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Delay in Research Work among Doctoral Students: Examining the Role of Institutional and Supervisory Support

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ABSTRACT

Delays in doctoral research remain a critical challenge in Pakistan, undermining institutional performance and students' academic progression. This study explored the relationship between institutional, supervisory support and the occurrence of research delays among doctoral candidates in Punjab. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 176 doctoral candidates from 10 public and private universities using a structured questionnaire, while qualitative insights were obtained from 12 supervisee and 10 supervisors' semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed through SPSS using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that institutional inefficiencies, such as bureaucratic processes and delayed evaluations, along with supervisory shortcomings including inadequate feedback, were the most significant barriers to timely completion. This study concludes that doctoral research delays are strongly shaped by institutional support structures and supervisory support and the occurrence, with statistical evidence ($r = .216, p < .01$) confirming a significant relationship between negative supervisory practices and delayed completion. The study provides valuable insights to policymakers and higher education stakeholders to address barriers that hinder timely doctoral completion. It is recommended to design targeted strategies to strengthen supervisory support and institutional structures for improving PhD research productivity.

Keywords: Doctoral Research Delays, PhD Completion, Supervisory Support, Institutional Barriers, Higher Education In Pakistan

Introduction

Doctoral education is widely recognized as the cornerstone of advanced scholarship, contributing not only to the creation of new knowledge but also to national development and global competitiveness (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2022). PhD graduates serve as future faculty members, researchers, and innovators who enhance the intellectual capital of societies and respond to complex socio-economic challenges (Kallio et al., 2023). In Pakistan, as in many developing countries, a doctoral degree is regarded as a prestigious academic milestone that carries significant social recognition and professional



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opportunities (S. Hurtado et al., 2024). However, despite its prestige, the doctoral journey is arduous, demanding sustained effort, resilience, and access to strong institutional and supervisory support. Studies have shown that prolonged completion times and high attrition rates remain global concerns, with completion often extending well beyond the expected duration (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2023). These challenges not only undermine doctoral productivity but also delay students' academic and professional advancement. For countries like Pakistan, where higher education is still consolidating its research capacity, doctoral delays represent a pressing barrier to the timely development of human capital and the strengthening of knowledge economies (Nyamupangedengu, 2024).

Globally, doctoral education is marked by high dropout rates and prolonged completion timelines, raising concerns about efficiency, productivity, and return on investment in higher education (S. Hurtado et al., 2024). Across contexts, between one-third and one-half of doctoral students withdraw before completion, while many who persist exceed the expected duration of study, creating significant personal and institutional costs (A. Lee et al., 2022). In developing countries such as Pakistan, these challenges are amplified by systemic barriers. Chronic financial constraints, escalating tuition fees, limited access to advanced research infrastructure, and a supervisory culture that often lacks adequate training or accountability contribute substantially to delays in doctoral research (Khalid & Nawaz, 2023; Nyamupangedengu, 2024).

Recent reports highlight the stagnation of doctoral output in Pakistan. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey (2023/24), the number of enrolled PhD candidates has remained around 3,000, despite national investments in higher education, reflecting stagnancy in doctoral scholarship amid rising costs and resource limitations (Government of Pakistan, 2024). Institutional weaknesses further aggravate the situation: narrative research in Punjab reveals that doctoral candidates often endure anxiety due to months-long delays in dissertation processing, prolonged administrative bottlenecks, and inadequate supervisory feedback, which hinder both academic progress and psychological well-being (Akram, Zafar, et al., 2023). Moreover, socio-cultural pressures, such as balancing employment, family obligations, and financial burdens, intersect with weak institutional support to create a cumulative effect that undermines timely completion (Shahzad & Malik, 2022).

Taken together, these findings underscore that delays in doctoral research in Pakistan are not merely individual challenges but systemic issues that require urgent attention. Without targeted reforms in institutional policies, supervisory practices, and student support structures, the problem is likely to persist, limiting both student success and the broader contribution of doctoral research to national development. While factors contributing to delays among MPhil students such as time management issues, job-related constraints, domestic responsibilities, and supervisory workload have been well documented in Punjab (Khatoun, Hassan, et al., 2023) .there remains a notable gap in research specifically focusing on warning signs and preventive strategies for PhD delays in Pakistan.

