

Institutional Conflicts and Administrative Delays in Doctoral Dissertation defence: Evidence from Pakistani Universities

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigated how institutional issues and administrative procrastination affect the extended doctoral dissertation defence in universities. The study involved twelve doctorate students in both public and private universities whose dissertations were already submitted but the process of dissertation defence was extremely time-consuming. Semi-structured interviews were used as a source of data collection and thematic analysis of the data. The results showed that the institutional conflicts that were reported by almost all the participants were as a result of disagreements between supervisors and examiners, lack of coordination, and poor institutional policies. Ten participants pointed at administrative inefficiencies, namely, lagging documentation processing, lack of consistency in communication, and lengthy scheduling processes. These institutional issues all had the effect of stagnating academic growth, emotional burnout, and lessening of professionalization opportunities of the impacted scholars. The respondents highlighted that such delays demoralized them, lowered their self-esteem and their eagerness to be involved in future academic activities. Nevertheless, these difficulties did not stop most candidates, who were determined by self-motivation, networking among themselves and lobbying within institutions. The paper arrives at the conclusion of long delays in dissertation defence taking has strong structural and bureaucratic roots. It requires universities to formulate clear policies, prompt mediums of communication and mechanisms of conflict management so as to promote academic justice and on time degree delivery.

Keywords: *Doctoral delays, institutional conflicts, administrative inefficiency, dissertation defense, higher education, academic resilience*

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Introduction

Doctoral dissertation defence is the finishing point of the years of academic commitment, intellectual work, and research. But in most institutions of higher learning, such an important academic feat is usually postponed by the complicated layers of institutional wrangles, bureaucratic inflexibility and institutional inefficiencies. The resulting delays not only are a dragging to the academic path of students but also pose psychological suffering, financial stress, and career insecurity (Ahmad et al., 2025a, 2025b). Under the qualitative paradigm, such experiences disclose systemic vices in governance, supervision and institutional coordination that go way beyond individual performance and academic ability.

Earlier studies have enlightened the manner in which doctoral students face institutional bottlenecks after their dissertations are submitted (Ahmad et al., 2023b). emphasized the role of administrative procrastination, in association with a low level of supervisory responsiveness in promoting anxiety and delayed degree completion. Equally, procedural challenges and ambiguity in communication channels in universities have been established to worsen post-submission stress among doctoral students (Ahmad et al., 2023a). Previously, Waheed et al. (2021) reported the so-called untold narratives of post-submission despair, which shows that the waiting time of defence is often long, up to years, and is often institutional silence, as well as negligence of the administration. Combined, these results highlight the fact that institutional inefficiency and administrative indecision is a structural issue which is heavily institutionalized in the academic culture of most universities.

These problems have been substantiated by the recent research in the world. In a qualitative research on Iran, the authors discovered that bureaucratic barriers and interrupted system processes of implementation within research doctoral programs are among the biggest barriers to timely completion (Koohpaei et al., 2024). Similarly, a study undertaken at the University of Peshawar has identified institutional rigidity, delayed communication, and slow evaluation commitment as the leading causes of postgraduate delays (Begum et al., 2024). Ari and Korkmaz (2024) have found that these additional barriers include minimum institutional support, failure to fit administrative expectations, and coordination with the supervisors to extend the time of dissertation defense among working PhD students in Turkey. According to Fetene and Tamrat (2021), the same trend was observed in Ethiopia within the Addis Ababa University

and found that bureaucratic systems, external slowness, and lack of resources to finance research are the obstacles to doctoral education.

Such uniform results in different settings show that this issue of late dissertation defences is not limited by national borders and institutional forms. It is not only a logistical or procedural problem but it is also a more profound institutional mismatch between administrative governance and academic mentorship. Long term defenses disturb academic progress, destroy the credibility of research programs and discourage scholarly innovation. Besides, the social and professional impact of the delays has the negative aspect of lost job chances and worsening mental health conditions in doctoral scholars (Ahmad et al., 2025). Thus, this qualitative research is intended to determine the overlap between the institutional clashes and administrative delays in higher education, and how they all intersect in long dissertation defences. Through an insight on the lived experiences of doctoral students, this study aims at unravelling the institutional processes that perpetuate delay and suggest measures to make academic institution more responsive and supportive.

