Hitting the thesis wall: demotivation hindering graduate students' research completion

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Research conducted by graduate students is crucial for the development of lifelong learning skills and future professional success. However, many students encounter obstacles that hinder the timely completion of their research projects and theses. The factors that impede the completion of research papers within designated timeframes have not been thoroughly investigated, resulting in a lack of understanding of certain barriers. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to identify the demotivating factors that hinder graduate researchers from completing their research papers on time. Through thematic analysis of qualitative data from 10 purposively selected graduate students experiencing demotivation, the findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the personal, psychological, institutional, and resource-related factors that demotivate graduate researchers. Key issues include self-determination challenges, conflicting responsibilities, rigid policies, and inadequate support. These insights can guide interventions to enhance graduate student achievement, well-being, and research productivity. By addressing the diverse barriers identified, academic institutions can create a more supportive environment for graduate researchers to excel.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Graduate student research plays a crucial role in developing the advanced skills necessary for continued learning and future careers. Students acquire methodological and analytical skills through actively designing studies, collecting and analyzing data, and producing scholarly work [1]−[4]. This enables them to develop competencies in research methods, communication, and their academic paths [5]. Timely completion of research projects and theses is a significant milestone that showcases students' mastery of content, resource management abilities, and proficiency in academic writing [6], [7]. However, despite the acknowledged importance of research, studies show that a considerable number of graduate students encounter various obstacles that impede the timely completion of their projects and theses, such as inadequate supervision, lack of preparation, and writing challenges [8]. Across institutions, extended timelines and high attrition rates persist, indicating that a variety of barriers often hinder students from making optimal progress on their research [9].

Research has shown that graduate students can achieve success in writing research through interventions that target self-efficacy, motivation, emotional intelligence, technical skills development,

collaboration, and intensive writing support [10]–[13]. Studies have found that addressing emotional factors and providing quality mentorship are crucial for empowering students to excel as academic writers [14]. The evidence suggests that creating supportive environments, fostering collaboration, delivering targeted instruction, and addressing emotional needs enable graduate students to thrive and succeed in their research writing endeavors [15], [16]. By implementing evidence-based practices such as writing courses, collaborative experiences, writing camps, and mentorship programs, institutions can assist graduate students in developing competencies, overcoming challenges, and producing high-quality research outcomes.

Building on previous research, it is emphasized that creating supportive environments is crucial for motivating graduate students and helping them complete their projects in a timely manner [17], [18]. Factors such as supervisor support, formal mentorship programs, and library workshops contribute to positive conditions that enhance student engagement and progress [15]. Establishing formal support systems, promoting collaboration, and fostering a positive program climate empower students to become part of the academic community, develop self-efficacy, and make consistent progress in their research. Clearly defined expectations and goals are also important motivating factors. Clearly outlined research objectives, transparent program requirements, and mapping out project timelines provide graduate students with the guidance and focus necessary to persevere throughout their academic journey [19]. Effective mentorship and guidance offer the instrumental and psychosocial support needed for students to overcome research challenges, boosting their motivation and persistence [20], [21]. Advisors who communicate expectations clearly, provide constructive feedback, and understand individual needs play a crucial role in nurturing student confidence, satisfaction, and eventual success.

While some studies have examined the general challenges faced by graduate students, there is limited research focusing explicitly on the specific factors that hinder timely completion of research papers [22]. Although broad issues such as skills deficits and poor supervision have been investigated, few studies delve deeper into precise obstacles like insufficient motivation, low confidence, and inadequate preparation that directly impede progress [23]. The literature lacks targeted inquiry into the unique demotivational barriers that prevent graduate students from submitting research papers on time. Further research is needed to shed light on the demotivators and obstacles that graduate students face, as there are still gaps in knowledge regarding factors such as motivation deficits, lack of confidence, and poor preparation that can hinder progress [5]. In-depth investigation into the specific impediments that cause students to miss research milestones is warranted but limited [24]. Understanding the distinct internal and external demotivators would help inform much-needed support strategies.