A recent meta-analysis of Pakistani PhD studies highlights pervasive issues including lack of supervisory commitment, inadequate feedback, communication gaps, and inefficient institutional processes all of which impede timely completion (.Irshad et al., 2023) . Moreover, a survey from the University of Peshawar pointed to student-supervisor relationships, bureaucratic hurdles, and misaligned evaluation protocols as key contributors to prolonged degree timelines(Ullah, 2024) These findings suggest that while MPhil-level challenges are well understood, localized, recent investigations into



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PhD-specific mechanisms remain scarce, particularly regarding early warning signs and institutional or supervisory preventative measures

This study aims to address these gaps through a holistic inquiry into the early warning signs of doctoral delays and practical strategies for prevention. Leveraging a mixed-methods design, it will examine the relationships among institutional support structures, supervisory support, and the occurrence of doctoral research delays. Findings from this research will offer valuable insights for policymakers, higher education administrators, and supervisors in Pakistan informing the development of supportive frameworks, timely interventions, and best practices in doctoral supervision. This, in turn, may help reduce attrition rates, financial burdens, and burnout, while improving PhD completion timelines and student well-being.

Objectives of the Study

To explore the relationship between institutional support structures and the occurrence of research delays

To explore the relationship between supervisory support and the occurrence of research delays

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Tinto's Student Integration Model, which posits that academic and social integration are critical to student persistence and degree completion (Tinto, 1993). According to this model, doctoral students' likelihood of timely completion is enhanced when institutions provide supportive environments, accessible resources, and effective supervisory engagement. Recent research confirms the relevance of this framework in doctoral contexts, emphasizing the interplay between supervision quality, institutional culture, and completion outcomes (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2023; Nyamupangedengu, 2024).

Complementing this perspective, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a motivational lens, highlighting the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining doctoral students' research engagement (Bitzer & Albertyn, 2022). When supervisory practices and institutional structures nurture these psychological needs, doctoral students demonstrate higher persistence and resilience in the face of research delays (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2023). By integrating these two frameworks, the study underscores how *structural factors* (institutional support) and *relational factors* (supervisory support) collectively influence doctoral research progress. This dual-theoretical grounding strengthens the analysis of early warning signs of delay and informs the design of effective strategies for prevention.

Literature Review

Doctoral education is a cornerstone of knowledge production and a pathway to academic and professional advancement. However, around the world, doctoral studies are increasingly associated with extended completion times and high attrition rates (S. Hurtado et al., 2024). In Pakistan, these issues are magnified by systemic challenges such as weak supervisory support, bureaucratic bottlenecks, limited funding, and socio-cultural pressures (Khatoon, Hassan, et al., 2023; Shahzad & Malik, 2022).

A growing body of research highlights the psychological and emotional toll of delayed doctoral work. (Mahsood et al., 2025) found that PhD scholars in Pakistan experience well-being challenges across individual, interpersonal, institutional, and policy levels, with stressors such as administrative delays and lack of institutional support hindering progress. Similarly, (Begum et al., 2024) reported that doctoral students often face prolonged isolation, self-doubt, and stress while struggling to cope with structural



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obstacles. These findings resonate with international research showing that doctoral students' mental health is closely tied to their academic progression (Schmitt et al., 2023).

Supervision is critical to doctoral persistence, yet it is often cited as a weak link in Pakistan. (Ilahi, 2024), in a meta-analysis of PhD research delays, revealed that inadequate supervision and inconsistent feedback were among the strongest contributors to prolonged completion. Similarly (Begum et al., 2024), emphasized that ineffective supervisory practices and bureaucratic inefficiencies such as delayed dissertation reviews and poor administrative coordination frequently lead to frustration and anxiety among doctoral scholars. These issues underscore the need for better supervisory training and streamlined university procedures.

Beyond institutional barriers, socio-economic constraints significantly affect doctoral timelines (Ahmad et al., 2025) highlighted that delayed PhD completions often result in lost job opportunities and health concerns, creating both financial and personal burdens for candidates. (Al-Aasar et al., 2025) further demonstrated how personal characteristics including job commitments, family responsibilities, and peer support interact with doctoral progress, with many students struggling to balance research with employment and domestic obligations. These findings confirm that delays in Pakistan are shaped not only by academic systems but also by students' lived realities.

Several empirical studies in Pakistan have identified a complex interplay of factors that delay PhD completion. Institutional barriers including complex bureaucratic procedures, prolonged dissertation proposal approvals, limited research funding, and inadequate supervisory support significantly contribute to extended timelines (Khatoon, Hussain, et al., 2023; Zahid et al., 2024) Student-related challenges such as poor topic selection, irregular feedback, and lack of timely corrections further disrupt progress (Begum et al., 2024; Khatoon, Hussain, et al., 2023) Additionally, psychological stress stemming from delayed evaluations and insufficient administrative support adds emotional burden to doctoral candidates (The Express Tribune, 2024). These findings highlight the urgent need for streamlined procedures, sustained supervisory guidance, and emotional support to enhance timely doctoral completion in Pakistan