Literature Review

Studies have shown that institutional politics and conflict of interests between supervisors, committees as well as administrative units are the greatest obstacles to the successful and prompt development of doctoral studies. A narrative inquiry conducted by Waheed et al. (2021) on doctoral students in Pakistan found out that stalled processes are frequent due to a lack of alignment between the administrative offices and the supervisors and the students spend a long time in the post-submission limbo. These organizational conflicts, in the form of unclear roles, conflicting expectations, and poor follow-up, bring about the circumstances that easily prolong defense timelines (Waheed et al., 2021). Furthermore, the larger studies of doctoral governance emphasize the tendency of fragmented institutional processes and multiple authority to create time-consuming structures of doctoral milestones (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2025; Taylor, 2023). Zahid and Mahmood (2024) record in South Asian contexts that a multi-layered approval process (e.g., topic approvals, BASR/board meetings) and administrative bottlenecks always slow down doctoral processes, and the two forces of bureaucratic systems and institutional struggles which extend defences.

Existing empirical studies have a considerable amount of literature using administrative processes as a target of delay. Pakistanis studies are characterized by long wait times to propose approvals, long to identify and compensate an external examiner, and inconsistent viva voice panel scheduling (Rehman et al., 2025; Zahid & Mahmood, 2024). According to

the case study of the University of Peshawar (Begum et al., 2024), the institutional factors that contribute to the delayed completion are identified as poor communication channels, poor tracking of thesis submission, and poor adherence to evaluation schedules. The international research supports the findings: the study of Fetene and Tamrat (2021) at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia found that the causes of doctoral delays were considered old-fashioned external review, problems with the payment of funds, and backlog of procedures. Together, the literature indicates that administrative systems which lack strength (as opposed to individual behaviors) are fundamental causes of protracted times of defense.

Any delay in the defensive system has quantifiable impacts on the well-being and careers of doctoral candidates. According to Tamrat and Fetene (2021), the anxiety, demotivation, and sensation of academic isolation are also reported in candidates who await reviews or a schedule of defense. Further studies led by (Ahmad et al., 2025a, 2025b; Waheed et al., 2021) also report poor health, an additional financial burden, and lost job opportunities related to long PhD programs. Psychosocial effects that have been 4 documented in other studies of working-student groups (Darley, 2021) and case studies of institutions (Van Rooij et al., 2021) are similar loss of momentum, reduced research identity and compromised career transitions, but the difference lies in the fact that administrative delays are associated with measurable human costs.

Although the evidence that has been collected over time shows that institutional conflict and administrative inefficiency are global issues, the majority of the studies either (a) record the procedural aspects separately (e.g., proposal approval delays), (b) observe the post-submission emotional experience, but fail to break down the interaction of institutional power relations and administrative processes in the process of defense (Hill & Thabet, 2021; McAlpine et al., 2021). In the case of Pakistan, the IJSSA, and (Mahsood et al., 2025; Zahid & Mahmood, 2024) studies are large-scale descriptions of the procedural delays, and Waheed et al. (2021) are narrative descriptions of the effects of conflicts and bureaucracy in delaying defences; but a gap in the qualitative literature that captures the perspectives of multiple stakeholders (doctoral candidates, supervisors, administrators, examiners) on the issue still remains. Similar unresolved intersections, such as administrative systems and institutional politics, which should be compared and interpreted (analogous), are indicated by the international literature (Alisic et al., 2024; Asrifan et al., 2026; Brabazon, 2022; Leible et al., 2025; Pratt & Shaughnessy, 2022). The work aims to fill this gap by seeking in-depth contextualized descriptions of the defense stage, with an emphasis on

lived experience and following institutional mechanisms and power relations that perpetuate delays.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore doctoral candidates lived experiences of prolonged dissertation defenses caused by institutional conflicts and administrative delays in higher education. Specifically, it seek to:

1. Understand doctoral candidates' perceptions of institutional and administrative factors contributing to dissertation defense delays.
2. Explore the emotional, academic, and professional effects of prolonged delays on doctoral candidates.
3. Identify coping strategies adopted by doctoral candidates while dealing with institutional and bureaucratic challenges.
4. Propose participant-driven recommendations to improve institutional procedures and ensure timely completion of doctoral defenses.

Research Questions

1. What institutional and administrative factors are perceived by doctoral candidates as contributing to prolonged dissertation defense delays?
2. How do these extended delays influence doctoral candidates' emotional well-being, academic progress, and professional growth?
3. In what ways do doctoral candidates cope with or respond to institutional and bureaucratic challenges during the defense process?
4. What practical recommendations emerge from doctoral candidates' experiences to improve institutional practices and ensure timely dissertation defenses?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore lived experiences of doctoral students in the process of enduring long dissertation defence, due to institutional mishaps and procedural delays at the administrative level within Pakistani universities. A qualitative research method was used to allow deeper understanding of the subjective experiences, perceptions and feelings of participants (Poth & Creswell, 2018). The focus was on finding meanings present in participants' narratives, not on measuring their responses. This methodological choice is consistent with the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms where

the contextual understanding, personal meaning and the co-construction of knowledge by researcher and participants come to the fore (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025).

