



Challenges Faced by Research Students in Writing Thesis: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by research students during thesis writing. Qualitative research methodology was adopted to conduct this study. Research questions were developed to achieve the research objectives. The population of the study was comprised of research students working on their thesis or recently passed out. Purposive sampling technique was adopted. The research tool of the study was interview guide. Interviews were conducted with a sample of 40 research students studying in Library and Information Science/Information Management Departments in public and private sector universities of Punjab province. Thematic approach was adopted to analyze the interview data. The results showed that it is challenging for research students to select the topic for research, develop focus on study, acquiring knowledge of information sources, developing online searching skills, developing data analysis skills and time management skills. They also faced problems in data collection and using inferential statistics. They also faced problem in interpreting data. They indicated the need for trainings on how to analyze and interpret data, using SPSS software, developing questionnaire/interview guide, citation management and literature searching skills. The results of the study are useful for research supervisors and newly research students to focus on identified areas and obtain essential research skills useful during thesis writing.

Keywords: Challenges, problems, writing thesis, training needs, library and information science

Introduction

Excellent writing can contribute to positive academic outcomes (Mousavi & Kashefian-Naeeni, 2011). Writing thesis is a difficult work for many research students. The majority of researchers struggle with drafting their theses, particularly writing literature review (Boote & Beile, 2005 and Fergie et al., 2011). A thesis is the written output of a systematic study that is the outcome of supervised research at the university level. Originality, critical and independent thinking, proper structure and format, and extensive documentation are all evident in the completed project. It fosters scientific thinking and helps the understanding of how to identify a research subject and research problem, framing research questions and objectives design and implement research, analyze information and report a study (Boote, 2005). According to Hay & Samra (2016) thesis writing is an activity undertaken by a researcher in order to put their study findings into written form. The thesis should be written in proper, cohesive language, in a suitable style, and in accordance with citation norms. In terms of style, the thesis should be written in a formal academic manner that is acceptable. Furthermore, the thesis must have a logical and evident structure and development that aids the reader's understanding of the argument being given rather than obscures it, and the language in thesis writing must be clear. The introduction chapter, review of literature chapter, methodology chapter, result chapter, and conclusion chapter are the five key components of a thesis that we must understand. Research papers, theses, assignments, and reports are examples of academic writing. Each of these articles, as the term paper indicates, has a distinct purpose and is aimed at a certain audience.

In academic writing, researchers attempt to share their findings and conclusions with the audiences. As a result, it's crucial to adhere the certain guidelines and procedures while writing for academic purposes. It is critical that what is written by the researchers should reach to its readers'

community in understandable format (Hashim, 2005). As Akindele (2008) indicated that the first impression of a thesis's quality is developed when thesis examiners complete the literature review, which is a crucial segment of thesis. As Mallett (2004) presented that the literature review section should highlight the current and past studies, as well as why the researcher is conducting this study and the procedure of selecting certain approaches or theories to work with. By supporting students in preserving knowledge over time, explicit awareness of genre rules in practice are providing long term benefits (Hyon, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

Research students have to write thesis for the completion of their degree. Thesis writing requires research skills and knowledge to conduct research successfully. It is essential to investigate the problems and challenges faced by research students in writing thesis. For a successful researcher, it is essential to have a good knowledge and practical skills of conducting research to cope with the challenges and problems they faced during research work. This study has been designed to get in-depth investigation and detailed answered from the research students who passed through a research journey. So, this study has been carried out.

Research Questions

Followings research questions were developed to find solution of the research problem:

1. What are the challenges faced by research students while writing thesis?
2. What are the most difficult sections of thesis for research students?
3. What is the satisfaction level of research students about the guidance they receive from their supervisor during thesis writing?
4. What is the need for trainings of research students to develop their research skills?