Addressing this gap in the literature can provide valuable insights to better support graduate students through customized interventions tailored to target known obstacles. Identifying the specific challenges students face enables the development of solutions tailored to their needs, such as implementing enhanced research methods training programs if inadequate preparation is found to be a key barrier [25]. Thoroughly elucidating the demotivators graduate students encounter also allows institutions to design effective supports to facilitate timely completion of quality research [26]. Eventually, research focused explicitly on investigating the demotivating factors that hinder graduate students is essential. It will empower students by providing universities with the knowledge to help them overcome barriers on their journey to research completion and academic success. Therefore, the overarching research question we aim to address is: what are the demotivating factors that hinder graduate researchers from completing their research papers on time?

2. METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate the factors that impede graduate researchers from completing research papers on time. This methodology allowed for the exploration of human experiences beyond numerical data [27]. The phenomenological method aims to comprehend individuals' subjective experiences and perspectives [28]. The study took place at a private secondary school in Northern Philippines and involved a purposive sample of 10 participants. This non-random sampling technique was used to intentionally select individuals with characteristics relevant to the research objectives [29]. According to Pharris and Perez-Mira [30], phenomenological research typically involves a small sample size of 3-10 participants. The participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: i) being graduate students in the final year of their studies; ii) having started writing their research paper; iii) having stopped working on their research paper for over a year, as prolonged procrastination may indicate diminishing motivation and engagement in the task [31]; and iv) being graduate students who are also employed as teachers in a private secondary institution.

In order to collect data for analysis, participants underwent a semi-structured interview process. The interview questions, designed to address the main research question: "What are the demotivating factors that hinder graduate researchers from completing their research papers in a timely manner?", were validated and approved by three educational experts. The interview consisted of seven primary questions strategically

formulated to clarify the main research question. All participants' responses were recorded and transcribed with the participant's consent for the study. The interview questions presented to the participants in the study are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview schedule for the participants

Type of question	Sample interview question
Introduction	Can you describe your overall experience with conducting research as a graduate student?
Transitory	How important is timely completion of your research to you?
	What are your initial thoughts and feelings when you think about the challenges you face in completing your research on time?
Body/core	Can you identify any internal factors that have hindered your progress in completing your research on time?
	Have you experience any external factors that have contributed to your demotivation in the research process?
	How do you perceive the role of your academic environment in influencing your motivation levels to finish your research on schedule?
Closure	In what ways do you believe your research experience could be improved to enhance your motivation and efficiency in completing your work on time?

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a consent form outlining the purpose of the study. Participants signed the form to indicate their agreement to participate, with a focus on ensuring their right to anonymity, the ability to withdraw from the study without providing a reason, and protection from any negative consequences in their professional or personal lives. The researchers utilized Braun and Clarke's [32] thematic analysis approach to examine the demotivating factors that hinder graduate student researchers in completing their research papers in a timely manner. The decision to use this model was driven by the desire to uncover underlying patterns and themes in the collected data. The goal of this analytical process was to shed light on and address the main research question. The researchers followed a series of steps, including familiarizing themselves with the data, generating initial codes from the transcripts, categorizing the codes, creating hierarchies within the codebook, and connecting the categories to form overarching themes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the factors that hinder graduate researchers from completing their research papers in a timely manner. Previous studies have looked at the general challenges that graduate students face, but they have not focused specifically on the factors that demotivate students and impede their progress in meeting research deadlines. There is a lack of targeted research on the specific obstacles that prevent students from reaching research milestones. To fill this gap, the study expanded on previous research to identify the unique internal and external factors that demotivate students and cause delays. The goal was to provide insights that can help in developing customized support strategies for graduate researchers to complete high-quality research on schedule.

