



## **UNPACKING THE EXPERIENCES OF PAKISTANI PHD SCHOLARS: PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PHD COMPLETION**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the experiences of Pakistani PhD scholars while focusing the role of personal characteristics in PhD completion. This study draws on in-depth interviews with PhD enrolled scholars across four Pakistani universities-Quaid-I-Azam University Islamabad, International Islamic University Islamabad, The University of the Punjab Lahore, and Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. Five participants were selected from each of these universities (total 20) through purposive sampling and thematic analysis method was used to identify themes from the data. We have used two theoretical models-Tinto social integration model (1995) and Braxton's revised integration model (2014) as theoretical lenses that guided the analysis on 'how jobs beyond the academia remains a challenge or opportunity for PhD-Studies completion', 'family life as a challenge or opportunity for PhD completion', and 'peer support as a blessing in PhD-studies completion'. The study findings suggest diverse experiences of PhD scholars while completing their studies, for instance jobs beyond the academia remains a challenge for some PhD scholars while for others an opportunity where non-academic jobs support them financially. Similarly, family life influenced PhD-studies of some scholars while others got support in completion of PhD-studies. However, peer support remains a blessing for most of the participants in completion of their studies.*

**Key words:** PhD scholars, PhD-Studies, Job beyond the academia, family life, peer support, PhD-studies completion, challenges and opportunities.

### **Introduction**

Issues in completion of doctoral research has become a theoretical concern in higher education circles. Issues in doctoral research and PhD completion are among Pakistan's least explored areas. The academic literature is scant on the topics related to doctoral research in Pakistan. Few studies have investigated factors that affect postgraduate research performance (e.g., Ali, Sannauddin & Ullah,2019; Saleem & Mehmood,2017; Saleem & Mehmood,2018; Qureshi & Vazir,2015; Sarwar, Shah & Akram, 2018, Shaikh, 2015). These studies have certain methodological limitations because they only focused on the supervisors' related issues in post-graduate research. Secondly, it needs to be explained to what extent distinct factors are critical to the performance of doctoral students. Moreover, it needs to be investigated which of these factors is crucial. Similarly, no attempts are made to investigate how PhD scholars' social and personal characteristics can affect their PhD studies and completion.

Researchers have identified some factors affecting postgraduate students' performance. The factors are grouped into student-related, institution-related, and supervisor-related factors (De Zoysa, 2007; Hadi & Muhammad, 2018 Meerah, 2010; Wareing, 2009). Some scholars classified these factors as personal, academic, and non-academic (Wollast et al., 2018). other scholars organized into three major themes, i.e., student deficiencies, inappropriate supervision process, and inappropriate research environment. Studies have examined personal, academic, and financial factors influencing postgraduate research (Gardener, 2008; Wamala et al., 2012). Another study grouped these factors into internal factors (classroom-



related/ academic factors) and external factors (family and financial factors) that affect students' academic performance (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012).

Students in Pakistan also face challenges in doctoral research and completion. Some PhD students spend more than the stipulated time for graduation. Some scholars even do not complete it in eight years. Students quit their PhD studies before graduation. In August 2020, the suicide of Nadia Ashraf, a PhD student at the University of Karachi, stirred social media and electronic media. There were different versions of the same event—friends of the deceased blamed supervisor and university. The University administration refuted all accusations. Issues in PhD research and completion are prevailing; however, only a few studies have been conducted in the Pakistani context (Ali, Ullah & Sanauddin, 2019; Hadi & Muhammad, 2018, Hadi & Muhammad, 2019), but these were not directly focusing PhD completion. Considering this scenario, doctoral attrition is a chronic problem; a full-pledged study is needed to investigate other factors affecting PhD completion. Therefore, the study is proposed to explore how PhD scholars' personal factors affecting PhD completion in Pakistani universities.

### **Objective of the Study**

1. To explore the role of PhD scholars' personal characteristics in their PhD-studies completion

### **Literature Review**

Tinto believed that scholars' external commitments, such as employment, subsequently affect their goals and commitments in degree programs (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). Recent studies have also confirmed that employment is a crucial element that influences PhD completion. Several researchers have established a link between the employment of PhD students and PhD completion (Bekova, 2019; Sverdlike, 2018; Wollast, 2019). Employment is one of the most widely accepted reasons for PhD attrition.

