Factors Contributing to the Approval of Research Proposals, Thesis Submission Delays, and Evaluation Issues at the PhD Level in Pakistani Universities

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Abstract: Several causes can contribute to delayed PhD graduation in Pakistani universities. One such aspect could be problems and procedural delays with the approval of research proposals, thesis submissions, and evaluation. This study will look into PhD scholars' topic approval timelines, concerns with their thesis submission process, and issues in thesis review. The study was done at four Pakistani universities, with 200 PhD scholars participating. A survey method was used, with data obtained using an online questionnaire. The key findings are that research proposals are approved by three forums. The first one is the board of studies. The second one is the board of faculty, and the third one is the board of advanced studies and research. The respondents reported that it took up to two semesters to get their research proposal or topic approved. Moreover, respondents also reported that there were fewer issues during the thesis submission process. Similarly, various issues were faced during foreign thesis evaluation, as it also took time. The findings of the study suggest that procedural delays need to be addressed and efforts should be made by university administration to facilitate PhD scholars in timely processing and evaluation of theses to facilitate timely attainment of PhD.

Keywords: PhD, Research proposal, Topic approval, Thesis submission, Thesis evaluation, Statutory bodies

1. Introduction

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest academic degree. PhD is three years or four-years program in different countries at but in Pakistan it is mostly three years program. Despite being a three-years program, it is observed that many of the scholars fail to complete it with in stipulated time. The Higher education commission (HEC) website has data about the number of PhDs produced but it lacks information about average graduation time of PhDs. There could several reasons for delayed PhD completion. There may be some issues related to students (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019: Mushtaq & Khan, 2012) , supervisory relations (Ali, Ullah, & Sanauddin, 2019; Qurashi & Vazir, 2016; Hina Batool, Ali, & Safdar, 2021) or universities' research culture and infrastructure. This study focuses on procedural delays in topic approval, thesis submission and thesis evaluation. Recent studies revealed that there several issues that obstruct timely PhD completion. There are issues in PhD topic approval process as it too bureaucratic and consumes plenty of time (Salim,2018: Sarwar, Shah & Akram: 2018; Shaikh,2015; Saleem & Mehmood,2017; Saleem & Mehmood,2018). Students after completion of coursework and comprehensive exam

are supposed to present their topic at various statutory forums in universities. Different universities have different names for such forums and the timeline also varies across universities. A brief overview of statutory forums is given below.

1.1 Board of Studies
Board of studies (BoS)is the first forum where PhD scholars present their research proposals. It is a department level forum comprising of faculty members of the same academic department, faculty members from same faculty and subject experts from other universities. BoS is chaired by concerned department Chairperson. BoS accepts or rejects PhD research proposals. Research proposals accepted by BoS are forwarded to Board of Faculty for further process.

1.2 Board of Faculty
Board of Faculty (BoF) is the second faculty level forum where PhD scholars present their research work. The formation of Board of Faculty varies across universities however it comprises of members from various academic departments within the same faculty (e.g. Faculty of social sciences, Faculty of life sciences). BoF is chaired by Dean of concerned faculty. BoF reviews research proposals approved by BoS and may accept or reject it. It may refer the research proposals back to BoS in case of issues in research proposals. Research proposals accepted by BoF are forwarded Board of Advanced Studies and Research.

