



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Students Regarding Doctoral Dissertation Writing in Iraq

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore and analyze the lived experiences of students concerning doctoral dissertation writing in Iraq. The research adopted a qualitative methodology. The statistical population in the first stage consisted of doctoral students and graduates in the field of geography in Iraq, while in the second stage, it included higher education experts such as managers, experts, and faculty members. The sample size for the first stage was determined through criterion-based purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in 10 participants. In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select 12 participants. Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews in the first stage and the Delphi method in the second stage. Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's seven-step method in the first stage and content analysis with Maxqda 2020 software in the second stage. Based on the findings, the lived experiences of doctoral geography students in Iraq were categorized into four dimensions (organizational structure, student-related factors, educational and research factors, and information and communication technology), 12 main components, 34 sub-components, and 157 concepts.

Keywords: *lived experiences, doctoral dissertation, doctoral students, Iraq.*

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1. Introduction

Today, research has become a significant aspect of human activity, fostering the growth and expansion of human knowledge and ultimately contributing to the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge and scholarship. Societal progress is achieved through research. Moreover, research assists in finding solutions to problems and resolving conflicts [1]. In universities, besides institutions and faculty members, students serve as the primary pillars, executors, and driving forces of research. Managing thesis projects in higher education is one of the strategies to address the challenges of thesis writing [2].

The quantitative growth of graduate education has increased significantly in recent years, necessitating a focus on qualitative aspects by policymakers and decision-makers in the higher education system. Among these, the challenges of dissertation writing, especially at the doctoral level, remain critical issues in specialized graduate programs. These challenges can be so severe that students either fail to complete their programs or struggle for years to finalize their dissertations. A unique feature of higher education and graduate programs is the dual emphasis on teaching and research, with the dissertation as the hallmark of the research aspect. Dissertations influence students' self-assessment of their intellectual abilities, practical and clinical skills, as well as their level of scientific and logical maturity [3-6].

In most universities, the graduation project serves as the final stage for students to graduate and enhance their professional opportunities. It is not uncommon for students to face significant difficulties with their dissertations, resulting in problems such as failure to graduate, poorly completed projects, and other similar issues. These outcomes are detrimental not only to the student or the university but also to society as a whole. The added significance of graduate education lies in its dual focus on teaching and research, making it a critical source of knowledge production [7]. However, dissertation writing in practice presents numerous problems and complexities for students, creating diverse challenges.

Dissertations and theses test and apply students' abilities and skills, including specialized knowledge, research competencies, analytical capabilities, and writing skills. Furthermore, the thesis-writing process offers a comprehensive assessment of the impact of education throughout the research endeavor. A doctoral dissertation is a product supported by universities (faculty, students, administrators, and staff) and consumed by society

(academia, civil society, and the business market). All processes necessary for producing a doctoral dissertation, whether part of primary or supportive operations, are interconnected like links in a chain. The strength of this chain is determined by its weakest link, meaning that weaknesses in any part of the ongoing dissertation-writing process can waste resources in other parts of the chain [8].

Zolghadr et al. (2022) found that students encounter the most significant challenges during the "data collection and analysis" phase, followed by "developing research methodology." Additionally, doctoral students face more difficulties than master's students regarding "novelty of the topic and lack of prior research." [9]. Asghari (2021), in a phenomenological study on the lived experiences of Iranian students as international students, identified the following experiences: increased academic competence, cultural competence, general skills, and improved job prospects (as pull factors), alongside cultural challenges such as discrimination and inequality (as push factors). Consequently, university planners must understand that the success of international mobility programs is only realized when students return. This goal can be achieved by enhancing pull factors and eliminating push factors by the home country, Iran [8]. Zabihi-fard et al. (2021) extracted 210 initial conceptual codes, which were later reduced to 172 after further analysis. Ultimately, three main categories of challenges were identified: administrative, educational-research, and student-related challenges [10]. Safaei (2019) examined supervisory styles of faculty advisors in Iran, identifying four main styles: 1. Commander-Soldier, 2. Facilitator-Networker, 3. Laissez-Faire, and 4. Exploitative. These findings highlight the critical role of supervisory styles in the dissertation-writing process [11]. Zarei et al. (2018) identified seven main themes related to students' problems during the thesis and dissertation process: 1. Individual or student-related issues, 2. Faculty-related issues, 3. Societal-level issues, 4. Bureaucratic challenges, 5. Topic selection problems, 6. Financial issues, and 7. Implementation challenges [12]. Rafi and Moghees (2023) identified challenges for doctoral students related to writing mechanics, developing coherent arguments, and structural organization. They recommended strategies such as iterative rewriting, using formal language, and crafting transitional sentences to improve writing quality [13]. Lestari (2020) emphasized the importance of enhancing English language skills, time management, extensive reading, and avoiding plagiarism in her study on undergraduate students. These findings reveal that even at the undergraduate level, students