Participants and Sampling

The target population was the doctoral candidates of public universities of Pakistan who have completed their dissertations but faced huge delay in their defence process. Participants were recruited by using purposive sampling in order to ensure the inclusion of individuals that were able to provide rich, relevant insights into the phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). A total of 12 doctoral candidates took part in the study, and they were from different disciplines, age groups, and backgrounds, which added value to the diversity of views. All participants had submitted their dissertations between one and three years ago but had not completed their defences because of administrative or institutional barriers. These inclusion criteria ensured participants had direct, recent and meaningful experiences regarding the issue under investigation.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews which gave flexibility to probe participants' unique experiences while being able to keep the core themes consistent. Each interview was conducted face-to-face or online (Zoom or Google Meet - depending on the availability and convenience of participants) and lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. The interview protocol contained questions relating to institutional policies, supervisory communication, administration transparency, emotional strain and professional ramifications of delayed defenses. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were kept in order to record non-verbal cues, tone and contextual information that improved the interpretive depth of the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework of Braun (2021) which provides a systematic and flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes that cut across qualitative data. This was followed by familiarization in which all interview transcript data were read several times to familiarize the researcher with the data. After that, initial codes were developed to represent important concepts, words, and definitions related

to the research goals. Next, related codes were grouped into more general categories that were subsequently organized into major themes that reflected common experiences of the participants. The main themes that were identified were: institutional bureaucracy, administrative inefficiency and procedural delays, emotional and professional strain, coping and adaptation mechanisms, and participant-driven suggestions for reform.

The analysis was iterative and interpretative in nature, which means that the researcher went back and forth between the data, codes and themes to refine his or her interpretations and to ensure internal consistency. Participant narratives played a central role in the meaning-making process and comparisons across cases were used to accentuate similarity and differences in experiences. Each theme was bolstered by direct quotes from the participants, to ensure that the voices of doctoral candidates were authentic. In order to increase trustworthiness and credibility, a number of validation strategies were employed. Member checking was undertaken through sending thematic summaries to selected participants to ensure that their opinions were accurately represented. Peer debriefing was used to check interpretations with fellow researchers who are also familiar with qualitative analysis to reduce bias from individual researchers. Further, coding notes, reflective memos, and decision logs audit trail was kept throughout the analysis process for transparency and rigor.

Overall, the data analysis showed the role of institutional and administrative constraints in causing long dissertation defence delays with serious emotional and professional implications for doctoral students in Pakistani universities. Thematic findings not only provided information on systemic inefficiencies but also offered resilience on the part of the participants themselves, as well as their constructive recommendations on how to enhance academic governance.

Results

Navigating Institutional Bureaucracy

This theme describes the lived experiences of bureaucratic complexity and inconsistency of the procedures among doctoral students in universities. Participants explained how ambiguity of the roles, overlap of authority and solid cultures within the administration converted normal academic procedures into lengthy and painful obstacles to dissertation defense.

Participant A is a male, mid-career doctoral student, bureaucratic employee in the public sector noted that the process of bureaucracy was disjointed and confusing. He explains his sorrow as:

“The dissertation procedure was like a labyrinth of redundant signatures and the lack of documents. Each office passed the buck onto the other and no one was aware of who was to handle it. The system caused me to feel helpless and always disorientated instead of enabling me to carry out research”.

In this story, procedural ambiguity and accountability created frustration and the feeling of institutional abandonment.

Participant B is a woman, doctoral student, in a social sciences field pointed out contradictory administrative directions, she describes that

“One of the offices requested three hard copies, five with a different formatting. One of the instructions that I adhered to was when I was accused of negligence by the other. The process was tiresome and emotionally draining due to the lack of coordination”.

Her story is an indication of institutional inconsistency wherein students are taking in the implications of institutional miscommunication.

Participant C is a Female, fulltime doctoral researcher. She noted the emotional effects of bureaucratic delays as under:

“Though my defense date had been approved, two times, it was delayed due to failure to sign the notification in time. It was as though our school lives were first meant to be secondary to office politics, and I was slowly losing my motivation to it”.

This experience shows how inefficiency in the process becomes entrenched in the form of emotional distress and disconnection.

Participant D is a male first-generation university doctoral candidate; he indicates informal administrative power transactions in his own style as under:

“Every clerk was a kind of a gatekeeper who was able to postpone my file without any clarification. Asking them was a dangerous affair since it could create more problems. I learned that it is individuals who make progress rather than rules”.