1.3 Board of Advanced Studies and Research
Board of Advanced Studies and Research (BASR) is apex university level forum which reviews and approves PhD research proposals. This forum is also called as Advanced Studies and Research Board in some universities. The formation of BSRR varies across but usually comprises vice chancellor/ president of universities, Deans of faculties, senior faculty members from academic departments. BASR grants final approval of PhD research proposals and after this approval PhD scholars can start their research formally.
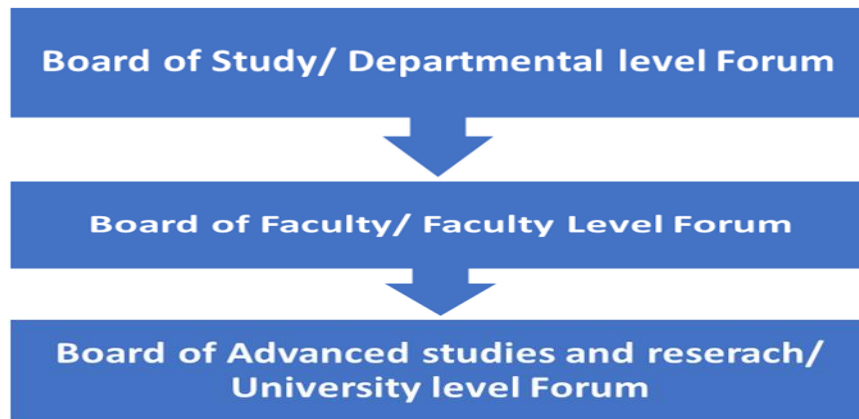
The process seems linear, however there are various issues that prolong PhD duration. After completing theses, PhD scholars submit thesis to universities for evaluation. This process is also not a smooth ride. Rather PhD scholars face various challenges during these stages. Doctoral candidates in Pakistani universities often face delays in the processing of their dissertations, leading to anxiety, impatience, and disappointment. These delays can occur during and after the submission of the dissertation. The process of submitting dissertations and waiting for an extended period can be frustrating for doctoral candidates. They may experience unnecessary delays in receiving dissertation review reports, caused by procedural obstacles and noncooperation from department faculty and administration. These delays can have negative consequences for doctoral candidates, including the potential termination of their studies, wastage of time, money, resources, and guidance, and a negative impact on their well-being (Saleem & Mehmood,2018: Waheed,2021).

1.4 Objectives of the study

1. To document PhD topic approval timeline in universities
2. To assess PhD students' satisfaction regarding statutory bodies' feedback on PhD synopsis
3. To pinpoint issues in thesis submission and evaluation process

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have examined the challenges that PhD scholars encounter in Pakistani universities. For instance, Shams (2020) investigated the challenges that PhD scholars face during the process of topic approval, thesis submission, and evaluation. The study employed a qualitative research design and interviewed 50 PhD scholars from various universities in Pakistan. The study revealed that PhD scholars face several challenges, including a lack of research knowledge, financial constraints, inadequate facilities, and weak communication between supervisors and students. Similarly, Sarwar, Shah, and Akram (2018) reported that there are procedural delays within the institutions, non-alignment of the functioning of different administrative bodies within the institution, and irrelevant rules and regulations in the thesis submission process, and overall poor research culture within the institution. Moreover, Haider and Mehmood (2007) highlighted the low esteem for indigenous PhD degrees and the absence of financial assistance as significant barriers that PhD scholars face. The study reviewed theses from various universities in Pakistan and got data through personal communications. The authors found that most of the respondents believed that indigenous PhD degrees were not valued as much as foreign PhD degrees. Furthermore, most of the respondents reported that they faced financial difficulties during their PhD studies.

Furthermore, Waheed (2021) explored the experiences of PhD scholars in Pakistani universities. The study employed a qualitative research design and interviewed 09 PhD scholars from various universities in Pakistan. The study found that doctoral candidates experience challenges such as prolonged delays in the evaluation process, pressure for paper publication, and lack of administrative support after thesis submission. Furthermore, concerns have been raised regarding the ethical review of research proposals in Pakistani universities. Salim (2018) noted that many institutions lack proper ethical boards and representation of society, raising questions about the integrity of research conducted in these institutions. The study investigated the ethical review process of research proposals in Pakistani universities and found that 60% of the universities did not have a proper ethical review board. Moreover, 70% of the respondents believed that the ethical review process was inadequate. The synthesis of findings of these studies suggests that there is an urgent need for further research and necessary reforms in the doctoral education system in Pakistan. The issues identified by Shams (2020), Haider (2007), Waheed (2021), and Salim (2018) highlight the need for improved infrastructure, better communication between supervisors and students, and enhanced financial support for PhD scholars. Moreover, the findings emphasize the importance of establishing robust ethical review processes to ensure that research conducted in Pakistani universities meets the highest standards of integrity.

3. Research Methodology
This section provides an overview of methods and procedure used in this study.

3.1 Study Settings
The study was conducted in four universities of two provinces and capital territory of Pakistan. International Islamic university Islamabad and Quaid e Azam university were selected from capital territory Islamabad. University of Punjab was selected from Punjab province. Abdul Wali Khan University was selected from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The purpose of choosing universities across diverse geographic locations was to gauge differences in academic and research culture. Moreover, efforts were made to obtain representative data for different provinces and the capital territory of Pakistan.