Existing studies in Pakistan highlight institutional barriers, inadequate supervision, and student-related challenges as major contributors to delays in research completion (Begum et al., 2024) However, most prior work has focused on MPhil-level research and has described problems rather than examining PhD-specific warning signs or proposing preventive strategies (Mahsood et al., 2025) The role of institutional and supervisory support structures in shaping doctoral delays remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how these support systems influence research delays among doctoral students in Pakistan, while also identifying early warning indicators and strategies for timely completion

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods research design to examine the relationship between institutional and supervisory support structures and the occurrence of research delays among PhD students in Pakistan. This design was selected to capture both generalizable patterns through quantitative analysis and deeper, context-specific insights through qualitative inquiry. The quantitative phase involved the use of a structured questionnaire to test hypothesized relationships, while the qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews to explore lived experiences and perspectives in greater depth. The



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integration of both approaches ensured methodological triangulation, enhancing the validity and robustness of the findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

The target population comprised doctoral candidates (who had completed their PhDs) and faculty members who supervise PhD research in public and private universities across Punjab. Exact population counts were not available because the Higher Education Commission (HEC) does not maintain comprehensive, centralized records of PhD enrolments and completions, which necessitated network-based sampling approaches (Rizvi et al., 2024). Inclusion criteria for student participants were: enrolment in, or recent completion of, a PhD program at a Punjab university and willingness to discuss research timelines; for supervisors, the criterion was active supervision of doctoral candidates. Exclusion criteria included postgraduate students at non-doctoral levels (e.g., MPhil) and administrative staff without supervisory responsibilities. The sampling frame was therefore constructed from departmental contacts, professional networks, and academic associations rather than a single registry, ensuring coverage across institutional types (public/private), geographic locations, and disciplines

In the quantitative phase, a sample of 176 PhD candidates was recruited using snowball sampling from ten major public and private universities across Punjab. These institutions included the University of the Punjab, University of Sargodha, Government College University Lahore, University of Engineering and Technology (UET) Lahore, Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi, University of Management and Technology (UMT) Lahore, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, University of Education Lahore, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) Islamabad, and Islamia University Bahawalpur. The inclusion of universities of varying size, type, and geographic location ensured a diverse representation of doctoral experiences across disciplines such as social sciences, natural sciences, engineering, education, and humanities. The sample size was determined through an a priori power analysis using GPower 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009), which indicated a minimum requirement of 128 participants to detect medium effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 0.50$) at $\alpha = 0.05$ and statistical power = 0.80. The final sample of 176 exceeded this threshold, ensuring sufficient statistical power, representativeness, and subgroup analysis capability.

In the qualitative phase, a purposive sample of 22 participants was selected from the same universities, comprising 12 PhD candidates and 10 supervisors with direct experience of research delays. Doctoral students were chosen based on their encounters with institutional and supervisory challenges, while supervisors were included to provide insights from an academic management perspective. This design enabled the collection of rich and contextually nuanced accounts of how institutional structures and supervisory practices influence doctoral research timelines. By combining the breadth of survey data with the depth of interview narratives, the study captured both generalizable patterns and lived experiences, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the role of institutional and supervisory support in shaping doctoral research delays in Punjab (Batool, Ali, & Safdar, 2022; Zafar et al., 2024; Rasool & Dilshad, 2022).

Snowball sampling was employed in the quantitative phase due to the absence of centralized records on PhD enrolments and completions by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan (Rizvi et al., 2024). This method allowed the identification of candidates through academic and institutional networks, enabling access to a dispersed and otherwise difficult-to-reach population. In contrast, the qualitative phase adopted purposive sampling to deliberately select individuals with first-hand experience of research delays, ensuring the richness and relevance of the data. By



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combining snowball and purposive strategies, the study was able to balance representativeness with depth of insights.

Data for this study were collected in two sequential phases, consistent with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. In the quantitative phase, a structured survey instrument was adapted from “Factors that Contribute to Delay in Postgraduate Students’ Thesis/Dissertation Completion” (Chidi & Sylvia, 2020) and further refined based on expert reviews and feedback from a pilot study involving 25 doctoral candidates. The final questionnaire consisted of 27 items divided into two sections: (a) demographic information (discipline, institutional affiliation, and year of enrolment) and (b) thematic areas relating to delay factors, including research completion, student–supervisor interaction, institutional and procedural barriers, and administrative collaboration. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Internal consistency reliability was confirmed through Cronbach’s alpha, with coefficients ranging between 0.76 and 0.88 across subscales, indicating strong reliability (Field, 2018; Taber, 2018). Construct validity was further supported through exploratory factor analysis (EFA), which confirmed the coherence of items within their respective constructs.