This quote shows how the authority system that is unofficial enhances dependency and silence in bureaucracies.

Participant E, is also a female, doctoral candidate, in the education discipline she enlightens her experience understood bureaucratic routines as passive control:

“Whenever I enquired on my evaluation reports, the answer was always that it was under process- months at times. Nobody had a reason to explain, and no one was ashamed to be responsible. That was worse than a direct refusal, more exasperating to make the silence”.

Her story is indicative of a lack of transparency in the procedures and a loss of trust due to non-communicator as a habit.

Participant F, is a Male, doctoral candidate, he specifies his comparative academic experience in his own tune as under:

“Students are able to monitor their progress in dissertation online in other universities. In this case, all is based on oral promises. Such lack of transparency results in confusion, misunderstanding and undue delays in the whole process of conducting the defense”.

The structural disjunction in this comparison is especially the lack of digital accountability.

Participant G, is a reflective overview of the bureaucratic culture was given by a male, senior doctoral candidate, towards completion:

“Education becomes bureaucracy and not scholarship when the administrative procedures will be of more significance than the students. The system loses its academic mission and starts to work as a means of safeguarding itself”.

Such a sentence sums up a general feeling of disempowerment and institutional dysfunction.

These stories, when put together, demonstrate that institutional bureaucracy is more of a lived experience of disempowerment than a procedural undertaking. Lack of responsibility, communication inconsistency and hierarchical inflexibility interacted to slow down

doctoral defense and affect the emotional state and scholarly impetus of candidates.

Endless Administrative Waiting

This theme is based on the experiences of doctoral students witnessing the long waiting periods due to the ineffective administrative approaches, especially in the examiner appointment, thesis evaluation and defense scheduling. Delays, according to the participants, are repetitive, opaque, and normalized within the institutional practices and make academic progression an unending waiting time.

Participant A is a male, mid-career doctoral candidate, employee of the public sector organization he explains his story that there is long waiting times to get the examiner evaluation reports:

“It took me nearly 18 months to be approved by external examiners after I had submitted my thesis. On visiting the office, the same answer was always obtained, -that the Email was sent. Nobody was able to demonstrate them and the waiting were psychologically draining”.

This story has pointed out deficient paperwork habits and acceptance of extended ambiguity.

Participant B is male doctoral candidate from social sciences discipline when the researcher asked about the contradictions in the claims made by administration, he replied:

“The office replied that the examiner had not replied, but on my directly addressing the examiner he replied that he had never received the thesis. I was in the middle of the institution and the evaluator with the work that was not my duty”.

The institution reveals loopholes of communication and responsibility through his experience.

Participant C is a Female, full-time doctoral researcher, who stressed the role of individual absences how it slowed down the whole process:

“I have submitted my thesis over eighteen months ago, but the defense process is still pending because the authorized officer is not present at

his seat. Without a backup system, nearly one full academic year has been squandered without any explanation”.

This story is about excessive dependence on people as opposed to well-developed administrative institutions.

Participant D is male, first-generation doctoral candidate, he explains emotional burnout due to a long period of inactivity:

“I did consider dropping out, not due to my research, but due to hours and hours of waiting. Months went by without improvement, and I felt like being invisible in my own university as though my academic life no longer counted”.

This quote demonstrates the fact that the stalling process in the administration destroys the motivation and scholarly sense.

Participant E is female scholar from education and research department; she points out the disjointed interdepartmental coordination as under:

“There was no coordination of the department and examination branch. I sent the same documents two or three times since each office insisted that they never received the documents. The repetition was time-wasting and unnecessary nervousness of the process”.

Her story confirms organizational incoherence in the working process.

Participant F is male, doctoral student, post-defense phase, he indicates on inefficiency even after the completion of doctoral dissertation defence:

“It took me five months to get the formal confirmation even after I defended my doctoral dissertation. The authorities insisted that a member of the committee was on an official trip outside the country and his signature was needed on the meeting minutes, which led to further stalling”.

It has been a learning experience that inefficiency is not limited to the defense to the final certification levels.

Participant G is a male doctoral candidate; he elucidates the problem of administrative delay:

“It is not absence of policies but the lack of responsibility. Everyone assumes that else will take actions and nothing will be done. Waiting turns into the order of things and there is no urgency within the system”.

A culture of procedural diffusion and institutional inertia is reflected in his reflection.

All these stories provide an understanding of the administrative waiting as a systemic situation rather than an isolated failure. Bad coordination, undocumented and unaccountable procedures turned the ordinary doctoral processes into extended durations of indecision, postponing the defences and undermining confidence in the efficiency of institutions among the candidates.