PhD Scholars were recruited as per selection criteria as only those enrolled students who had completed their coursework and were currently developing a proposal, drafting their theses, or awaiting defense/degree. These scholars were better positioned to provide information on the variables under study.
Specifically, the following categories of respondents were contacted:

A. Enrollee
a) Defended thesis but awaiting degree
b) Submitted thesis but awaiting defense
c) Proposal approved from ASRB but not done with thesis yet.
d) Developing proposal but not approved by ASRB yet

3.2 Survey Method

A survey is a method for collecting information from a sample to describe a larger population (Groves et al., 2011). Surveys are a common quantitative research tool, and a questionnaire is the instrument that participants complete and return (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I chose an online survey due to the prevalence of information and communication technology, as well as Internet access. This was especially relevant for this study, as PhD scholars in different universities use the Internet regularly and have digital literacy to complete the online survey. An online survey is a non-intrusive way to collect feedback, as respondents can answer questions in a relaxed and convenient setting. Therefore, an online survey was conducted during the quantitative phase. In addition, a large sample size for physical or mailed questionnaires would require many resources. The online questionnaire was cost effective. (Self-funded PhD).

3.3 Sample Size

They all met selection criteria as only those enrolled students who had completed their coursework and were currently developing a proposal, drafting their theses, or awaiting defense/degree were contacted, and they consented to take part in the study.

Based on the enrollment data provided by the universities, the total enrollment was 4085 which was the total population (N). The sample size (n) was calculated using the Sekaran table (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). According to the Sekaran table for a population of 4085, the sample size was 357. The proportionate allocation method was used to calculate the sample size for each university. Students from every faculty were contacted, i.e., faculty of basic and applied sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, and management sciences.

Table 1: Enrollment data of universities (Till fall 2020-21)

Name of university	No. of PhD students	Sample
AWKUM	350	31
University of Punjab	2098	184
IIUI	530	46
QAU	1107	96
Total	4085	357

3.4 Tool of data Collection

A new questionnaire was developed literature review. The questionnaire consisted of various sections keeping in view research objectives.

3.4.1   Socio- Demographic Information

The first section was about background characteristics, such as age, gender, discipline, employment, coursework CGPA, and number of years after enrollment.

3.4.2   Research Journey from Supervisor Allotment to Thesis Defense

The second section comprised questions related to the research journey from supervisor allotment to research topic

approval. The purpose of this section was to document issues and delays in the topic approval procedures at universities.

3.4.3   Issues in thesis submission and evaluation

The third section asked questions regarding issues related to thesis submissions and evaluations. This section gathered information about issues faced by students during thesis submission and thesis evaluation.

3.5 Data Collection

The questionnaire was created using Google forms. The link to questionnaire was shared with fifty respondents from Abdul Wali Khan University for pre-testing of the tool. The respondents were approached through personal contact and social networks. Participants completed an online survey. Needful changes were made to the questionnaire after pre-testing. For the main study, the Google Form link was distributed to potential respondents via text messages, emails, WhatsApp groups, and Facebook. In the second phase, 357 respondents from four universities were contacted; however, 200 respondents completed the questionnaire. The response rate was 58.82. The data were collected between December 2022 and March 2023. The socio-demographic attributes of all respondents are summarized in results section.

3.6 Data Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics and scoring methods were used to analyze the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to review and express the data collected from the respondents (Aron et al., 2005). Participants' demographic characteristics, issues with topic approval, and thesis evaluation were analyzed using frequency and percentage.

4. Findings of the study
4.1 Ph.D. Scholars' Socio-Demographic Information

Out of total 200 respondents, a majority of the respondents (68.5%) were male PhD scholars . The age-wise distribution shows that less than half (35.5%) were aged between 31 to 35 years. The majority of the respondents (70.5%) were married scholars. The majority of the respondents (73%) were employed. Less than half of the respondents (35%) participated from AWKUM. The faculty-wise distribution shows that less than half (35.5%) were enrolled in the social sciences and management sciences faculty. A little less than half (46%) were studying in the 5th year of their study program. In addition, the average GPA of students during coursework was 3.33.