The questionnaire was disseminated using both online platforms (Google Forms, WhatsApp, and institutional groups) and offline channels (departmental visits and personal contacts) to maximize reach and ensure representation of doctoral candidates across Punjab. This multi-modal approach proved effective in overcoming limitations of digital access and low initial response rates. A total of 176 valid responses were obtained, representing a diverse sample across universities and disciplines. This distribution strategy aligns with approaches used in similar doctoral education studies in Pakistan, where combining online and face-to-face recruitment enhances inclusivity and representativeness (S. Mahsood et al., 2025).

In the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to capture participants’ experiences with supervisory practices, institutional inefficiencies, and coping strategies in managing research delays. Interviews lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, via Zoom, and by telephone, depending on participant availability. A purposive sample of 12 PhD candidates and 10 supervisors was selected to provide both student and supervisory perspectives. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member-checking to ensure accuracy (Nowell et al., 2017). Trustworthiness was further enhanced through triangulation of perspectives, maintenance of an audit trail, and reflexive note-taking, ensuring dependability, conformability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By combining large-scale quantitative data with in-depth qualitative narratives, and by rigorously establishing reliability and validity of instruments, the study achieved both breadth and depth in exploring the phenomenon of doctoral research delays.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 26), employing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis. Correlation analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of associations between institutional support, supervisory support, and research delays. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabling the identification of recurring themes and patterns across participant narratives. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through



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triangulation, allowing the study to validate statistical results while contextualizing them with lived experiences.

Table 1: Disciplines of the study

Discipline	Frequency	Percent
(Missing/Unlabeled)	6	3.4%
Social Sciences	86	48.9%
Natural Sciences	54	30.7%
Languages	11	6.3%
Others	19	10.8%
Total	176	100.0%

As shown in Table 1, nearly half of the respondents (48.9%) were from the social sciences, followed by 30.7% from the natural sciences, 10.8% from other disciplines, and 6.3% from languages. A small proportion (3.4%) of the respondents did not specify their discipline. These results suggest that the majority of doctoral enrolments in the studied universities are concentrated in the social sciences.

Table 2: Duration of Degree Completion

Duration	Frequency	Percent
One to three years	3	1.7%
Three to four years	58	33.0%
Five to six years	72	40.9%
Seven to eight years	36	20.5%
Eight years and above	7	4.0%
Total	176	100%

Table 2 highlighted doctoral students' perceptions of research delays. The average time spent in completing the PhD was ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.875$), indicated that most respondents completed their studies within the five- to six-year range, which exceeds the conventional three- to four-year timeline. Respondents agreed that they had experienced delays beyond their program's planned schedule ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.118$) and reported challenges in the timely submission of research work ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.155$). The strongest agreement was with the statement that "delays are common among doctoral candidates" ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.078$), reflecting the perception that delays are systemic rather than isolated. These findings are consistent with recent studies in Pakistan that identified prolonged degree completion as a widespread issue,

Table 3: Research Work Delay Related Statements

Statements	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Years spent in completion of degree	176	2.87	0.875
Experienced delays beyond planned timeline	176	3.64	1.118



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Statements	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Delay in research work submission	176	3.56	1.155
Delays are common among doctoral candidates	176	3.72	1.078

In the table no 3 delay-related statements provided insight into the doctoral completion experience of the respondents. The average time spent in completing the PhD was ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.875$). Most respondents completed their degrees within the five- to six-year range. This finding exceeded the conventional three- to four-year timeline indicated a trend of extended durations. Regarding perceptions of delay, respondents generally agreed that they had experienced delays beyond their program's planned timeline ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.118$). They also reported delays in submitting their research work ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.155$). Notably, the highest mean score was observed for the statement that "delays are common among doctoral candidates" ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.078$). It reflected a shared belief that delays were a systemic issue rather than isolated incidents.

Table 4: Delay in Institutional Support System

Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I would benefit from more frequent guidance sessions with my department.	3.26	1.13
I have limited access to essential research facilities from the institution.	3.47	1.07
Institutional policies (e.g., BASR approval, thesis submission) are timely and efficient.	3.65	1.12
I have encountered challenges in accessing research resources (e.g., databases, labs).	3.53	1.21
I have problems within the thesis committee.	3.48	1.15
Poor communication between researcher and department.	3.64	1.09
There are departmental politics between faculty members.	3.91	0.92

Table 4 identified institutional and departmental challenges contributing to doctoral research delays. The most prominent concern was departmental politics and faculty conflicts ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.92$), indicating that interpersonal tensions significantly hinder academic progress. Respondents also reported high agreement with poor communication between researchers and departments ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.09$) and mixed perceptions about the efficiency of institutional policies such as BASR approvals and thesis submission procedures ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.12$). These findings reflect a significance issue of bureaucratic rigidity and weak institutional governance. Infrastructural challenges also emerged as significant barriers. Respondents reported difficulties in accessing essential research resources ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.21$) and limited availability of institutional facilities ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.07$), consistent with global studies linking insufficient research infrastructure to prolonged completion timelines (Lee et al., 2022; Hurtado et al., 2024). Issues within thesis committees ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.15$) further highlight supervisory and procedural shortcomings, while the moderate mean score for more frequent guidance sessions ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.13$) suggests an unmet demand for consistent academic mentoring.