A crucial element that influences the completion of a PhD is employment. Several researchers have demonstrated a link between PhD completion and the employment of PhD students (Bekova, 2019; Sverdlike, 2018; Wollast, 2019). Employment is now a widely accepted reason for such an attrition. Owing to a shortage of funding, some doctoral students are forced to work full- or part-time (Bekova & Dzharfarova, 2019). In her subsequent research, Bekova (2021) covered the connection between getting a job and finishing a PhD. Second, she discussed the relationship between the nature and features of a job and finishing a PhD. She asserted that having a job or scholarship on campus is favorably connected with earning a PhD. Additionally, it is thought that funding and jobs on campus increase student productivity and speed up thesis completion (Horta, Cattaneo, and Meoli, 2016; Haert et al., 2014; Motanya et al., 2023). He added that off-campus employment had a negative impact on Russian academics' ability to complete their PhDs. PhD students who work outside the university find balancing their workload and study challenging. (Jaksztat, Neugebauer, & Brandt, 2021).

The literature cited here is mostly Western, but also raises questions regarding the Pakistani context. One pertinent question is why PhD scholars in Pakistan require employment. Why is funding unavailable for Pakistani doctoral studies and how does the lack of funding prolong PhD completion? This warrants further exploration in Pakistani context.

Tinto believed that scholars' external commitments, such as familial obligation, subsequently affect their goals and commitments in degree programs (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). PhD



scholars are expected by their families to fulfill familial obligations and provide economic support due to their age and qualifications, leading to stress and responsibility.

Families can be a source of social and emotional capital. Social capital is resources from individual, family, and academic networks. Emotional capital is resources like love, support, and commitment from affective relations in families. Bourdieu (1977) and Reay (2000) discussed family support for PhD scholars. Social and emotional capital has helped them. Data suggests families provided scholars social, financial, psychological, and academic support.

Friends provide social and emotional capital. Social capital refers to resources, both actual and potential, gathered through individual, family, and academic networks. Emotional capital, a form of social capital, signifies emotionally valuable resources like love, support, and commitment developed through long-term affective relationships, especially within families. The PhD journey can be isolating and affect student wellbeing. Social support in various forms is crucial for psychological health (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2000; Mantai & Dowling).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study used Tinto's social integration model (1995), and Braxton's revised social integration model (2014) as a theoretical lens in this study. Both theoretical models explained persistence factors in undergraduate and doctoral education. They posited that personal attributes and students' academic and social integration directly affect their persistence and degree completion (Braxton, 2014; Tinto, 1995). They believed that completing or quitting a degree is a decision-making process and an outcome of several factors, i.e., pre-entry attributes, social and academic integration, quality of interaction with faculty/staff, and institutional commitment to students' welfare. This study inquiries about only one factor i.e., how personal factors can influence PhD studies and completion.

### **Methods and Procedures**

Twenty PhD scholars who had authored proposals, dissertations, or awaited degrees were recruited through purposive sampling and personal networks helped us in the data collection process. Using interview guide, in-depth interviews were held with PhD scholars from various academic backgrounds and genders at four universities-Quaid-I-Azam University Islamabad, International Islamic University Islamabad, The University of the Punjab Lahore, and Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. We used a constructivist approach to interviewing (Charmaz, 1995) as our priority was to draw out the experiences of the PhD scholars, allowing them to use individual accounts and understanding, perceptions of how they explain the issue under investigation. In order to ensure confidentiality of the participants, we used short words for their names representing the data. A topic guide was used based on concepts from the literature and piloting with two PhD scholars earlier. Data collected through audio-tap recorder were transcribed into meaningful text and visited many times to get sense of it. We then clubbed similar responses and coded the data. Emerging themes identified by constant comparative analysis were explored in subsequent interviews. Recall of the participants' accounts was made by probes and pointers to get more detail on how and why these factors affected their PhD over time. Our approach prioritized drawing out participants' experiences and personal accounts-factors affecting PhD-studies through an iterative and systematic method of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps approach was used for analysis. We used a thematic framework to explore interview data, inductively coding the data to allow codes and themes to emerge and develop from the data. We subjected codes to continuous refining and revision, grouping and agreeing on sub-themes and themes in the final stage. Peer debriefing was used throughout the research to test



emerging themes and embed credibility into the analytical process. All these processes led us to the generation and analysis of the following themes.