Table 2: PhD scholars' socio-demographic information (n=200)

Variable	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender of the respondent		
Male	137	68.5
Female	63	31.5
Age of respondents		
25-30	27	13.5
31-35	71	35.5
36-40	50	25
41-45 and above	42	21
Marital status		
Married	141	70.5
Unmarried	59	29.5
Employment status		
Employed	146	73.0
Unemployed	54	27.0
Name of University		

AWKUM	70	35
IIUI	63	31.5
QAU	31	15.5
Up	23	11.5
Others	13	6.5
Faculty/ Subject		
Social sciences and management sciences	71	35.5
Life sciences	47	23.5
Physical and chemical sciences	40	20
Arts and humanities	42	21
Number of years after enrollment		
2	39	19.5
3	24	12
4	45	22.5
5 and more than 5	92	46
Coursework CGPA (Mean)	3.33	

4.2 Research Journey from supervisor allotment to topic approval

Out of 200, little more than half of the respondents (52%) were allotted supervisors within three months after their comprehensive exam. The majority of the respondents (68%) were allotted supervisors with their consent. More than half of the respondents (54.5%) affirmed that their supervisor specialized in their area of interest. More than half of the respondents (52.5%) affirmed that PhD topic was decided with mutual understanding of the scholar and supervisor. The majority of the respondents (81%) affirmed that they received thorough feedback on their research proposals before submission to university fora. A little more than half (51.5%) submitted their research proposals between one to three months after coursework. A little less than half (41.5%) appeared in BoS between one to three months after coursework. The majority of the respondents (84%) deemed feedback from BoS as satisfactory. The majority of the respondents (82.5) got their research proposals approved with minor corrections. The majority of the respondents (73%) submitted their research proposals within two months after approval by BoS. More than half (63%) appeared in BoF within two months after BoS. The majority of the respondents (72.5%) deemed feedback by BoF as satisfactory. The majority of the respondents (70.5%) submitted their research proposal within two months after BoF. The majority of the respondents (72.5%) deemed feedback by ASRB as satisfactory. More than half of the respondents (69%) got their research proposals approved with minor changes by ASRB. More than half of the respondents (59%) affirmed that BoS processed their research proposals in a timely manner. A little more than half of the respondents (51.5%) negated that BoF processed their research proposals in a timely manner. Similarly, A little more than half of the respondents (52.5%) negated that ASRB processed their research proposals in timely manner. In addition, more than half of the respondents (36%) took a semester to get their research proposals approved by university fora.

Table 3: Research journey from supervisor allotment to Topic approval (n=200)

Information	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Time taken between coursework/ comprehensive exam to the supervisor allotment (in months)		
1 to 3	104	52

4 to 6	73	36.5
6 to 9 and more	23	11.5
Researcher's Consent in the allocation of Supervisor		
Yes	136	68
No	64	32
Supervisor's area of specialization matches your area of interest		
Yes	109	54.5
No	91	45.5
Procedure of the selection of your PhD topic		
Topic was given by supervisor.	46	23.0
Topic decided with mutual discussion/understanding.	105	52.5
I choose the topic	49	24.5
Received thorough feedback from the supervisor on your synopsis before submission for approval		
Yes	163	81.5
No	37	18.5
Time taken to submit a proposal for the Board of Studies (BoS) / Departmental forum after coursework (in months)		
1 to 3	103	51.5
4 to 6	63	31.5
6 to 9	34	17
Time taken to appear in the Board of Studies (BoS) / or equivalent forum after coursework (in months)		
1 to 3	83	41.5
4 to 6	55	27.5
6 to 9	62	31
Satisfaction from the feedback received from BOS or Department Board		
Satisfactory	168	84.0
Non-Satisfactory	32	16.0
Status of the synopsis after appearing in the BoS/Departmental Board		
Recommended without revision	25	12.5
Recommended with minor revision	165	82.5
Not recommended	10	5.0
Time taken to submit a revised proposal in BOF or an equivalent Forum after BoS approval (in months)		
1 to 2	146	73
3 to 4	43	21.5
More than 4	11	5.5
Time taken to appear in BOF or an equivalent Forum after BoS approval (in months)		
1 to 2	126	63
3 to 4	54	27
More than 4	20	10
Satisfaction about the feedback received from BOF or an equivalent Forum		
Satisfactory	145	72.5
Non-Satisfactory	55	27.5