Table 5: Positive Aspects of Supervision

Statement	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I am satisfied with the guidance of my supervisor on written works	176	3.48	1.053
I have a good relationship with the supervisor	176	3.71	0.876
Structured supervisory system exists	176	3.27	1.173
Supervisor gives information about appropriate meetings, conferences	176	3.57	1.039
Supervisor informs about appropriate training opportunities	176	3.31	1.110
Supervisor is accessible outside appointment times	176	3.25	1.093
Provides additional research-enhancing information	176	3.23	1.178
Available whenever the student needs research help	176	3.28	1.110
Good verbal communication with supervisor	176	3.13	1.208

Table 5 highlights doctoral students’ perspectives on supervisory practices and committee interactions. The strongest aspect was the positive relationship with supervisors ($M = 3.71, SD = 0.876$), which suggests that interpersonal rapport plays a critical role in sustaining doctoral motivation and progress. Respondents also reported satisfaction with supervisors’ guidance on written work ($M = 3.48, SD = 1.05$) and support through conference participation opportunities ($M = 3.57, SD = 1.04$), demonstrating that supervisors contribute meaningfully to academic development.

Despite these positive elements, several areas for improvement emerged. The lowest-rated item was verbal communication with supervisors ($M = 3.13, SD = 1.21$), pointing to challenges in clarity, feedback quality, or frequency of interactions. Similarly, supervisory accessibility beyond appointment times ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.09$) and the provision of research-enhancing information ($M = 3.23, SD = 1.18$) were rated relatively low, reflecting inconsistent supervisory engagement. The structured supervisory system ($M = 3.27, SD = 1.17$) was also perceived as inadequate. Collectively, these results suggest that while many doctoral students benefit from strong supervisory relationships, there is a pressing need for structured and proactive supervisory frameworks to enhance academic outcomes.

Table 6: Negative Aspects of Supervision Factors

Statement	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I do not interact with the supervisor more frequently	176	3.01	1.198
Poor feedback on research work progress	176	3.10	1.174
My supervisor is not very helpful	176	2.72	1.195
Difficulties due to supervisor’s workload	176	2.98	1.188
Poor interpersonal relationship with the supervisors	176	3.05	1.123



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Lack of prompt feedback	176	3.02	1.183
Conflicting and inconsistent feedback	176	3.01	1.121

Table 6 illustrated the challenges doctoral students experienced with supervision, reflecting patterns of moderate dissatisfaction across several dimensions. The highest concern was **poor** feedback on research progress ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.17$), followed by lack of prompt feedback ($M = 3.02, SD = 1.18$) and conflicting or inconsistent feedback ($M = 3.01, SD = 1.12$). These findings suggested that while students are not extremely dissatisfied, the quality, timeliness, and consistency of supervisory feedback remain pressing concerns.

On the other hand, the lowest-rated negative item was “My supervisor is not very helpful” ($M = 2.72, SD = 1.19$), suggested that most students still perceive supervisors as supportive despite shortcomings in feedback and communication. Challenges such as supervisors’ workload ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.19$) and strained interpersonal relationships ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.12$) further point to accessibility and relational barriers that may affect supervisory effectiveness. Overall, while supervision was not seen as overwhelmingly negative, recurrent weaknesses in communication, workload balance, and feedback delivery reflect systemic issues that require institutional interventions to strengthen doctoral supervision structures.

Table 7: Correlation Analysis between Timely Degree Completion (TD) and Delay in Departmental Procedures (DDP)

Variables	1	2
1. Timely Degree Completion (TD)	1	.125
2. Delay in Departmental Procedures (DDP)	.125	1

In the table 7 correlation analysis revealed nuanced relationships between doctoral completion timelines and institutional as well as supervisory factors. First, the relationship between Timely Degree Completion (TD) and Delay in Departmental Procedures (DDP) was positive but weak and statistically non-significant ($r = .125, p = .098$). This suggested that while inefficiencies in departmental processes such as approval delays or administrative hurdles may contributed to prolonged doctoral study, their direct impact was not robust in this sample.) Thus, the weak but positive trend observed here underscores the need for more efficient administrative processes to support timely completion.

Table 8: correlation between Timely Degree Completion (TD) and Positive Aspects of Supervisor (PAS).