### **Data Analysis: Scholar's Experiences with PhD-Studies Completion**

The analysis in this article includes of three key themes illustrating how personal characteristics of PhD scholars influence their PhD-studies completion.

#### **Theme 01: Jobs Beyond the Academia: Challenge or Opportunity to PhD Completion**

The narratives of the participants revealed diverse views about the role of non-academic jobs in PhD completion. The analysis indicated that doing non-academic jobs influenced PhD studies of some of the participants while others took it as an opportunity supporting their PhD journey. Support from employers and colleagues was also beneficial for some participants while the non-supportive behavior of the employer was a headache for other participants pursuing their PhDs. A general view among many participants was that day-to-day expenses were covered from their jobs as PhD scholars were adult and couldn't rely on their families. One PhD scholar emphasized the importance of money and jobs. He stated that one can live without a PhD but cannot live without money. He explained that employment is a full-time work. This process requires time and energy. A PhD scholar discussed the difficulties while doing a job and a PhD simultaneously. He added:

*"employment is a full-time task. It requires devotion. PhD is also a full-time job. Employment affects PhD progress. Employed PhD scholars take longer to accomplish their PhDs, and such employees must take study leave. Otherwise, it is challenging to carry both simultaneously."* (LQ, 3rd year PhD scholar).

It is evident that dissatisfaction surrounds him if he is not doing well in his Ph.D. or job. In the case of employment, one is getting paid for, and he is not doing it well; it is dishonesty, too. A dissatisfied scholar cannot excel in his PhD studies. An employed scholar shared his inability to maintain his job with and PhD. He also shared his dissatisfaction while not doing good in his job or PhD.

*"I cannot maintain a balance between the two. I feel dissatisfied when I cannot do well with my PhD or job. At times, I skipped my PhD classes. While I am busy with my PhD research, my duties have suffered. Both get affected, and PhD has affected adversely"* (HR, 3rd year PhD Scholar).

There are challenges in balancing a job and PhD, with some scholars having to compromise one over the other. Scholars have suggested that continuing both can lead to suffering and delayed graduation. The proposed solution is to take study leaves if eligible, as it allows the job to remain intact while focusing on studies. Employed scholars take advantage of some organizations' study leave options, which can be granted with half or full pay.

Respondents classified jobs into four groups: academic/research, non-academic, government, and private. The nature of the job was found to determine its impact on PhD studies, with academic jobs having less impact. A PhD scholar was also a visiting faculty member at a university added.

*"I am engaged as a visiting faculty member at a university. I have a degree in rural development. I teach agricultural economics to students. I do not think my employment affects my Ph.D., but other things affect it."* (NSH, 6th year PhD scholar).

Participants noted that irrelevant jobs (other than academia) involving public dealing or clientage could negatively affect PhD studies. Administrative positions were particularly challenging to balance with PhD studies, while teaching and research-related jobs were seen as less disruptive to PhDs.



A PhD scholar in biotechnology was funded by his supervisor. He was also engaged as a research associate. He explained how this position helped him to stay focused on his PhD:

*"I am engaged as a research associate and doing a PhD in a funded project. This helped me to focus on my studies. I get a stipend to meeting my basic needs. I must visit the laboratory and work. I contribute to the project as well as work on my PhD"* (PR, a funded PhD scholar).

PhD supervisors agreed that job and research organization experience is beneficial for PhD scholars. They said those with practical experience can adjust to their PhD studies better, combining theory and practice. It is advantageous for those pursuing academic and R&D careers, and they understand the importance of the PhD. Scholars have discussed the ways in which their colleagues and employers aided and supported them, including helping them obtain no-objection certificates (NOC). An employed scholar added.