How much time was taken to submit the proposal for ASRB/BASR after BoF approval (in months)		
1 to 2	141	70.5
3 to 4	46	23
More than 4	13	6.5
Satisfaction from the feedback received from ASRB/BASR?		
Satisfactory	145	72.5
Non-Satisfactory	55	27.5
Status of the synopsis after appearing in the ASRB/BASR		
Recommended without revision	56	28.0
Recommended with minor revision	138	69.0
Not recommended	6	3.0
BOS/ Departmental forum processes the case in a timely manner		
Yes	118	59.0
No	82	41.0
BoF process the case in a timely manner		
Yes	97	48.5
No	103	51.5
ASRB/BASR process the case in a timely manner		
Yes	95	47.5
No	105	52.5
Time (semester) taken from supervisor allocation to topic approval by ASRB/BASR		
One semester	72	36
Two semesters	67	33.5
Three semesters and more than three semesters	61	30.5

4.3 Issues in thesis submission and evaluation

Out of 110, little more than half of the respondents (55.46 %) completed their theses within one year after topic approval by ASRB. A little more than half of the respondents (60.90%) affirmed that the thesis submission process was easy and quick. A little more than half of the respondents (67.28%) affirmed that the foreign reviewers panel was based on the specialization of the thesis. A little more than half of the respondents (64.55%) affirmed that the reviewer panel was updated at the thesis submission time. A little more than half of the respondents (56.36%) negated that exam section processed thesis evaluation timely. Less than half of the respondents (33.64%) stated that foreign examiners evaluated their theses in two to three months. A little more than half of the respondents (59.09%) got their local theses evaluation in three to four months. A little more than half of the respondents (63.64%) affirmed that their final theses defense was arranged within two months after the thesis evaluation. A little more than half of the respondents (53.63%) affirmed that it took them three to five months from thesis submission to public defense.

Table 4: Issues in thesis submission and evaluation (n=110)

Information	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Time taken to complete the thesis work after BASR/ASRB Approval		
Within one year	61	55.46
Within two years	33	30

Three or more than three years	16	14.54
Thesis submission process was easy and quick		
Yes	67	60.90
No	43	39.10
The reviewers' panel was constituted based on the specialization of the thesis		
Yes	74	67.28
No	36	32.72
Reviewer's panel was updated at thesis submission time		
Yes	71	64.55
No	39	35.45
The Exam/ Academic section process the thesis evaluation timely?		
Yes	48	43.64
No	62	56.36
Time taken during the foreign thesis evaluation (in months)		
1 to 3	34	30.90
3 to 4	37	33.64
4 to 5	25	22.73
5 or more	14	12.73
Time taken during the local thesis evaluation (in months)		
1 to 2	65	59.09
2 to 3	31	28.19
3 to 4	7	6.36
4 to 5 and more	7	6.36
The public defense was arranged within (months)		
1 to 2	70	63.64
2 to 3	32	29.09
3 to 4 or more	8	7.27
The total time taken from thesis submission to public defense '(in months)?		
1 to 3	34	30.92
3 to 5	59	53.63
5 to 6 or more	1 7	15.45

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study reported the timelines of PhD topic approval, issues related to thesis submission process and thesis evaluation. It is concluded that that topic approval is stepwise, bureaucratic and time consuming. The findings reported that some scholars had to wait up to two semesters to get their topic approved and scholars had reservations on the time taken by BASR. Overall satisfaction is observed regarding the input/ feedback by statutory bodies on research proposals. Thesis submission process was not problematic however issues were reported reading delays in foreign thesis evaluation. Scholars reported that foreign thesis evaluation took up to four months. However, the local thesis evaluation was done swiftly. Based on findings, it is suggested that the process of research proposal approval may be decentralized to academic department and the time span should be reduced to a maximum of two to three months. University administration should make thesis submission easier for PhD students. Moreover, universities should make strategies for a timely foreign thesis evaluation or devise alternative practices in lieu of foreign thesis evaluation. Theses recommendation may help addressing delays and may help in timely PhD completion in Pakistani universities.

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