few expressed some resilience few interviewees rarely experienced the problems they did not say much about the overcoming obstacles and most of the issues they mentioned are external aspects such as getting approval from relevant authorities and obtaining chemical and laboratory equipment. They said that these are uncontrollable variables, so We used this time to focus on literature review and research paper publications instead of waiting and wasting time.

Sharing and scheduling activities; So, it's a time limit. I think the time is the foundation for everything. Planning activities and allocate time. (Interviewee).

The mutual belief and understanding between supervisors, husband, colleagues and myself play an important role in the successful progress of a PhD dissertation. Supervisors they have given a flexible schedule to carryout research. Husband share household works and taking care of daughter. Sharing and scheduling the activities might be helpful to overcome these challengers. (Interviewee).

4. DISCUSSION

The literature review identified multiple variables that facilitate or hinder the successful completion of PhD. Overall, the results of the data analysis support the literature review, with most, though not all. In addition, several new codes were found in each variable. The most crucial aspect found was supervision. The essence of the supervisory relationship, encouragement, the degree to which students obtain the idea of research planning, and feedback were nominated as the most common descriptors for enablers. Second, the most significant factor is financial considerations. Some intrinsic features, such as inspiration, determination, zeal, hard work, and trust, were referred by both candidates as enablers. Time factor and family obligations are major obstacles, because of individual student issues about marital, family involvement, the participant may not have enough time to work on research. It is reflected the significance of time commitments and personal circumstances conducive to a research project being undertaken. In addition, it should be noted that during their doctoral studies, students who face family or marital difficulties frequently encounter significant additional constraints or even academic failure (Dante et al., 2011). Just three references to laboratory works, equipment, chemicals and authorisations by the competent authorities for the field works referred to as barriers by the participants engaged in engineering research. Similarly, Ho et al. (2010) argues that the degree completion process can be facilitated by access to resources and a supportive and stimulating environment for thesis work. They were helped to conquer these obstacles by candidate qualities on perseverance, hard work, time management, planning events, and scheduling activities.

5. LIMITATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Since this particular study was carried out with ten interviews and reflections it is hard to conclude and generalize the findings therefore, large set of data is needed to address the factors contributing to the success or failure of PhD. Although the data is insufficient to derive a conclusion it has contributed to the previous studies which have found the same factors as enablers, barriers and motivators which further validate our findings. Further, the validity of the data can be accepted to an extent since the reflections have been well-thought-out.

Contribution of this current study is significant, in the opinion of researchers, it offers substantial insights that will increase responsiveness among university administrators in order to better realize the challenges faced by PhD candidates. This study also intends to afford valuable insights on the potential issues facing current and prospective PhD candidates that will help them to prepare themselves and make informed choices. The outcomes of the study are also expected to deliver research supervisors with information that will hopefully help to make them more emphatic in their studies, particularly for those who derive from diverse background.

6. CONCLUSION

The interest in success and completion rates for postgraduate research students is rising. In terms of research education, timely completion is a priority. The responses of two different stages of PhD students identified some common themes including the role of the motivation for higher education, internal and external enablers,

internal and external barriers, and strategies for overcoming the barriers which are crucial for timely completion. On the whole, the study analysis indicates six key factors that are likely to have a positive or negative effect on the research success of doctoral students. However, the role of supervisors is often emphasised as a promoting factor in the advancement of PhD. The most critical factor influencing doctoral advancement outside of personal / financial circumstances was supervision. Regular meetings and timely reviews, articulating idea were the most relevant measures for strengthening supervision. Another major factor was financial support. In facilitating development, facilities were not critical considerations, but were part of overall satisfaction. Other references in terms of time commitments, motivations and social emotional capital required to pursue a higher study. Although some people find the PhD journey easy, some find not easy, in various phases of the PhD, different combinations of obstacles, enablers and success factors will work together to help them achieve the goal of successfully completing the degree.

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