*"I was lucky enough to receive support from my colleagues and employer. My head cooperated with the NOC. He also allowed me for classes and granted me leave whenever required"* (AL, government employee & 5th year PhD scholar).

A scholar added that my employer encouraged me, relaxed my duty, and granted me leave. He added. *"I did not work in academia, but my colleagues were very cooperative. My head supported me in my PhD. He has encouraged and motivated me. He granted me leave whenever I asked for it. He also provided relaxation in duty timing."* (GHR, private employee & 3rd year PhD scholar).

Scholars have identified two types of support provided by colleagues. One is indirect and non-academic support. The second type is direct and academic support. Indirect and non-academic factors include financial and logistical support. Similarly, burden-sharing can also be a form of non-academic support. Academic and research support could be in the form of sharing knowledge, sharing techniques, helping with data analysis, and reviewing the thesis.

*"Hmm, I think colleagues can provide indirect support in PhD research like they can provide you with financial backing. They can provide logistics support through vehicles. They can also share computing-/compilation-related work. So, I think they can support scholars in this way."* (AL, private employee & 5th year PhD scholar).

The analysis in this article affirms Tinto's assertion that employment affects PhD studies. However, it further classifies jobs into academic, non-academic, private, and government employment. It can be concluded that PhD scholars doing non-academic jobs and private sector employment suffered more than others did. Moreover, PhD scholars funded by supervisors do better in their PhD studies as they spend more time on their research with their supervisors. This calls for more financial support to PhD scholars so they can focus on their studies and to do well.

## **Theme 02: PhD Journey and Family Life: Challenge or Opportunity for PhD-Studies Completion**

Tinto argued that PhD scholars' other commitments, such as familial obligation, affect their goals and commitments in degree programs (Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 2006). PhD scholars are expected by their families to fulfill familial obligations and provide economic support due to their age and qualifications, leading to stress and responsibility. A scholar added.

*"Due to age and status factors at the PhD level, families expect them to get a job and earn money. At this stage, PhD scholars were under pressure. This is a critical stage and requires management skills from scholars."*





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*Keeping in view this context, familial responsibilities can affect PhD progression.” (DW, 5th year PhD scholar).*

A PhD sociology scholar used “significant others” for family. Significant others are individuals who profoundly influence each other (Andersen & Chen, 2001). In this context, he meant that one must overlook familial responsibility. In local Pakistani culture, in addition to other responsibilities, participation in Gham (death mourning) and Khadi (marriage ceremonies) is essential. One must participate because this is socially desirable. Participation in social gatherings requires time, money, and logistics. PhD scholars, as family members, are also expected to participate, utilizing scholars’ energy and time. As explained by a scholar.

*“Sociologically speaking, we use the term “significant others” for family. The family is one of the most important institutions. Moreover, scholars sometimes have familial responsibilities. Sometimes one must fulfill family obligations or attend “Ghum Khadi (marriage and deaths).” (LQ, 3rd year sociology PhD scholar).*

Similarly, other domestic responsibilities can also hinder PhD progress. One scholar said that I had to supervise the construction work of our house. I could not pay attention to PhD-related activities during this period and missed my deadlines. This implies that domestic chores can negatively affect PhDs.

*“The familial responsibilities affect the timely completion of the Ph.D. I suffer because of my domestic duties. I was engaged in home construction and marriage preparation along with PhD studies. Due to a lack of proper management, I could not submit the proposal quickly and suffered a lot” (LQ, 3rd year PhD scholar).*

The scholar's story illustrates the negative impact of domestic activities on Ph. D, but this was not very intense. Another PhD scholar discussed how a family member's illness or death could harm their PhD. The scholar had to quit his PhD program. It is pertinent to mention that this is a particular case in this research.

*“Earlier, I was enrolled in a PhD but had to quit my PhD due to my kids. I had twins and some genetic diseases. Moreover, my father died, and I had to shoulder the responsibilities of my family. I was compelled to leave my Ph.D.” (GHR, 3rd year PhD scholar).*

Family members expect PhD scholars to spend time with other members. Family members have both emotional and psychological bonds. They spent time exchanging views and socializing to cement family cohesion. A scholar with a role set must compartmentalize; otherwise, his PhD can be affected.