During the investigation of factors that hinder the motivation and timely completion of research papers by graduate researchers, four main themes were identified. These themes include: i) personal and psychological challenges; ii) competing demends and time constraints; iii) the rigorous nature of the research process and institutional barriers; as well as iv) inadequate support systems and resource constraints. These themes were derived from the categories discussed and visually represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The demotiving factors in graduate research completion

3.1. Personal and psychological challenges

The qualitative data analysis uncovers a prominent theme focusing on the personal and psychological challenges faced by the participants in the research. This theme underscores the difficulties they face while dealing with the demands and intricacies of their work. The data highlights various challenges including fear of obstacles, self-doubt, lack of motivation or focus, emotional challenges, mental exhaustion, procrastination, and feelings of laziness. The findings are presented in Table 2.

The personal and psychological challenges identified in the study are consistent with the principles of self-determination theory. This theory posits that these obstacles may stem from deficiencies in the researchers' fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness [33]. The perspectives of the participants, which emphasize these discouraging factors, underscore the necessity for comprehensive support systems and interventions to address the overall well-being of graduate researchers. Previous research has shown that issues such as anxiety, self-doubt, and a lack of autonomy and competence can have a significant impact on students' academic performance and persistence [34]–[36]. Understanding the complex nature of these challenges can help researchers and academic institutions develop tailored strategies to enhance the psychological resilience, self-efficacy, and motivation of researchers. Ultimately, these approaches will improve their likelihood of successfully completing their research projects.

Table 2. Personal and psychological challenges codes and excerpts

Code	Excerpt
Fear of obstacles	"Maintaining motivation is challenging, as the fear of encountering further obstacles is demotivating." [Participant 1]
Self-doubt	"I experienced writer's block which likely impacted my self-efficacy due to mental distress." [Participant 10]
Lack of motivation or focus	"Maintaining motivation and focus to complete the work is difficult." [Participant 4]
Emotional challenges (stress, frustration, anxiety)	"Thinking about the necessary tasks makes me stressed, frustrated, and anxious, as I doubt my ability to complete them." [Participant 8]
Mental fatigue and exhaustion	"Mental fatigue and exhaustion from juggling teaching and student roles has significantly hindered my progress." [Participant 6]
Procrastination	"I tend to wait until the deadline, which partly motivates me to complete my research." [Participant 9]
Laziness	"It could be attributed to my own laziness or age." [Participant 3]

3.2. Competing demands and time constraints

The research participants encountered competing demands and time constraints, highlighting the complex challenges they faced in balancing multiple responsibilities and obligations. These challenges included overwhelming responsibilities, time management issues, work responsibilities, heavy workloads and additional responsibilities, family responsibilities, distractions and competing obligations, lack of interest in the program, and lack of motivation due to age and career stage. The findings are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Competing demands and time constraints codes and excerpts

Code	Excerpt
Overwhelming responsibilities	"Fatigue from balancing work, graduate studies, and family responsibilities has hindered my timely research progress." [Participant 5]
Time management issues	"Poor time management, prioritizing work over reviewing my paper, is a factor hindering my progress." [Participant 9]
Work responsibilities	"Excessive workloads, including lesson preparation, paper grading, and weekend responsibilities, have been demotivating." [Participant 5]
Heavy workloads and extra responsibilities	"Heavy workload, side engagements, and grandparent duties have occasionally demotivated me in the research process." [Participant 3]
Family responsibilities	"While writing my research, family obligations, including caring for my dad with cancer as the sole caretaker, combined with professional responsibilities, left me lacking the energy and motivation for thesis work." [Participant 7]
Distractions and competing obligations	"External distractions such as social media or personal obligations have made it challenging to dedicate uninterrupted time to my thesis work. Prioritizing teaching over research has also hindered my progress." [Participant 6]
Lack of interest in the program	"The program I took was not of interest to me, making it difficult for me to even identify a research topic." [Participant 2]
Lack of motivation due to age and career stage	"Nearing retirement, I question the value of stressing over a Ph.D. I do not intend to leverage for advancement." [Participant 3]