Review of Literature

This section presents a review of the related literature that is available on the topic. Conducting research, whether you're a new student or a PhD graduate, is an essential element of being a scholar-practitioner with the abilities and credibility to influence social change. Fortunately, many of the research problems students confront, from selecting a topic to recruiting study participants, are solvable. There are number of challenges faced by research students in writing thesis and these challenges include selection of research topic, choosing appropriate research methodology, collecting data and analysing it. Research topic plays an important role in conducting research so it's critical to pick it wisely because you won't be able to accomplish anything else until you've determined the research topic's core emphasis. After deciding on a topic, the researcher will need to develop a technique. In order to move further, a process for performing the study must be established. When it comes to selecting the suitable approach for the study, use the research strategies to get on the right track. Recruiting the study participants might often need participants working in institutions, which can create challenges, particularly if your research is contentious or sensitive, and this adds to the problem. When the data has been collected, the final hurdle is to figure out how to make meaning of the information gathered (Wegener, 2016).

Many undergraduate students have difficulties when writing their thesis. Many students excel at conducting research but fail miserably when it comes to writing a thesis. Students cannot understand that thesis development is difficult. Writing a thesis in English, particularly for Indonesian students, is challenging; students must consider not only the thesis' contents and arrangement, but also the language, as English is not our native language. Research students sometimes feel frustrated with the amount of work they do in a given period, because their goals are overambitious (Phillips and Pugh, 1994).



There is a strong belief that doctorate writing should be done in a social setting so that research students may learn about peer review in academia (Adamek, 2015). Peer writing with fellow research students is usually described as a beneficial technique for building a researcher identity since students may discuss their problems and improve their writing in a supportive environment (Adamek, 2015; Wegener et al., 2016). Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) showed that internal and external influences have a significant impact on thesis composition. The internal component is connected to the pupils' knowledge, while the external factor was the setting. Furthermore, Lipson (2005) emphasizes that there are two types of problems while writing a thesis. The first category is internal factors. It is difficulties that arise from within pupils. It is about the student's knowledge, which includes: a lack of knowledge about the substance of writing a thesis, a problem deciding on a thesis title, a problem deciding on a methodology, a problem finding appropriate theories, a problem finding appropriate literature, self-confidence and motivation.

In addition, (Al-Qaderi, 2016) looked at the difficulties that undergraduate students at University in Yemen have when writing their graduation research projects. In Yemen, English is taught as a foreign language (FL), and the most common issues students face are: (1) a low academic level of the students, which might be due to the use of English as a medium of teaching and research, or a lack of specialization in English. (2) a dearth of well-equipped libraries with open access to electronic materials and websites; and (3) students' challenging circumstances and unfavorable attitudes toward research projects. Many critical issues students experience while drafting research proposals in Tanzania have been identified by Kikula and Quorro (2007). Kombo and Tromp (2011) found that writing wide titles with no clear and targeted substance in the beginning is a typical error. The difficulties were not expressed clearly enough to assist the readers, and the authors were unable to identify the appropriate study methodologies. The literature reviews



were insufficient, and the study technique, which included research questions, was poorly constructed. The results were not presented well, as evidenced.

Research Methodology

To conduct this research, qualitative research approach has been used to investigate the phenomenon under investigation. The effectiveness of qualitative research is heavily based on the skills and abilities of researchers, while the outcomes may not be perceived as reliable, because they mostly come from researcher's personal judgments and interpretations. Qualitative research is also more appropriate for small samples (Ben, 2013). The population of the study was M. Phil research students in Library and Information Science/Information Management departments in library schools situated in the Punjab Province. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose the subjects for interview purpose.

A sample of ten students from selected Library and Information Science schools in Punjab Province was taken as a subject to collect qualitative data for this study. The core areas this study covers are including research challenges, difficult sections of thesis, perception about the research guidance received from supervisors, problems in conducting research and training areas of M. Phil level research students. An interview guide was developed and used as a tool for data collection. Interviews were conducted with the respondents to collect the qualitative data. Thematic approach was applied to analyze the collected data.

Limitation of the Research

As this research project was carried out during Pandemic, so due to Covid-19, the researcher could not approach the students studying in the department of Information Management, University of the Punjab.



Analysis of Qualitative Data

The collected data was analyzed in two stages. Stage first consists of preliminary analysis and stage 2 is based on advanced analysis.