*“Yes, Ph. D can be affected by the familial responsibilities of PhD scholars because the scholar must also fulfill his familial obligations. Therefore, scholars must perform domestic tasks. They must also give time to their family members. Familial responsibilities can prolong the duration of a PhD in such a case” (PRZ, 5<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar).*

A married female scholar shared that it was more challenging to be a married female scholar. In addition to their husbands, in-laws are also stakeholders. In Pakistani society, females also need in-law approval to pursue a PhD. In this study, the number of female scholars was lower than that of male scholars. I could not find official data, but based on my observations, I can say that the number of female scholars was lower than that of male scholars. A female must



fulfill her domestic and familial responsibilities. The femininity and dependence on men make PhDs more challenging for married female scholars.

*“The support for PhD scholars varies between families, and some may face domestic issues, especially married women who must convince their in-laws and husbands. They may also require financial and logistic support, and scholars must learn to deal with these challenges.”* (IQR, 4<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar).

The PhD program presents multiple challenges for students responsible for both academic and research work. Family issues can further complicate such difficulties. One PhD scholar mentioned a classmate who could not meet both ends, and ultimately quit his PhD. She explained:

*“I have observed that married PhD scholars have more difficulty than unmarried Scholars. Married scholars had more burdens and responsibilities and could not go along with them. My one classmate quit her studies as she could not manage time”* (NSR, 6<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar).

Families can be a source of social and emotional capital. Social capital is resources from individual, family, and academic networks. Emotional capital is resources like love, support, and commitment from affective relations in families. Bourdieu (1977) and Reay (2000) discussed family support for PhD scholars. Social and emotional capital has helped them. Data suggests families provided scholars social, financial, psychological, and academic support.

Having a supportive spouse could have been a blessing during my PhD. Two of my participants expressed their gratitude to their spouses. They added that we needed to separate their roles as parents from those of PhD scholars. We can do so with the help of supportive and cooperative spouses. A male PhD scholar added.

*“I am thankful to my wife. My wife also helped me. She took care of the children and did not demand much from me. She managed everything in my absence. I did not worry about my children when I was away from home.”* (PRZ, 5<sup>th</sup> PhD scholar). Likewise, a married female scholar explained how her supportive husband enabled her to focus on research. In times of need, the father can also perform the duties of the mother. She shared duties performed by her husband.

*“The proposal submission deadline was approaching and had to look after my two children. My husband performed domestic chores and took care of the children. I was fortunate enough to meet my deadline.”* (IQR, 4<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar). Having siblings who are also pursuing or having completed a PhD can benefit doctoral students. These siblings can offer guidance and support as well as knowledge and techniques, making the PhD journey easier and more efficient. Two of my participants acknowledged the academic support they received from their siblings. A PhD scholar added.

*“My elder brothers, both possess Ph. D., also helped me academically. My brother has assisted me in shaping my research. He also provided useful suggestions for methodology. He also advised on how to develop an argument from literature.”* (ELM, 5<sup>th</sup> PhD scholar). In Pakistan, male members are responsible for earning. Females are usually not required to do jobs; however, if they do a job, they belong to them. An exciting phenomenon was observed in the data. A male scholar said that his wife supported his studies. This is a direct support for a scholar in the continuation of his degree.



*“My wife has a lucrative job. She earns enough money to live with dignity. She also pays my fee. I am unable to pay my fees. She provides financial and psychological support. Though in our society, it is not desirable, but it is true.”* (Pervez, married PhD scholar)

Other participants also acknowledged the financial assistance from their fathers or brothers. They accepted that they could not continue my PhD without the financial assistance of their families. This indicates that family is a support system for Pakistani scholars.

In addition to financial support, the participants shared emotional and psychological support. Emotional support was as important as financial and social support. PhD scholars can experience frustration and depression due to failure and undesirable progression in their studies. A scholar in his 6th year of PhD had suicidal thoughts but was supported by his wife.

