Distance as a Barrier and Online Learning: A Qualitative Phenomenological Case Study on Challenges of Doctoral Students in Distance Education

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Abstract

The present qualitative research focused on exploring the challenges and barriers confronted by doctoral students in distance education. The study was conducted on doctoral students of a public sector distance education university in Pakistan and employed a phenomenological case study approach. The study included three focus group interviews and sixteen semi-structured interviews with distance doctoral students, who were selected through snowball sampling. Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data gathered through the interviews. The findings showed that doctoral students encountered different difficulties in the context of distance and online learning. To address these challenges faced by doctoral students, organizing on-campus face-to-face workshops during summer and winter vacations and implementing a training session on network troubleshooting before conducting regular seminars, would alleviate the difficulties experienced by distance learners. This research is anticipated to bring about various reforms to minimize the challenges encountered by distance doctoral students.

Keyword: Online learning, distance barriers, distance education, digital learning, phenomenological case study.

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Introduction

Distance education is a type of instruction where teachers and students are physically separated for some or all of the study time, and different technologies are used to support interactions among them along with other students (Simonson & Berg, 2016). It can be classified into two main groups based on whether it is delivered asynchronously or synchronously (Nasrullah, 2014). The interactions in asynchronous DE occur between the learner and teacher at different places, and the instruction is delivered in a flexible timeframe. This may include reading-written materials as well as watching and listing pre-recorded lectures. Synchronous learning includes various alternative communication resources such as online chatting and video discussions (Virtic et al., 2021), as well as real-time interactions in online classes (Shahabadi, 2015).

Distance education is a flexible approach because of its focus on the choice of learning, selection of time and learning experiences. The demand of distance education is increasing day by day

because of its low cost and flexible mode of instruction (Pityana, 2004). It offers a unique opportunity for such job holders who don't have spare time for getting education (Abimbola et al., 2015) and is a source of resolving the problems regarding their access to education.

DE is such a kind of education that takes place outside the formal classroom through some correspondence or using technological instruments and sometimes it occurs in the form of face-to-face instruction. Despite numerous advantages and facilities, several difficulties can also be found, which are faced by the distance education students because an appropriate classroom interaction doesn't exist amongst students and teachers. And resultantly, they suffer during their studies and research work.

The enrolled students in DE programs face individual, institutional and instructional challenges (Cosmas & Mbwette, 2009). The individual challenges are related to the students' attitude, affiliations and feelings (Lynch, et al., 2020). Individual challenges also include domestic challenges like; job, home responsibilities, poor learning environment and lack of time. Majority of the students of the distance education are working persons, while some of them are jobless and study leaver (Nsamba, 2016). Institutional challenges include university policies which are sometimes not in accordance with the student's personal needs or interest. As a matter of fact, distance learning students feel themselves separated and as the outcome of this separation, students become low motivated (Boulos et al., 2005). Instructional challenges in DE include insufficient technical support, inappropriate content development, and unavailability of trained teacher (Cosmas & Mbwette, 2009). Additionally, Communication gap, feedback delay, physical distance, and network connectivity are relevant challenges in distance education. Another major problem with distance education is lack of continuous support and guidance regarding research work. Students of distance education are deprived of this facility.

To cope with the challenges faced by DE doctoral students, different support services are offered by distance learning (DL) universities. Ultimately, students' learning capability and integration in the society increases. These services are designed to aid students' academic improvement, as well as their personal and social growth (Farajollahi & Moenikia, 2010). Access to online and library resources, academic assistance, research writing services, and streamlined departmental processes may be included in these services. DE is widely recognized as a means to generate and transfer knowledge, as well as to develop skilled individuals who can contribute to reducing poverty. Distance education doctoral programs can help to develop skilled individuals who can contribute to society (Shava & Ndebele, 2014). Also, DE study offers a facility of studying from home or work place. Due to its flexible delivery techniques, online distance education programs have become a highly popular and widely accepted mode of learning (Aryal & Balan, 2023).