Stage 1

This preliminary process is intended to reducing masses of data to meaningful and manageable portions through data reduction, sorting, discarding and reorganizing to find emergence of patterns or themes that eventually will contribute to the study's interpretations and conclusions. The researcher repeatedly, listen all the interviews and developed their transcriptions. The researcher assigned different codes to all the related transcriptions which were developed during the interview listing and transcribing process. Field notes taken during the interview process were also read carefully and interpreted to incorporate into the relevant transcriptions to develop some meaningful units of information. After developing transcriptions based on interviews data and field notes and developing units of information, the researcher moved towards detailed analysis procedure.

Stage 2

At this stage, the units of data were reconfigured in order to view the new perspectives to develop themes as a result of data analysis. This process involved noting reflections or and remarks, sorting units of data to identify relationships between patterns, themes and confirming patterns and themes to finalize the analysing procedure.

Interpretation of Data

The qualitative data obtained from 40 interviewees have been analysed here. The given table shows that there were 3 departments of Library and Information Science and one



department of Information Management from where the respondents were selected for interviews.

Ten interviewees were selected from each department.

Table: 1. Departments of Respondents (N=40)

Sr. #	Departments	Frequency
1.	Department of Information Management University of Sargodha	10
2.	Department of Library & Information Science, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur	10
3.	Department of Library and Information Science, Superior University Lahore	10
4.	Department of Library and Information Science, Minhaj University Lahore	10

Research Experience of the Respondents

The majority of respondents (n=29) mentioned that they had attended research trainings and workshops conducted on different elements of research. They mentioned that they gained good knowledge and awareness regarding research work through these channels. Another good majority (n=24) mentioned that they had worked on different research projects in form of research assignments and research paper writing. Among forty interviewees, there was a good ratio (n=15) respondent who had published research articles based on their M. Phil research knowledge and learning.

**Table: 2. Research Experience of Respondents (N=40)**

Sr. #	Research Experience of Responses	Frequency
1.	Worked on any Research Project	24
2.	Published any Research Article	15
3.	Attended any Research training workshop	29

Challenges Faced by Research Students in Conducting Research

Conducting successful research is a challenging task for research students of M. Phil level after gaining theoretical understanding during course work. Majority of the interviewees mentioned that to find a research topic is major challenge while conducting research (n=32). They also indicated that identifying research problem (n=25), developing focus during study (n=25), managing time for research and meeting the deadline is also a challenge during research work (n=25). It was found that acquiring a knowledge of relevant information sources and developing good level of searching skills, successfully collect data and meet the obstacles during data collection process and thesis write-up skills are the challenging tasks for M. Phil level research students to successfully complete a research project.

Table 3: Challenges in Conducting Research (N=40)

Sr. #	Thematic Analysis of Responses	Frequency
1.	Finding the right topic	32
2.	Identifying research problem	25
3.	Understanding various research methodologies	22



4. Searching relevant literature	23
5. Developing focus during the study	25
6. Acquiring adequate practical skills/research experience	18
7. Acquiring adequate knowledge of information sources	20
8. Acquiring good level of online searching skills	21
9. Developing thesis write-up skills	19
10 Managing obstacles during data collection	17
11 Developing practical skills to apply inferential statistics on data	23
12 Developing practical skills to analyse qualitative data	18
13 Developing time management skills to meet deadlines	25

Difficult Sections of Thesis During Thesis Write-Up

The interviewees were asked to identify the difficult sections of thesis they faced during thesis write-up. A vast majority of the interviewees identified that data collections and analysing have been a difficult task during thesis write-up (n=24). They mentioned that respondents do not willingly provide data and for this task and they have to repeatedly remind the respondents to provide data for research purpose. The interviewees also identified that data analysis by applying appropriate statistical tests on data and requires adequate data analysis skills by the researcher. They also indicated that they don't have enough skills to analyse qualitative data as compared to quantitative data. The second majority of the respondents mentioned that writing introduction section and choosing appropriate research methodology also required enough skills (n=22). During further probes, interviewees mentioned that identification of a research gape, writing statement of the problem with strong justification and developing research objectives and research



questions is not an easy task. Similarly, they pointed out that selecting appropriate research methodology to start a research thesis in the right direction is also matter a lot. Another majority of the interviewees indicated that searching literature and developing good quality of literature review (n=18) is a difficult task. The subjects of the study highlighted that they found it difficult to develop data collection tools including interview guide and questionnaire, writing summary and conclusion section of the thesis also demands a good level of critical skills during thesis writing.