face similar challenges [14]. Atia et al. (2020) studied medical students in Libya, identifying lack of awareness, inadequate faculty support, and time constraints as primary obstacles to research projects. These findings underscore the need for proper training and support [15]. Ciampa and Wolfe (2019), examining doctoral students' perspectives, stressed the importance of understanding students' needs during the dissertation-writing process and proposed practical strategies to address these needs [16]. García-Castillo (2019) identified multiple factors influencing dissertation writing challenges, including personal issues, the quality of student-supervisor relationships, and the research environment. She emphasized the importance of training and mentorship [17]. Matin and Khan (2017), in Bangladesh, identified problems such as lack of knowledge and experience, time limitations, insufficient financial support, and poor communication with supervisors. They emphasized the role of educational institutions in providing the necessary resources and frameworks [18].

The diversity of geography fields, including climatology, physical geography, geomorphology, rural and urban geography, tourism, political geography, and geopolitics, highlights the importance of this discipline. The establishment of new interdisciplinary and applied fields, revision of existing specializations, systematic development, and regulation of geography fields and applied research in this domain are necessary. Simultaneously, addressing challenges such as the decline in undergraduate geography enrollments due to the impracticality of some specializations, the diversity of specializations at the master's level, organizing doctoral specializations, introducing new specializations by universities, revising course syllabi, and balancing applied and theoretical sciences in geography could enhance the discipline's utility and capacity.

For these reasons, research addressing dissertation-writing challenges in geography could be a significant step toward solving the field's issues and motivating students. This study seeks to answer the question: What are the lived

experiences of students regarding doctoral dissertation writing in Iraq?

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach with a descriptive perspective, conducted in two qualitative stages. The statistical population in the first stage included doctoral students and graduates (who defended their dissertations in the past three years) in the field of geography in Iraq. In the second stage, the population included higher education experts, such as managers, specialists, and faculty members. The sample size for the first stage consisted of 10 participants, selected using criterion-based purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was reached. In the second stage, 12 participants were chosen using purposive sampling.

Data collection tools included semi-structured interviews in the first stage and the Delphi method in the second stage. Data analysis in the first stage was conducted using Colaizzi's seven-step method, while in the second stage, content analysis was performed using Maxqda 2020 software. To ensure the validity of the data, two methods were applied:

Extracted data were shared with the participants for review and confirmation.

The content validity ratio was calculated, and Holsti's reliability coefficient was employed to ensure the reliability of the extracted concepts and indices.

3. Findings

The study was conducted in six stages, yielding the following results: four categories of challenges were identified in structural and organizational aspects, information and communication technology, educational and research domains, and student-related issues. At this stage, the researcher aimed to provide an accurate description of the previous phase's findings, presented in the tables below.

Table 1. Lived Experiences of Students Regarding Dissertation Writing Issues (Structural and Organizational Challenges)

| Main Components | Sub-components | Statements |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Process Challenges | Dissertation Topic Approval Process | Confusion and frustration with the topic approval process. Inappropriate timing for topic submission and unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles. Lack of facilities. Prolonged process of topic selection, writing, and proposal defense. |
| | Educational and Research Expert Shortages | Shortage of skilled and knowledgeable staff for guidance in dissertation-writing. |

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|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Organizational Challenges | Managerial Challenges | Lack of planning to support high-quality dissertations. Insufficient remuneration for supervising faculty from universities. Inadequate budgets and resources allocated for practical dissertations. Inability or unwillingness of university administrators to enforce rules. Inactivity of university-industry liaison offices to support valuable research. Admission of underqualified students. |
| Infrastructural Issues | Presence of Outdated Equipment | High costs of workshop and laboratory tools. Lack of institutionalized research culture in universities. Prolonged repair times for equipment. Insufficient laboratory tools and facilities. Lack of proficient staff for laboratories and workshops. Inadequate working spaces. Library-related issues. |
| Strong Bureaucracy | Time-consuming Approval Processes | Lengthy administrative coordination for dissertation-related tasks. Profit-driven bureaucracy in universities. |
| Scientific Atmosphere | Weak Scientific Culture | Unhealthy competition and envy among peers. Lack of research-oriented culture. Limited collaboration among academic departments. |