With the increase of number of doctoral students in distance learning, the concern about their retention has also increased and it has become a growing concern in DE (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The rate of leaving doctoral study is more than formal on-campus study (Holmes & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2020). Although it is expected for some students to leave doctoral studies, but it has adverse influence on the reputation of the institution (Cassuto, 2013). A high departure rate in doctoral studies can result in the loss of money, effort, and time (Bagrıacık Yılmaz & Karataş, 2022). Additionally, such departures can have emotional effects on the students (Gardner, 2009). Despite of all this, the distance learning students persist in their study program owing to different type of support and motivation. Family and peer support plays a vital role in this regard. Family

encouragement is of great value for the DE students (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Students also use different alternate sources to persist in their studies.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

In recent years, a significant increase has been observed in the enrollment of PhD students in distance learning. Such trend encompasses many countries throughout the world. Most of the students work in various fields to support themselves and their families. Doctoral students in DE have to face a number of problems and challenges during their study. Some issues are distance concerned while other related to nature of the doctoral study. These issues were elaborated upon to promote discussion and further advancement in higher-quality practices within PhD-level distance education. Therefore, the main research question of the present study was: What challenges do doctoral students face in distance education programs?

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was most suitable for this research, which aimed to examine meaningful learning experiences of distance learning doctoral students and investigate the challenging issues they encountered. The development of the new knowledge through investigation depends on the employment of suitable methodologies, which are led by the philosophical foundations. A high-quality study design needs exploratory questions and suitable methodology that respond the research queries relationally, metaphysically and epistemologically (Jackson, 2013).

To improve the researcher's understanding about students' experiences in DE, this research used a phenomenological case study design. The application of this approach focuses on capturing essential information behind an incident and understanding the ways in which students assign significance to their real-life experiences (Grbich, 2012). It concentrates the method of investigating the first-hand experiences of those concerning a specific event, as observed and investigated by the participants of the study themselves. Phenomenology probes a problem as experienced by the individuals subjectively, for the purpose to have an insight regarding diverse aspects of truth by taking into consideration perspectives of the individuals who have lived experience of an event (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). It has the capability to capture the complete essence and depict the experiences of an event, encompassing their uncertain, profound, and immediate characteristics (Finlay, 2009).

Participants of the Study

The participants' sample for the current study comprised of 25 doctoral students actively involved in DL. The sampling was consisting on students with different professional and disciplinary experiences, and incorporated 19 male students and 6 female students. Phenomenologists focus on identifying common attributes of lived experiences. Despite the possibility of choosing a large and diverse sample size, the present research intentionally targeted only distance doctoral students who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Due to the lack of precise information regarding the accessibility and convenience of doctoral distance education students, snowball sampling was chosen as the preferred sampling method. To address this issue, the researcher adopted a systematic approach, initially establishing contact with a doctoral student who had previously been a classmate in a Master of Education (M.Ed) program and met the

research's criteria. With the assistance of this student, the researcher was able to categorize and enlist other relevant participants who had similar characteristics.

Data Collection

The purpose of the present qualitative study was to gain a through comprehension into the experiences of research participants by probing how they make their self-understandings of truth and the meaning given to their exclusive experiences and dedicated to comprehension the meanings beyond their lived experiences (Merriam et al., 2009). Initially, the researcher selected and finalized relevant students using snowball sampling. The participants were chosen through mobile phone calls, emails and in-person contacts. The researcher used many techniques to increase the participants' response and sustained the selection practice till the preferred number of research participants reach. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with sixteen participants and three focus group discussions (FGDs) using a guide informed by the purpose of the study and major research questions aiming at exploring the lived experiences of the doctoral students.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis presents a structured framework for data analysis and is well-suited for studies that intend to interpret and uncover meanings. It is a systematic analysis of data by providing a structured framework that allows for the connection between content and themes. It enables the researchers to acquire a more profound comprehension of the data, thus allowing them to draw conclusions that hold significant meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Marks and Yardley (2004), thematic analysis allows the researchers to collect a sufficient amount of data that leads to inclusive analysis. According to the Braun and Clarke method, data analysis consists of following six steps: (1) Data familiarization, (2) Generate preliminary codes, (3) Search themes along with codes, (4) Review of themes, (5) Naming and defining themes, (6) Finalize the themes. The themes identified were distance as barrier and online learning.