*“I felt suicidal due to my frustration, but my wife's familial and psychological support kept me safe. Despite wanting to quit my Ph.D. several times, she prevented me from doing so”* (NSR, 6<sup>th</sup> PhD scholar). The PhD journey can be challenging and isolating, and positive affirmation, encouragement, and motivation can be crucial in helping scholars persevere. Family members can be valuable sources of emotional and psychological support. This highlights the need for increased psychological support from PhD scholars and family members to assess and support their mental health. Similarly, supervisors and universities also need to strive to provide adequate students support service.

### **Theme 03: Peer Support as a Blessing in PhD-Studies Completion**

Friends provide social and emotional capital. Social capital refers to resources, both actual and potential, gathered through individual, family, and academic networks. Emotional capital, a form of social capital, signifies emotionally valuable resources like love, support, and commitment developed through long-term affective relationships, especially within families. The PhD journey can be isolating and affect student wellbeing. Social support in various forms is crucial for psychological health (Bourdieu, 1977; Reay, 2000; Mantai & Dowling).

PhD scholars were asked to share their accounts of the support received from friends. A PhD scholar shared his opinions on social support from friends. He stated that only those who understood PhD could be helpful and mentioned how his PhD friends assisted him in proposal development and thesis writing.

*“My friends had done Ph. Ds in various disciplines, and I used to take guidance from them. They checked my proposal and thesis and provided feedback. They also shared tips about different steps in the research process.”* (DWD, 5<sup>th</sup> PhD scholar). Another scholar expressed a similar view. He acknowledged the support received from his friends. He provided due credit and highlighted the importance of peer learning for survival in PhD.

*“Lateef Ullah's support was crucial for completing my PhD; his motivation and teachings were invaluable. Peer learning is essential as we learn from each other and compensate for each other's weaknesses while motivating each other”* (NSR, 6<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar).

Besides academic support, emotional support is also necessary to keep going in my PhD scholars to get disheartened when things do not go in the right direction. Emotional support is necessary to boost morale. A scholar narrated how support from his friends kept him going, despite the untoward situation.

*“I was lucky to have supportive friends during a challenging time. My synopsis was approved by the department in 2016, but institutional politics and obstacles delayed ASRB approval for four years. My PhD classmates*





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*kept me motivated and my friends offered counseling” (NSR, 6<sup>th</sup> year PhD scholar).*

Peers and cohorts can play a significant role in extending the various forms of support to PhD scholars. This can be done both informally and formally. Universities can also devise strategies to enhance peer-to-peer support. Peer-to-peer support can be used for PhD success.

### **Conclusion**

The paper unpacked how personal characteristics of PhD scholars have influenced their PhD-studies completion. It concluded that non-academic or jobs beyond the academia have created challenges for some PhD scholars completing PhD-studies while the same remained an opportunity for others as they were financially supported by their jobs during their PhD-studies. As a challenge, jobs beyond the academia influenced time management and research work of PhD scholars. They have to hardly manage time for doing the tasks on plat timely. However, some other PhD scholars were happy with their non-academic jobs during their PhD as they have timely submitted their semester dues and managed their other expenses, such as food, clothes, stationary etc. The findings in this paper further imply that living family life was a challenge for PhD scholars and at the same time it supported others during completion of their PhD-studies. Family life was a challenge for some scholars as they were unable to furnish tasks timely because of many things to do in the family, such as serving in marriage or death ceremonies, serving parents and other members of the family when they were unwell. However, family life worked as strong support for some PhD scholars. They were supported their families socially, emotionally, and financially when needed during their PhD journey. Taking family as an opportunity, they did well in this journey and completed their PhD-studies timely. Conclusion of third theme in the analysis of this study appeared a bit different where most of the respondents were satisfied of peer support and they declared it as a blessing during PhD-studies. A common view among the respondents were that they got motivation from peer support when they were distressed in the PhD journey. Peer’s circle supported PhD scholars emotionally and psychologically, especially at the time when they were going through critical stages in the PhD-studies. Future studies can be conducted to explore the institutional and structural challenges to PhD-studies completion.

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