Table 4: Difficult Sections of Thesis Identified by Interviewees (N=40)

Sr. #	Thematic Analysis of Responses	Frequency
1.	Introduction section (including gap identification, writing problem statement, formulating research objectives)	22
2.	Literature review (searching skills, collecting relevant literature, developing relationship among literature)	18
3.	Choosing appropriate research methodology (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, population of the study, sampling, scope of research)	22
4.	Developing data collection tool (questionnaire, interview guide)	17
5.	Collecting data from respondents (through questionnaire, interview, observation)	24
6.	Analysing research data (applying statistical tests, descriptive & inferential statistics, qualitative data analysis)	24
7.	Data analysis (Interpretation of data and discussions on results)	24
8.	Writing summary, conclusion & recommendation	17

Satisfaction with Research Guidance Provided by Supervisor

Thesis write-up is regarded as a research journey to achieve the research goals under the guidance of research supervisor till the completion of research project. Majority of subjects during interview indicated that they have been satisfied with research guidance provided by their research supervisors (n=36). On the basis of this result, we can say that research guidance being provided to the research students studying in library and information science/information management departments is admirable as majority of the interviewees looked satisfied with their research supervisors.

Satisfaction with Research Guidance

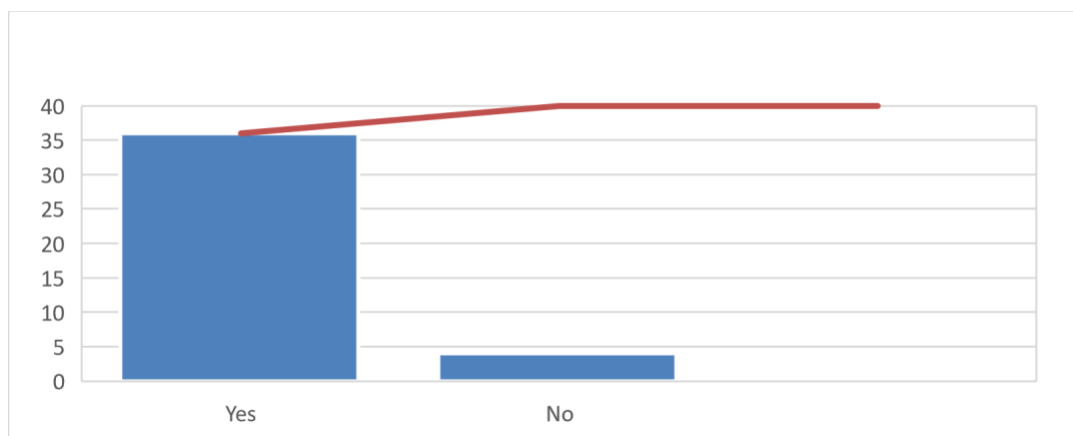


Figure-1

Need of Trainings for Thesis Writing

The interviewees were asked about the need of trainings they feel during thesis writing. A vast majority of respondents shared a desire to acquire trainings on thesis writing. Majority highlighted the need in this regard (n=32). These results showed that there is a dire need to provide training opportunities to the research students studying in the library schools of Pakistan to train

them in conducting research. Training should be provided in this regard via research seminars, conferences, symposium etc. Library schools and library associations should play their effective role to promote the research culture in the field.

Training Needs of Research students

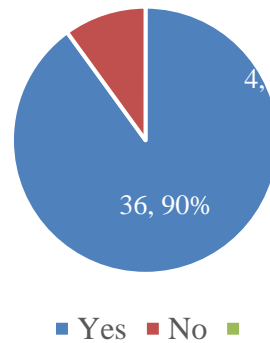


Figure -2

Training Areas for Thesis Writing Needed by Research Students

As majority of respondents indicated the need for thesis writing, they were further inquired about the areas for providing trainings. Results highlighted that most of the subjects mentioned that they need trainings for data analysis (n=31), developing questionnaire/interview guide (n=29), use of data analysis software (n=29), analysing qualitative data (n=31), understanding qualitative research (n=26). See table 09 for others values.