The results of the study highlight the significant challenges faced by graduate researchers. These challenges stem from the multiple demands on their time and the heavy responsibilities they must juggle. As

a result, their ability to meet deadlines for research papers is hindered. This issue is connected to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, which suggests that individuals strive to acquire, preserve, and safeguard their limited resources, such as time and energy [37]. The perspectives of the study participants reveal the difficulties they encounter in balancing competing demands, including overwhelming workloads, family obligations, and other responsibilities. Consequently, their time and energy are depleted, leaving them fatigued and unable to focus adequately on their research [38]. Problems with time management, heavy workloads, and distractions further impede their efforts to balance their responsibilities and make progress in their research [39]. Numerous studies consistently show that graduate students often struggle to manage the various demands on their time and energy [40]–[42], leading to increased stress, burnout, and decreased academic performance [43]. To address these issues, academic institutions and support systems should consider implementing strategies to help students develop effective time management skills, prioritize their responsibilities, and access resources to better manage their workloads and obligations.

3.3. Rigorous research process and institutional barriers

The theme uncovers a significant problem, shedding light on the difficulties experienced by the research participants as they navigate the rigorous research process and encounter various institutional obstacles. The codes cover several aspects including the rigorous and lengthy process, demanding nature of the research process, pressure from academic requirements, delays caused by the pandemic, inflexible academic policies, rigid policies and regulations, and stress associated with publishing requirements. The results are summarized in Table 4.

The results of this study indicate that graduate researchers encounter significant obstacles throughout the research process. These challenges stem from the rigorous and demanding nature of the process itself, as well as institutional barriers and policies that create additional hurdles. This theme is closely related to the concept of academic stress, which suggests that the pressures and demands associated with graduate-level research can lead to increased levels of stress and demotivation [44]. Participants also highlight the impact of inflexible institutional policies and regulations, which align with the concept of organizational constraints that can hinder effective performance [45]. They express that the entire research process, from inception to completion, acts as a major source of stress and demotivation. Additionally, the demanding nature of the process, including meeting comprehensive exam requirements, further compounds their challenges [8], [46], [47]. Furthermore, participants describe feeling pressure from academic institutions to adhere to various requirements, such as revisions and deadlines. These pressures can lead to a lack of focus and clarity in their research. They also mention the negative effects of pandemic-related delays and inflexible academic policies on their progress and motivation. To address these challenges, academic institutions should adopt a more holistic and student-centered approach to supporting graduate researchers. This can be accomplished through the development of comprehensive programs that specifically address the various challenges faced by researchers. Additionally, fostering greater transparency and collaboration between researchers and their institutions is essential.

Table 4. Rigorous research process and institutional barriers

Code	Excerpt
Rigorous and long process	"Just thinking about the rigorous and lengthy process that I have to go through in writing is already stressing me out." [Participant 3]
Demanding research process	"I was demotivated to continue because starting the research process was demanding, in addition to the comprehensive exam I have to take." [Participant 2]
Pressure from academic requirements	"The academic environment's constant reminders, fees, and revision demands make me feel incompetent, distracting from my initial research vision and hindering progress." [Participant 1]
Pandemic-related delays	"The 2-year pandemic period was included in calculating my residency requirement." [Participant 2]
Inflexible academic policies	"The graduate school's failure to account for the 2-year pandemic pause in my writing was unpleasant. Their requirement to take a refresher course was demotivating." [Participant 6]
Rigid policies and regulations	"The graduate school should offer counseling and considerations for writers facing personal and professional challenges, rather than rigidly enforcing residency and publication requirements that can distract from the primary research focus." [Participant 7]
Publishing requirement as a stressor	"Publishing requirements add unnecessary stress - I need more support from my workplace, family, and the institution." [Participant 3]

3.4. Inadequate support systems and resource constraints

The theme of the study centers on the challenges faced by participants due to insufficient support systems and resource limitations, which significantly impeded their research advancement. The identified codes for this theme include lack of support from the academic environment, uncaring academic environment, inadequa te academic support and guidance, lack of advisorship, lack of incentives or support,

poor communication and advising, limited resources and unexpected setbacks. The findings are summarized in Table 5.