Variable	1	2
1. Timely Degree Completion (TD)	1	-.027
2. Positive Aspects of Supervisor (PAS)	-.027	1



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By contrast, supervisory dimensions showed more direct associations. The correlation between TD and Positive Aspects of Supervision (PAS) was weak, negative, and non-significant ($r = -.027$, $p = .721$), suggested that students' positive supervisory experiences such as accessibility, guidance, and encouragement did not directly predict shorter completion times.

Table 9: correlation between Timely Degree Completion (TD) and Negative Aspects of Supervision (NAS).

Variables	1	2
1. Timely Degree Completion (TD)	1	.216**
2. Negative Aspects of Supervision (NAS)	.216**	1

However, the correlation between TD and Negative Aspects of Supervision (NAS) was statistically significant, albeit weak ($r = .216$, $p = .004$). This indicates that negative supervisory experiences, such as poor or inconsistent feedback, workload-related inaccessibility, or weak communication, were meaningfully associated with extended doctoral completion timelines. These findings reinforce the argument that strengthening supervisory quality particularly by reducing workload, improving feedback mechanisms, and fostering constructive relationships is essential for minimizing doctoral delays.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This section captures the lived experiences, perceptions, and suggested solutions from doctoral students and supervisors who participated in the interviews.

Thematic Analysis of supervisors' interview

Supervisor–Supervisee Relationship

The supervisory relationship emerged as a central theme in shaping doctoral progress. Respondents consistently emphasized that effective supervision is grounded in “mutual respect and communication,” where supervisors provide mentorship, methodological guidance, and constructive feedback. However, gaps in consistency often trigger delays. As one supervisor noted, “when a consistency gap comes, delay factors start”.

Several challenges were identified. Authoritative attitudes, mismatches in research interests, and supervisors prioritizing personal projects over student theses created disengagement. For instance, a participant observed that “some supervisors postpone thesis review until their own project milestones are achieved.” Others highlighted systemic flaws in supervisor allocation, where “random or availability-based” matching caused misalignment in research direction.

Despite these barriers, positive engagement was seen as highly motivating. Supervisors acknowledged their dual responsibility: facilitating research without becoming “service providers,” while ensuring students take ownership. Yet delays often arose when supervisors neglected feedback, overloaded students with unrelated tasks, or faced availability issues. As one participant stressed, supervision is a “triangulated responsibility the supervisor, student, and department must work in harmony.”



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Overall, findings reveal that while supportive and collaborative supervision fosters timely completion, mismatches, poor communication, and inconsistent feedback are critical delay factors. Clear role expectations, informed supervisor–student matching, and continuous engagement were underscored as essential for minimizing delays in doctoral research.

Workload and Feedback Dynamics

Supervisors' workload emerged as a critical theme influencing the pace of doctoral research. Many supervisors are simultaneously engaged in teaching, administration, departmental duties, and personal responsibilities, limiting their capacity to provide timely and consistent feedback. Seven respondents acknowledged that “workload of supervisor affect the feedback from the supervisors and theses got delay.” However, some contested this narrative, with one professor arguing that “the supervisor’s workload, though important, is seen as manageable when both the student and supervisor are committed.” This tension highlights that delays are not solely institutional but also relational, shaped by coordination between supervisor availability and student initiative. Students often echoed this concern, pointing out that irregular meetings stretch feedback loops and hinder research continuity. One participant stressed that “delays frequently result from a lack of harmonization between the supervisee’s initiative and the supervisor’s availability.” Similarly, female respondents emphasized that personal and family obligations compound supervisory delays, especially when both supervisor and student struggle with time management. A senior professor recalled that “daily or frequent meetings enabled immediate feedback and corrections, but gaps of months made supervision inconsistent.”

Overall, while workload undeniably shapes supervisory responsiveness, evidence suggests that effective time management, commitment from both parties, and regular communication can mitigate its impact on research delays.

Institutional Support System

Institutional inefficiencies were repeatedly identified as systemic obstacles to timely PhD completion. Respondents emphasized that administrative processes ranging from synopsis approval to external evaluations are often slow and inconsistent. One supervisor highlighted that “despite completing the thesis in 10 months, the administrative process took nearly two years due to inefficiencies in external evaluation.” Another student reported facing “seven years procedural delay,” underlining the severity of bureaucratic barriers.

Foreign evaluation procedures emerged as a particularly problematic area. Respondents stressed that dissertations are sometimes sent to evaluators outside their area of expertise, creating repeated rejections and long delays. As one supervisor noted, “If my topic is on depression, it must be evaluated by someone who works on depression, not just any psychologist.” Others pointed to the lack of prior consent from foreign examiners, which often prolongs timelines.