Table 5: Training Areas Required by Research Students (N=40)

Sr. #	Thematic Analysis of Responses	Frequency
1.	Understanding quantitative research methods	26
2.	Use of sampling techniques	25
3.	Understanding citation management and literature skills	27



4.	Development of questionnaire and interview guide	29
5.	Data analysis techniques by using SPSS	29
6.	Understanding qualitative research	26
7.	Analysing qualitative data	31
8.	Interpretation of results	29
9.	Use of citation management software	25

Discussion on Results

This study shed light on the challenges faced by research students in writing thesis. The interviewees of the study had somehow research experience as they had attended research workshops and also had publishing experience in form of research reports and research articles. Some of the interviewees also got trainings during their course work regarding conducting research. The majority of the respondents during interview process highlighted the challenges they faced in writing research thesis, as selection of a research topic. It may be due to their limited exposure in the field as they don't have adequate practical experience of work in any library and organizations to think more critically and generate new ideas to conduct a research study. Similarly, the interviewees mentioned that they could not identify research problem and remained unable to explore it through literature. It also based on critical exposure and adequate skills to understand the things deeply and critically. They also indicated that selection of a research methodology to conduct a research study is challenging for them. It showed that their knowledge regarding research methodology is also weak. As selection of research methodology should be in line with the research objectives and nature of the study, it is not an easy task for newly researchers to set an appropriate research methodology.

Similarly, the interviewees also pointed out that finding relevant literature from the Internet and various others online sources of information is also challenging for them as it requires adequate online searching skills and knowledge. Hence, there is a need to develop online searching skills of the respondents to enable them in finding and retrieving relevant information available via digital media. Research work during thesis write up demands complete attention and focus by the researcher. The interviewees mentioned that it is very difficult to develop and maintain focus during research work to fully concentrate on the thesis and complete it well in time. During interview process, it was also highlighted by the interviewees that practical skills and adequate knowledge of the field also contribute a lot during thesis writing process. They mentioned that based on this knowledge, one can overcome the obstacles faced during thesis writing process.

A great majority of the interviewees also highlighted that knowledge of proper statistical tests to apply on data and analyse it by using adequate statistical measures is also problematic task. They highlighted those skills for analysing the qualitative data are important to learn about them. They indicated that time management skills are one of the important skills to complete the research project well in time and meet the deadlines given by the supervisor for the completion of different research tasks during thesis project. The interviewees indicated the most difficult sections of the theses and data collection procedure and analysing it by providing adequate discussion. Indeed, it requires statistical skills and use of various data analysis software. The interviewees indicated the need for training to know about above discussed areas of research to enhance the research skills.

Conclusions

Based on acquired responses through interview data, this study has concluded that research students studying in Library and Information Science/Information Management Schools in Pakistan are facing problems in writing research thesis due to low level of their thesis write up



skills. Research students face difficulty in selecting topic for research thesis. It is also concluded that the respondents had low level of motivation in writing research thesis and projects. The research students studying in Library and Information Science/Information Management needs trainings to improve their skills and knowledge to successfully work on research project. So, there is a great need to provide them training opportunities regarding writing thesis. In this regards, library and information science associations can also play their role to offer research seminars, workshops, symposium and conferences.

Recommendations

Based on the results and conclusions drawn from this qualitative study, the following recommendations are provided to enhance thesis writing skills for the research students. Further research can be conducted on this topic by choosing larger sample from various universities in Pakistan, studying in various disciplines. Problems faced by research supervisors during guiding research students in getting the work done should also be investigated.

1. Training needs of research students should be addressed by providing them opportunities in understanding the research process.
2. LIS schools and associations can play their active role in conducting research seminars, conferences and symposiums to highlight the emerging research areas and techniques with a special focus to the questionnaire developing, data analysing techniques in qualitative and quantitative research.
3. Training in using SPSS software should be provided with a special focus in applying inferential statistics.



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