The results of this study suggest that graduate researchers encounter significant challenges due to insufficient support systems and limited resources in their academic settings. These factors serve as major obstacles to their research progress and motivation, which are consistent with the principles of social support theory. According to this theory, the availability and quality of support from one's social environment can greatly impact an individual's well-being and performance [48]. Participants in the study reported a lack of support from their academic institutions, noting a focus on reminders and threats rather than meaningful assistance. They also expressed a need for increased academic support, such as reduced teaching responsibilities and the assignment of dedicated research advisors [5], [49]−[51]. Additionally, participants highlighted the unsupportive nature of their academic environments, inadequate academic guidance, and a lack of incentives or support from their workplaces. Poor communication and advising between participants and their research advisors, along with limited resources and unexpected setbacks, were identified as significant challenges [52]−[54]. To address these issues, academic institutions should prioritize the establishment of comprehensive support systems for graduate researchers. This may involve implementing mentorship programs, allocating resources and funding, and fostering a more collaborative and supportive academic atmosphere [55]−[58].

Table 5. Inadequate support systems and resource constraints

Code	Excerpt
Lack of support from academic environment	"The work environment could improve by reducing researchers' academic responsibilities and assigning advisers earlier in the program to support the research process." [Participant 2]
Uncaring academic environment	"My academic environment only contacts me for reminders about deadlines and fees, rather than genuine engagement. They request partial manuscript submissions simply for the sake of submitting, not for meaningful feedback." [Participant 1]
Inadequate academic support and guidance	"External factors, such as inadequate institutional resources, support, and guidance have significantly demotivated me during the research process." [Participant 6]
Lack of advisorship	"My first adviser's frequent absences for seminars and lack of communication, due to professional responsibilities, led to delays until I could change advisers." [Participant 7]
Lack of incentives or support	The employer provided no additional incentives or supports for high school teacher researchers during the research process. [Participant 5]
Poor communication and advising	"Lack of regular adviser-advisee communication, as I hesitate to approach my often-busy adviser, undermines my progress and confidence." [Participant 9]
Limited resources and unexpected setbacks	"Limited resources and unexpected setbacks, like failed reliability tests, affected my research timeline and motivation." [Participant 4]

4. CONCLUSION

Graduate research expands current knowledge, produces novel perspectives, and establishes a basis for future investigations. This study seeks to investigate the obstacles that impede graduate students in meeting deadlines for their research papers. By pinpointing these challenges, valuable information can be obtained to guide the creation of more efficient support systems and interventions that improve graduate student achievement and welfare. The study uncovers four main themes: personal and psychological obstacles, conflicting responsibilities and time limitations, demanding research procedures and institutional obstacles, and insufficient support systems and resource limitations.

The findings of this study have important implications for promoting the success and well-being of graduate students. Academic institutions, faculty advisors, and support services can utilize these insights to create customized strategies to address the difficulties encountered by graduate students. This may include implementing programs to improve self-determination, time management skills, and work-life balance, as well as establishing more flexible and supportive academic policies and structures. These interventions have the potential to enhance student outcomes, increase research productivity, and cultivate a more supportive and enriching environment for all individuals involved in graduate research.

Based on the insights gained from this study, future research should explore additional factors that may influence the progress of graduate students, such as the role of mentorship, disciplinary differences, and institutional culture. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the long-term impacts of various support strategies on the success and well-being of graduate students. Additionally, further investigations into the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as counseling, time management workshops, and peer support networks, would provide valuable guidance for improving outcomes for graduate students. Including participants from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds could offer valuable insights into the complexities of these challenges across various academic contexts. Utilizing a diverse sample may uncover important differences or contextual factors that impact the nature of these issues within different academic settings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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