Results of the Study

The following themes were emerged as a result of the data analysis:

Distance as a Barrier

Distance education facilitates students in completing their doctoral studies. Its popularity has increased over the past decade due to advancements in technology and variations in the ways individuals approach distance learning. The major issue that DE students at doctoral level confront during their study is distance. A female participant "9" holding the position of principal shared her experience as follows:

> *The major dilemma I passed during my doctoral study was to join on-campus workshops after a long journey of 550 km. The intensity of the issue enhanced during comprehensive exams. My department disapproved my study leave a number of times. Once, I could not sit in interim exams.*

Distance not only creates physical fatigue but also cause mental weariness. No doubt, it is a hard task for learners to join the class soon after long travelling. The concentration and focus that

doctoral study needs become insufficient. Learners' performance is negatively influenced. Departmental rules are also negative in this concern. Sometimes, students feel it difficult even to continue their studies. Participation in the workshops can be fantastic chance for a distance learning student to attain practical expertise and knowledge that may be helpful in enhancing their learning experience. It is however, a challenging task to request and obtain leave from the department to join workshops. The participant "17" confirmed it as "Due to pressure from higher authorities and government regulations, taking extended leaves for this purpose is not always feasible. Additionally, I also had to endure a salary deduction when taking leaves".

The participant "18" threw light on a similar issue as, "Taking leaves from my job was an overwhelming challenge for me. Firstly, I had to convince my superiors to grant their approval, and then I had to devise strategies to manage my responsibilities and workloads during my absence". A similar hurdle was expressed by participant "19" as, "Strict policies are enforced by the education department regarding leaves, including a minimum notice period and a limit on the number of leaves. I must adhere to these departmental policies rigorously, and obtaining permission for leaves from the department is indeed a challenging task". An issue of similar nature was also reported by five out of six participants of other two focus groups. The one who did not confront was working in the city where university was located. A large number of doctoral students are employed in education sector, so leave taking process is always challenging for them. An efficient interaction and planning are of great importance in pursuance of a fruitful outcome for employees and officers. Regarding leave issue, participant "16" verbalized as:

> *Long-distance travel often necessitates taking vacations from work, and most of the time, we have to make sacrifices in our studies to secure our jobs. Finding a suitable replacement can be a challenging task. There were occasions when I was unable to attend university due to assignments from my department.*

Students have to take the advantage of station leaves to participate in distance education classes. Availing such leaves is not an easy task. Additionally, finding a suitable substitute is not a simple job. There are also instances where job obligations hinder students from taking leave for study. The participant "8" who has just completed her dissertation presented her views as:

> *A six-week-long stay to participate in workshops far from my family was not an easy task for a working woman. Being a stomach acidity patient, going to the market for mineral water became a regular source of fatigue for me. Moreover, the high cost of basic necessities caused me great concern.*

Separation from families and living in far-off areas result in a distress and discomfort. The support from family and friends is very useful during study period. Its absence causes distraction from study. The students' interactions with peers become less and they take normal circumstances as potential threat. Distance also imposes economic pressure on learners' pocket. Motivation from family and friends stimulates the students to make progress. Self-motivation also enables learners to attain the goals they set for themselves. This concern is highlighted by a well-motivated participant "3" as:

> *After admission, I had no other option but to attend and participate in university workshops. However, I didn't give up, as my career centered on it. Obtaining a doctoral degree was also a source of inspiration for me, which enabled me to tackle difficulties with vigor.*

Obtaining a doctoral degree is an ultimate wish of students. To fulfill this wish they have to make a careful planning. It is motivation that keeps the students on the right track towards their goals of doctoral degree. So they do not care about how difficult the path is. When I asked her why you spent eight years in completion of your doctoral degree, the participant "9" responded as, "It is because of distance". Usually doctoral students in DE do not have time restriction and they take advantage of more freedom. They carry on their studies on their own ease. The lack of control by university management leads students to spend their time on activities unrelated to their studies. They spends more time to complete their study program. The participant "1" The individual who has recently completed his coursework and is now dedicating his efforts to formulating a research topic expressed his viewpoint in the following words:

> *The aim of DE is to facilitate the students working from home, as their job restrictions do not permit them to join physical classes. But in the present scenario, distance education forces the students to participate in workshops physically, which contradicts the original intention of distance education.*

Distance education is a very suitable choice for the individuals who want to carry on their study along with their job. It can be especially feasible for them who aim at enhancing their qualification. Now if such students are compelled to join physical class, their jobs may suffer. Also it is their moral obligation to give proper attention and time to their job, but they stuck in between. During the conversation, the participant "14" who was going through his research proposal described his experience as:

> *At the beginning of my doctorates, I was working in the same city. Afterword, I had to go to another city due to promotional transfer. In the new circumstances, I bore a great deal of hardships. The intensity of the situation increased when my department did not permit me to join one month long workshop.*

Distance created difficulty for the participant on his transfer. The university had no any mechanism to facilitate such individuals. Institutions offering such programs should ensure that students receive sufficient support and assistance to guarantee a successful and beneficial learning experience. The participant "5" who bears the fatigue of 520 kilometers long travel to make participation in workshops put forth his experience as:

> *The university may be the heaven for the people of the same city, but students like me have to confront a number of difficulties leading to dissatisfaction. In order to meet my doctoral study requirements, I have to tackle the setbacks such as travelling fares, seeking leaves permission from my job and weariness.*

Management of workshops is surely a hard job for distance learners. The participants has described his problems here that are producing a sense of discomfort and dissatisfaction from the study mechanism. There were two groups of participants. One group was residing in the locality

near to university, while the other was from a distant locality. Both the groups were in a different situation. The farmer group reported ease and pleasure in getting on campus education, but the other one expressed suffering and fatigue. So distance causes waste of time, money and health. Distance education has become more familiar and popular in recent years due to its adoption of advanced technology and convenience. It is very beneficial for the students who want flexible study schedules, convenience and diversity in educational opportunities. It is also a feasible choice for the learners who reside in geographically distant areas or physically disable to attend formal education.

Despite of all the benefits it provides, many doctoral students showed dissatisfaction towards distance learning. Such un-satisfaction can be the outcome of fatigue due to distance, unsuitable facilities of residence, teaching methodologies and supervisors' behavior. In most of the cases, participation in workshops requires extra expenditures in the form of travelling fares, and charges of accommodation. In addition, professional responsibilities also add stress to learners' nerves. Attending workshops is a cause of physical mental exhaustion, especially if long hours are required to reach the university or to participate in the workshops. Resultantly learners well being and performance is influenced. The health and performance of a distance learner can be severely affected by inadequate residential facilities. When discussing this issue with participant "11", he argued in favor of making it more understandable as:

> *Absolutely not! The study atmosphere was absent in hostel. Lack of discipline, huge crowd, smoking, and unproductive usage of mobile were bases of distractions from study in hostel. Except central library, no proper place for study was available.*

According to participant's point of view, the root cause of dissatisfaction of distance learners is hostel's environment. The focus and concentration on study is distracted by noisy and crowded hostels. It becomes even more problematic during examination times when learners are in a great need of concentration for many hours. A hostel lacking basic amenities like study places, bright illumination, cozy seating, and fast internet, make it difficult to complete research projects and assignments. Unhygienic environment of hostels and poor maintenance may cause illness of learners, leading to absence from classes and minimal academic performance.

Online Learning

This study centers on experiences of PhD scholars in DE. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the university offered on-campus classes for certain subjects, along with corresponding workshops. Pandemic causes the students to shift to distance learning and this shift is still going on. As it is natural with every system, online learning systems too have advantages and disadvantages. The benefits of the online learning make it a golden choice for the learners of every age group and background. It not only provides time and place flexibility but also offer a great access to study contents and enables participation in learning environment through internet facility. The participant "16" responded a question about online class as, "I feel pleasure in accessing course content and making participation in class discussion without restriction of time. It facilitates me to set study schedules in accordance with my needs".