Table 2. Lived Experiences of Students Regarding Dissertation Writing Issues (Student-Related Challenges)

| Main Components | Sub-components | Statements |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Employment Challenges | Student Employment | Students working in offices and organizations face limited leave options. Conflict with employers due to absenteeism. Administrative and organizational workload at workplaces. Time constraints due to employment commitments. |
| Psychological Challenges | Student Morale | Declining motivation during the dissertation-writing phase. Impact of family, organizational, and peer behaviors. Mental exhaustion during the dissertation process. Stress from repeated topic rejections. Academic gap between study levels. Physical fatigue and diminishing energy. Increasing age of students. Stress related to dissertation defense sessions. Uncertain future (shadow of decades of civil and foreign wars in Iraq). Lack of persistence and low effort levels. Physical and psychological issues. |
| Lack of Motivation | Societal Work Culture | The prevalent culture of superficiality in society. Loss of morale and motivation due to life, family, financial, and employment issues. Inappropriate behavior by academic supervisors. Lack of confidence. Mockery by some professors regarding students' performance. |
| Irrelevance of Dissertation Outcomes | Disregard for Dissertation Results | Lack of utilization of dissertation outcomes. Cultural disregard for dissertations and their findings. Absence of mechanisms to apply student research findings. Low importance of dissertations within universities and workplaces. |
| Financial Challenges | Funding Challenges | Financial strain, especially for those with limited incomes. High costs associated with prolonged study periods and dissertations. |
| Skill Challenges | Weak Personal Skills | Limited proficiency in foreign languages and overreliance on Arabic. Insufficient time for dissertation writing due to personal issues. Lack of creativity in topic selection. Fear of selecting novel and innovative topics. Limited collaboration and discussion among students. Lack of critical thinking. Undefined academic interests. |
| Lack of Regular Planning | Time Management | Student ignorance of doctoral program regulations and guidelines. Wasting time due to unfamiliarity with research topics and methodologies. Rushing dissertation defense due to economic, employment, and military service concerns. |

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|-----------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Technical Skills Deficiency | Limited Research Skills | Lack of preparation and planning for the dissertation phase. Inadequate familiarity with research methods. Low proficiency in using qualitative and quantitative software. Poor skills in utilizing digital resources and electronic books. Inability to translate English sources effectively. |
| Weak Academic Competence | Knowledge Limitations | Lack of practical and theoretical knowledge regarding the dissertation process. Low awareness of research methodologies. Heavy reliance on theoretical knowledge without hands-on experience. Non-scientific motivations for pursuing education. |

Table 3. Lived Experiences of Students Regarding Dissertation Writing Issues (Educational and Research Challenges)

| Main Components | Sub-components | Statements |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Educational Challenges | Computer and Software Training | Lack of proficiency in statistical tests and software. Insufficient knowledge about useful and practical websites. Lack of research methodology courses with software training workshops. Inadequate awareness among students about searching for information. Lack of knowledge about using software tools. |
| | Research Methodology | Insufficient workshops on modern methods. Lack of practical skills in applying research methods. Inadequate knowledge about extracting quality articles. Challenges in purchasing software and learning to use them. Insufficient training in qualitative research methods. |
| | Dissertation Writing | Insufficient theoretical credits offered in doctoral programs for dissertation writing. Lack of specialized courses in dissertation writing. Missing university workshops on dissertation writing. Facing practical challenges in research methodology due to theoretical-only training. Neglect of theoretical courses offered in doctoral programs. Weak practical skills in sampling techniques. |
| | Topic Selection | Insufficient expertise among faculty in interdisciplinary topics. Overlooking diverse subfields within each discipline by faculty members. Inadequate familiarity of faculty and students with various areas of a field. Lack of attention to interdisciplinary topics and their instruction. |
| | Topic Guidance | Lack of proper guidance for topic selection or suitable suggestions. Dominance of faculty opinions in topic selection. Topic selection driven by financial constraints. Topic selection based on resource limitations. Topic selection influenced by journal requirements. Insufficient guidance from faculty during topic selection. Lack of experienced and knowledgeable advisors on selected topics. Pressure from tight deadlines for topic submission. Flawed and unstructured topic selection mechanisms. Changing advisors, leading to changes in topics. |
| | Student Interests | Lack of systemic attention to student interests in topic selection. Ignoring student preferences and inclinations in topic selection. Lack of emphasis on students' interest in the topic selection process. Overlooking student interest due to the difficulty of the topic selection process. |
| | Faculty Commitment | Low institutional discipline in dissertation and proposal defense sessions. Faculty delays in defense sessions. Overburdened faculty providing delayed feedback. Canceled defense sessions due to faculty non-attendance. Faculty negligence in supervising student research projects due to job dissatisfaction or external opportunities. |
| | Advisor Selection | Lack of punctuality and discipline among faculty in defense sessions. University disapproval of external advisors. Challenges in changing advisors or co-advisors. Advisor workload exceeding limits. High student-to-faculty ratio. |
| | Advisor Skills | Lack of academic competence among advisors. |