Beyond evaluations, institutional resources such as research software, libraries, and workspace were described as inadequate or inaccessible, compounding frustration and limiting productivity. Respondents also criticized viva scheduling and report submissions, where “some examiners take 3–4 months and still don’t send the report.”

Overall, institutional bottlenecks spanning bureaucratic red tape, evaluator mismatches, and weak resource provision emerged as structural drivers of doctoral delay. Addressing these requires streamlining procedures, aligning evaluators with research domains, and



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strengthening institutional research support systems.

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Overall, while workload undeniably shapes supervisory responsiveness, evidence suggests that effective time management, commitment from both parties, and regular communication can mitigate its impact on research delays.

Institutional Support System

Institutional inefficiencies were repeatedly identified as systemic obstacles to timely PhD completion. Respondents emphasized that administrative processes ranging from synopsis approval to external evaluations are often slow and inconsistent. One supervisor highlighted that "despite completing the thesis in 10 months, the administrative process took nearly two years due to inefficiencies in external evaluation." Another student reported facing "seven years procedural delay," underlining the severity of bureaucratic barriers.

Foreign evaluation procedures emerged as a particularly problematic area. Respondents stressed that dissertations are sometimes sent to evaluators outside their area of expertise, creating repeated rejections and long delays. As one supervisor noted, "If my topic is on depression, it must be evaluated by someone who works on depression, not just any psychologist." Others pointed to the lack of prior consent from foreign examiners, which often prolongs timelines.

beyond evaluations, institutional resources such as research software, libraries, and workspace were described as inadequate or inaccessible, compounding frustration and limiting productivity. Respondents also criticized viva scheduling and report submissions, where "some examiners take 3–4 months and still don't send the report."

Overall, institutional bottlenecks spanning bureaucratic red tape, evaluator mismatches, and weak resource provision emerged as structural drivers of doctoral delay. Addressing these requires streamlining procedures, aligning evaluators with research domains, and strengthening institutional research support systems.



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Departmental Politics

The role of departmental politics in delaying doctoral progress, though not highlighted as a universal concern, emerged as a subtle yet important factor. Respondents noted that internal conflicts within departments can occasionally interfere with supervisory processes and administrative approvals. One supervisor reflected, “If there’s an issue between you and someone else in the department, they might not let the work proceed, affecting the supervisory work and delaying research.”

Such dynamics often manifest in the form of red tape, interpersonal disputes, or evaluators withholding progress due to departmental rivalries. As one participant explained, “We’ve seen red tape issues... sometimes the internal evaluator doesn’t pass on work due to personal issues with others in the department, so the work doesn’t move forward.” In these cases, both supervisors and supervisees bear the burden of inefficiencies that are unrelated to the quality of the research itself.

These findings highlight that although departmental politics may not be widespread, when present, they create unnecessary procedural bottlenecks that extend timelines and strain supervisory relationships. Ultimately, the delays caused by such internal politics add another layer of challenge to an already demanding doctoral journey.

Discussion

The mixed-methods findings of this study revealed that delays in doctoral research are the outcome of interrelated personal, supervisory, and institutional factors rather than isolated individual shortcomings. Quantitative results showed that the majority of respondents required five to six years to complete their doctoral studies well beyond the standard three- to four-year duration confirming that extended completion timelines are systemic within Pakistan’s higher education context. Qualitative data further illuminated how supervisory relationships, workload management, institutional inefficiencies, and departmental politics interact to produce these delays. Together, the findings underscore the importance of both structural reforms and relational improvements in mitigating doctoral research delays.

Supervision proved to be a central factor influencing timely doctoral completion. Quantitative findings revealed that negative aspects of supervision such as poor or inconsistent feedback, limited accessibility, and heavy supervisory workload had a significant association with delayed completion. Qualitative insights reinforced these results, showing that both students and supervisors viewed supervision as a shared responsibility between the supervisor, student, and department. However, mismatched research interests, insufficient engagement, and feedback delays frequently disrupted progress. These patterns echo international and national studies identifying supervision quality and consistency as key predictors of doctoral persistence (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2023; Zahid et al., 2024) From (Tinto, 1993)) perspective, weak supervision limits academic integration and belonging, reducing persistence.

Supervisory workload and communication challenges also emerged as recurring concerns. Quantitative data indicated moderate dissatisfaction with supervisory accessibility. While qualitative findings revealed that competing responsibilities such as teaching, administration, and research often restricted timely feedback. Some supervisors argued that committed students could still make progress despite these constraints, suggested that delays are relational rather than one-sided. These findings align with global evidence that supervisory overload and coordination gaps lead to fragmented support (Ali et al., 2023; N. Irshad et al., 2023; Moxham & Chien, 2022) Moreover, the



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study highlighted the psychological impact of supervision quality, with many students reporting anxiety, frustration, and reduced motivation due to inconsistent support. Female candidates particularly noted the strain of balancing family obligations and academic duties. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the findings suggest that doctoral motivation and persistence depend on the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. Thus, strengthening feedback systems, ensuring balanced supervisory workloads, and integrating mental health and peer-support mechanisms are essential for minimizing doctoral research delays.