The most attractive trait of online learning is its flexibility. The students find it difficult to join the classes on the fixed schedule. So, online learning system's facility of flexible time table

becomes a blessing for the learners. It allows them to give proper time to their study along with their work without any stress of fixed timings. The participant "2", who has just made the completion of course work, conversed as: *"It was only through online classes, that I attended my missed classes via recorded discussions. I also enjoyed the facility of hearing lectures time and again to have a deeper insight, and concepts".* It is another major benefit of DE, to provide facility of recorded class discussions which allow scholars to remove the deficiencies of missed classes. In traditional education, the missing a class period often results in a complete loss of understanding for that particular concept.

Contrary to this, through online learning, scholars are able to watch the recorded class lectures at a time convenient to them. In spite of all the benefits discussed above, online classes also have some drawbacks. A limited interaction is present between supervisors and doctoral students. Due to this reason, learners feel difficulty in engaging themselves in a meaningful discussion, receiving feedback from supervisors of the same field. Reliable technology is major requirement of online classes. Without a computer or mobile and high speed internet, learners cannot succeed in online system. Online learner also have to face the technical problems like computer malfunctioning and slow speed of internet. These problems not only disrupt the course work but also the timely submission of assignments. The problem of internet connectivity also has effects on communication between supervisors and learners.

Participant "20" of the focus group "2", whose research work has been submitted for external evaluation conversed as, "communication with supervisor was easier task for me but many times weaker internet connectivity made the supervisor's response a little bit nuanced". The participant "22" made an addition by saying, "The main aim behind attending online classes is to hear the lectures and participate in question-answer session afterward. But it was deprived of such delight". The interaction with teachers and make inquires about different concepts is valuable part of face to face learning. So, a student feels frustration if he or she is deprived of this facility in online classes.

Talking about the difficulties and obstacles participant "21" gave his point of view as, "Throughout my study period, internet connectivity disturbed me a lot. Weak signal issue was the main hindrance in attending online classes. Sometimes it caused a sense of exhaustion and irritation. Double sounds during the online session create a great deal of confusion, and to understand the discussion becomes an uphill task". The fast internet is basic necessity in online learning. Internet speed promotes good quality instruction. Teachers often make the usage of "MS Teams" to conduct online classes. It is internet connection that gives the surety of high quality videos and audio during online classes. Slower internet speed causes repeated sound disruptions and video buffering, frequently distracting learners and hindering their concentration. Participant "11" who has completed and qualified in his university qualifying exam expressed his views as:

> *Poor connectivity of network was a matter of great frustration. A lot of my time was wasted due to this problem. I confronted a great difficulty in accessing course material because of slower speed of downloading. It became very difficult for me to participate in online classes during system up gradation of internet companies.*

Poor network is troublesome particularly for online learners. More time is wasted in finding the study material. As they have limited time, so their motivation decreases. It also affects performance of the scholars. Poor connectivity makes it difficult for online learners to make a full participation in discussion, and they may miss some important information. Distance education is making its circle vast owing to a number of support services. These support services are provided keeping in view the difficulties of online learners. The basic idea behind these services is to give an easy access to different online resources and to support them in achievement of success. These services are not only helpful in increasing the enrollment but also enhance the quality of research work. Innovative support services like digital literacy training, library services and guidance and counseling services can also be provided.

Discussion

This question was related to explorations of challenges confronted by the distance doctoral students. Regarding the challenges, the analysis revealed that distance as barrier, and technical problems regarding online learning were amongst the most significant challenges in the way of doctoral students.

In this context, the first thing was "distance as a barrier". A number of previous studies as the time, physical distance and technical obstacles presented by (Stine, 2010), negative effects on satisfaction level (Dennen, 2005), physical separation and sense of isolation due to distance and distance as a barrier and its effects on satisfaction (Muilenberg & Berge, 2005), have highlighted the distance related obstacles. Due to long distance between home city and university, the distance learners have to sit for many hours in the buses. It is not only time consuming but also puts a financial burden on students budget in the form of fares, as they are already making a great effort in managing their education expenses.