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| Educational Content Challenges | Access to Primary Sources | <p>Inability to motivate students.</p> <p>Limited advisor expertise in specific topics.</p> <p>Lack of scientific and practical knowledge among some advisors in dissertation writing.</p> <p>Low academic quality of advisors.</p> <p>Over-reliance on advisor preferences in dissertation decisions.</p> <p>Inefficient guidance provided by advisors during the dissertation process.</p> <p>Advisors not up-to-date with modern technologies.</p> <p>Advisors' limited scientific knowledge across various topics.</p> <p>Difficulty and high cost of accessing primary sources for dissertations.</p> |
| | Easy Content Access | <p>Insufficient resources in university libraries.</p> <p>Limited access to English-language primary sources.</p> <p>Lack of primary sources due to Iraq sanctions.</p> <p>High costs of purchasing required books for dissertations.</p> <p>Traveling to other cities and provinces to gather resources.</p> <p>Time-consuming, costly, and exhausting process of sourcing academic material.</p> <p>Lack of cooperation from some institutions and organizations in supporting research.</p> <p>Lack of assistance from colleagues and peers due to the novelty of topics.</p> <p>Insufficient resources for topics unique to local contexts.</p> |
| Academic Group Challenges | Academic Group Support | <p>Lack of collaboration to strengthen advisor-student relationships.</p> <p>Limited research potential within academic groups.</p> |
| Article Challenges | Lengthy Peer Review Processes | Prolonged peer review timelines. |
| | Lack of Credible Domestic Journals | Shortage of credible domestic academic journals. |
| | Weak Article Writing Skills | Lack of awareness among students about scientific article-writing guidelines. |
| | Weak English Proficiency | Inadequate English writing skills. |

Table 4. Lived Experiences of Students Regarding Dissertation Writing Issues (Challenges in Information and Communication Technology)

| Main Components | Sub-components | Statements |
|--|--|---|
| Information and Communication Technology (ICT) | Online Libraries | <p>Difficulty in quickly accessing various resources and scientific databases.</p> <p>Insufficient subscription to academic journals.</p> <p>Weak connections with electronic libraries.</p> |
| Infrastructure and Facilities | Internet Speed Computer and Equipment | <p>Poor internet speeds.</p> <p>Insufficient availability of computers in universities and dormitories.</p> <p>Limited bandwidth capacity.</p> <p>Weak telecommunication infrastructure.</p> |
| Information Literacy | Awareness of Resources | <p>Insufficient knowledge about useful and practical websites.</p> <p>Low information literacy among students and faculty members.</p> <p>Lack of technical insight among administrators.</p> <p>Students' lack of awareness and knowledge about the topic selection and dissertation-writing process.</p> <p>Inadequate guidance and communication from university departments on dissertation-writing procedures.</p> |

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Lived experience refers to the set of achievements and experiential, cognitive, perceptual, and skill-based learning outcomes that students gain during the dissertation-writing process. The analysis of interviews reveals that, based on interactions and supervisory styles, as well as the characteristics of both students and faculty, some students achieve notable outcomes, although the extent of these

achievements varies. Many students lack adequate familiarity with skills such as research methods, statistics, critical thinking, and mastery of research techniques. It is expected that through the dissertation-writing process, students will gain relative proficiency in these areas.

The lived experiences of students indicate that despite various challenges and deficiencies in supervision, some students gain positive experiences and are ultimately satisfied with their efforts to overcome obstacles and conduct independent research. However, some students lose

motivation due to the pressures and fears associated with the process, making it difficult for them to progress without external help:

"Due to my lack of familiarity with research methods, I lost confidence and sought help from a research institute."