Institutional inefficiencies emerged as another major source of delay. Quantitative data showed that respondents perceived departmental politics, poor communication, and delayed administrative procedures as significant contributors to extended completion timelines. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, revealing that bureaucratic obstacles such as slow synopsis approvals, delayed examiner feedback, and mismatched foreign evaluations often prolonged completion by months or even years. Respondents also highlighted inadequate access to research resources such as databases, software, and laboratories, which further hindered progress. These findings resonate with broader research in South Asia indicating that administrative inefficiencies and limited institutional capacity are structural impediments to doctoral education (Akram, Younas, et al., 2023; Ullah, 2024b). The Government of Pakistan's Economic Survey (Government of Pakistan, 2024) also reported stagnation in PhD completion rates despite increased investments in higher education, pointing to persistent systemic bottlenecks. Internationally, studies have similarly emphasized the role of institutional support in doctoral outcomes, showing that efficient administrative processes, access to research infrastructure, and digitalized monitoring systems significantly improve completion rates (M. Hurtado et al., 2024; J. Lee et al., 2022).

The findings also revealed that departmental politics and interpersonal conflicts within academic units create hidden barriers to progress. Both supervisors and students described instances where personal rivalries or favouritism delayed approvals or thesis evaluations. Such dynamics reflect what (R. Mahsood et al., 2025) termed "academic gatekeeping," where internal politics influence procedural timelines. This environment weakens institutional integrity and exacerbates stress among doctoral candidates. From a theoretical perspective, such institutional climates hinder academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993) and frustrate autonomy needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000) thereby impeding persistence and motivation.

The findings reinforce that solutions must target both institutional systems and human relationships. Strengthening supervisor training, reducing administrative redundancy, and digitalizing thesis evaluation processes could significantly improve completion rates. Equally, fostering a culture of mutual respect, consistent feedback, and shared accountability between supervisors and students is essential. As both Tinto's integration model and Self-Determination Theory emphasize, academic persistence is sustained when students feel competent, autonomous, and connected within supportive institutional structures.

Conclusion

The combined findings of this study confirm that delays in doctoral research are shaped by both individual and structural dynamics. Quantitative results indicated that the majority of students exceeded the conventional three- to four-year completion timeline, with 65.3% taking more than four years and nearly a quarter (24.5%) requiring seven years or more. Delay-related perceptions also highlighted systemic issues, as most



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respondents agreed that delays beyond planned timelines and research submission postponements were common among doctoral candidates. Correlation analysis further revealed that negative supervisory experiences such as lack of timely feedback and weak communication were significantly associated with prolonged degree completion, whereas positive supervisory factors alone showed little impact. These results resonate with recent global studies, which emphasize that ineffective supervision and bureaucratic hurdles are critical predictors of doctoral attrition and delay (M. Hurtado et al., 2024)

Qualitative insights expanded on these patterns by illustrating how supervisory relationships, workload management, and institutional inefficiencies contribute to delays. Supervisors and students stressed that inconsistent communication, mismatched research interests, and overloaded supervisors frequently disrupted research continuity. Institutional barriers such as prolonged evaluation processes, inadequate access to resources, and departmental politics compounded these challenges, echoing similar findings from international contexts where bureaucratic red tape and poor resource provision undermine doctoral progress (Nyamupangedengu, 2024). At the same time, positive supervisory relationships, characterized by respect, availability, and constructive guidance, were seen as highly motivating, suggesting that supportive engagement can partly offset structural constraints.

Taken together, the integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence revealed that doctoral delays are not solely attributable to student shortcomings but are embedded within supervisory practices, institutional structures, and departmental cultures. Locally, in Pakistan, delays appear especially acute due to underdeveloped supervisory systems, inconsistent administrative processes, and limited funding support (Government of Pakistan, 2024; Ullah, 2024). Globally, similar trends highlighted the need for policies that prioritize structured supervision, efficient evaluation systems, and stronger institutional support mechanisms to improve doctoral persistence (J. Lee et al., 2022). Addressing these barriers requires a multi-level approach: enhancing supervisory training, streamlining bureaucratic processes, and fostering transparent, politics-free academic environments. Such reforms would not only support timely degree completion but also strengthen the broader higher education system in Pakistan and comparable contexts.

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