Another challenge that distance learners are confronting is mandatory participation in on campus workshops. The students cannot attend these workshops without taking long time off from their jobs and familial commitment. Long distance travelling is physically demanding activity for the persons residing for away from the university. Also it is a time intensive task that has negative influence on the health and performance of the distance learners. The tug of war between professional commitments and academic responsibilities leads to mental stress and fatigue, which ultimately affects the performance of learners. The disconnection from family environment for workshops leads to feeling of loneliness. Barriers of distance as a prominent factor for dissatisfaction among doctoral students are identified by a number of researchers. Allen (2004) had a point of view that there is an association between dissatisfaction and geographical separation. Gardner & Gopaul (2012) also sorted out the distance related issues as the cause of increasing ratio of attrition among distance learners.

Additionally, Baker et al. (2014), Allen & Seaman (2014), and Ivankova & Stick (2007) also gave emphasis to the distance barrier being an important source of doctoral students' worry, and heighted its bad impact on academic performance of the learners. The cost associated with traveling is quite high, which adds in the difficulties of the learners, who already bearing great expenses on university fee. In addition to the financial burden, time and effort are also wasted on long travel. The job holder also has to confront the difficulty of taking leaves from their job. This additional stress and anxiety causes learners to feel torn between professional and educational responsibilities. Furthermore, stay in hostels or other such accommodation also adds in the

financial burden and worry as well. The absence of a peaceful study environment, lack of privacy, and non adjustable living conditions create hurdles for learners, making it difficult for them to fully focus on their studies.

Online learning provides great deal of advantages to the learners, especially to those who are unable to gain formal education due to their job and family obligations. The facility of recorded class discussions enables the learners to review their class activities and course material at their own pace. It paves their way to a better understanding of course contents and to alleviate confusion, which ultimately improves their performance. Online learning in-spite of all its benefits and advantages, can pose serious challenges for the students. A number of researches have discussed the gravity of these challenges under different terms, such as "Online Learning Challenges", "E-Learning Barriers", and "Education Barriers". For instance, Koh & Hill (2009), and Van Den BERG (2020) have explored the deficiency of interactive learning as a significant challenge. Hallberg & Wafula (2010) have found language barriers, while Seynhaeve et al. (2022) has pointed out the unavailability of physical interaction as the major barrier to online learning.

Network connectivity was also found to be a great issue in online education. Poor and weak internet connectivity not only disrupts the learning process, but also leads to frustration for students who can't access online or join online discussions. It also causes a feeling of boredom and time wastage, when they have to wait for a long time to load pages. It also reduces their overall engagement and motivation. Furthermore, the lack of direct interaction amongst learners, supervisors and fellows can prove to be a major drawback of online learning, particularly for learners who thrive on social interactions and discussions. In the absence of facility to engage in real time discussion, learners have to make strong efforts to comprehend their course contents, causing dissatisfaction and weariness.

Conclusion

One of the key issues regarding challenges faced by doctoral students is "Distance as Barrier". In order to attend the workshops at a locality far off from their residence, they have to take long leaves from their job, which is not an easy task. Also, more than one month long stay away from families and loved ones adds anxiety and stress to learners' lives. Another concern, with "Distance as Barrier" is the imbalance between job restrictions and study requirements. Many doctoral students pursue their studies with full time work, so they have to confront a permanent tussle between job commitment and learning tasks.

Internet connectivity is another hurdle in the achievement of online learning goals. Online learning system is very simple for the doctoral students, as it facilitates them to oversee their educational tasks at their own convenience and recorded lectures aids them in achieving a deeper comprehension of concepts. However, poor internet connectivity results in students a feeling of exasperated and boredom. It is also a cause of unnecessary wastage of value time.

To enhance research productivity and mitigate obstacles encountered by distance doctoral students, it is recommended that conducting on-campus, in-person workshops throughout summer and winter breaks will alleviate the challenges faced by remote learners. Moreover, it is advisable for the university to incorporate training sessions on troubleshooting in online workshops.

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