"I had limited knowledge of qualitative research methods, and my advisor was also not well-versed in qualitative research or software. I felt very stressed and confused until a friend introduced me to a research institute for support."

Conversely, other students emphasized acquiring practical and cognitive skills during the dissertation process:

"Through the dissertation-writing process, I gained numerous practical and cognitive skills and experienced significant growth."

A critical objective of academic socialization manifested in the dissertation is the development of scientific insight:

"I learned a lot during the dissertation-writing process, including patience and perseverance. Many things I had not learned during my studies became clear while writing my dissertation."

Students also noted learning skills such as software use and improving social relationships, as they often needed to interact with various individuals.

Before engaging in the comprehensive dissertation process, students had preconceived notions and expectations about dissertations, their roles, and their advisors' responsibilities. These perceptions often underwent a reality check and transformation during the process, leading to a reevaluation of initial assumptions. Dissertation-writing represents the first significant opportunity for students to conduct independent research, fostering gradual independence as a core component:

"The most valuable outcome of my dissertation was the sense of accomplishment. I can now confidently say that I am capable of conducting quality research."

A lack of awareness about topic selection and dissertation-writing processes has led to prolonged topic approval, proposal preparation, and defense stages, creating significant issues:

"My peers and I lacked knowledge about topic selection, proposal writing, and dissertation preparation. Even research experts were not sufficiently cooperative."

Advancing knowledge in any field depends on prior research. In this regard, easy and efficient access to information resources is crucial. However, students reported challenges in accessing updated and comprehensive sources:

"Due to sanctions, I could not access many academic sites to retrieve articles."

"The university library lacked updated books and articles relevant to my work."

"As my research topic was specific to Iraq, I couldn't refer to many resources."

The analysis also highlighted structural and organizational challenges in dissertation-writing, including:

- **Approval Process Challenges:** Confusion during topic approval and inadequate support from educational and research experts.
- **Managerial Challenges:** Limited budgets and resources for practical dissertations, leading students to fund their projects independently.
- **Infrastructure Challenges:** Outdated and poorly maintained equipment and insufficient laboratory facilities.
- **Bureaucracy Issues:** Time-consuming administrative processes and inadequate research culture within universities.

Students also identified challenges in information and communication technology (ICT):

- **Online Libraries:** Limited access to global electronic libraries and inadequate subscriptions to academic journals.
- **Infrastructure:** Poor internet speeds and outdated telecommunications infrastructure.
- **Information Literacy:** Insufficient knowledge of useful academic websites and inadequate information literacy among students and faculty.

Individual challenges included:

- **Employment Challenges:** Balancing work commitments with dissertation writing.
- **Psychological Challenges:** Stress and lack of confidence due to repeated topic rejections and inadequate support.
- **Financial Challenges:** High costs associated with prolonged study durations and dissertation-related expenses.
- **Skill Challenges:** Weaknesses in statistical and research software, qualitative research methods, and translating English texts.

Educational and research challenges were also prevalent:

- **Educational Challenges:** Insufficient training in research methods and dissertation writing, limited interdisciplinary expertise among faculty, and a lack of comprehensive guidance for topic selection.
- **Article Writing:** Prolonged peer-review times and inadequate awareness of article-writing standards.

Based on the lived experiences of doctoral geography students and graduates, 4 dimensions, 12 main components, and 34 sub-components of challenges were identified and validated.

To successfully implement solutions, it is recommended that Iraqi universities develop a comprehensive, phased plan, which includes:

- Conducting a thorough assessment of current doctoral programs, ICT infrastructure, and student support systems.
- Prioritizing identified solutions based on available resources and immediate needs.
- Investing in improved ICT infrastructure, including high-speed networks and online learning management systems.
- Organizing training programs for faculty and administrative staff to enhance supervisory and communication skills.
- Updating doctoral curricula to balance theoretical and practical education and include essential skills such as time management and advanced research methods.
- Establishing comprehensive support systems for doctoral students, including peer support networks, academic and psychological counseling, and financial aid.
- Strengthening partnerships with governmental organizations, industry, and civil society to identify research topics with real-world relevance.
- Implementing ongoing monitoring and evaluation systems to assess the effectiveness of strategies and refine them based on feedback and outcomes.
- Developing clear guidelines for topic selection and dissertation-writing processes to reduce student confusion.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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