Emotional and Psychological Strain

This theme is based on the emotional and psychological effects of long dissertation examination and defense procrastination. Interviewees referred to long-term uncertainty as a cause of emotional depletion, resulting in anxiety, a spirit of demotivation, loss of self-esteem, and in certain instances, a negative health and social impact. These events demonstrate that the administrative delays go beyond inconvenience of the procedure into the sublime of personal and psychological stress.

Participant A is a male doctoral student and senior lecturer who explained what he perceived to be the emotional uncertainty that was inflicted by extended silence by the institution:

“Each month having no news was like being unheard. I started doubting my academic value and my research. The uncertainty impacted my teaching and research focus which were in constant anxiety and emotional instability”.

This narrative shows the undermining effect of self-efficacy and professional confidence by institutional silence.

Participant B, is a female doctoral student and mother of two kids, who has highlighted the emotional dilemma between the academic procrastination and the family demands:

“My children kept telling me when they would finally call me Doctor and I did not know. It was saddening since the lateness was not my fault but carelessness of the system”.

Her experience points out the way in which personal identity and family morale becomes skewed due to delayed defence of doctoral dissertation.

Participant C is a female full-time doctoral researcher that explained how waiting affected her psychologically:

“I get up in the morning looking forward to a mail which I never receive. It is as though my life is put on hold and there is no development and no resolution. The waiting has gradually killed my motivation and emotional strength”.

This story is a demonstration of sustained stress and a feeling of stagnation that comes with bureaucratic procrastination.

Participant D is a male first-generation doctoral student who associated administrative delay with physical and mental health issues:

“The endless indecisiveness provoked intense anxieties and health issues. I told to take my rest, but how was it possible, when I never could know my future, and when it was altogether beyond my power”.

Her narrative illustrates the incarnated results of the institutional slowness.

Participant E is a female doctoral student who works in a government department and explained what a long delay can do to society:

“I kept getting the question of why my doctorate had not been completed by colleagues. Others thought that I was irresponsible or incompetent. This was a shame to realize that the delay did not have anything to do with my academics”.

This quote demonstrates that institutional inefficiency can create social stigmatization as well as reputational damage.

Participant F is a female doctoral student who is near graduation and reported about being emotionally withdrawn in academic life:

“I ceased going to seminars and did not want to have academic talks. My PhD was a source of discomfort or rather pride and trying to be out of it seemed to be the only solution to the emotional weight”.

It is also her case of burnout and emotional detachment as coping mechanisms because of the long-term strain.

Participant G is a male senior doctoral student and he summarized the

emotional journey of the doctoral experience:

“My start in my PhD is full of passion and hopes, but the delays which take long empty me emotionally. The system gradually wears my passion out to the point that survival is more relevant than intellectual development”.

This commentary sums up group disappointment and existential exhaustion.

In general, the results show that a long dissertation delay can create major emotional and mental stress in doctoral students. The resulting effects of persistent institutional uncertainty were anxiety, burnout, diminished motivation, health issues, and social embarrassment, which interacted with each other. Those experiences support the necessity of clear communication, the development of emotional support systems, and psychologically aware administrative systems in the sphere of doctoral education.

Resilience Amid Institutional Delays

This theme underscores the fact that even the doctoral candidates were found to be resilient as they came out to grapple with lengthy institutional delays. Irrespective of the feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and emotional burden, the participants employed adaptive coping mechanisms to maintain motivation, emotional stability, and academic self. These tactics were individual agency as well as situational adaptation to structural limitations.

Participant A is a male doctoral student and senior lecturer who was able to sustain academic activity to deal with long delay:

“I managed to stay academically engaged reading new findings and composing small papers. Being intellectually active also made me feel that even though my studies were not progressing in my doctoral program, I still had an academic identity”.

This plan represents cognitive coping in terms of prolonged academic involvement.

Participant B is a female doctoral student who used his or her personal faith to survive in the face of long-term uncertainty:

“During the wait, my religion turned out to be my strength. I thought that patience and praying would see me through and this belief aided me to cope with frustration and stay composed”.

Her experience brings out spiritual resilience as an internal coping mechanism.

Participant C is a full-time female doctoral researcher, who underlined the significance of peer support:

“A group of doctoral students with the same delays made us a small group. Communicating updates and frustrations helped me feel a little less alone and feel emotionally supported during the waiting period that was a long time”.

This taste proves the power of solidarity of peers.

Participant D is a male doctoral student who shifted his power to mentoring and supervision:

“I started mentoring the junior students and overseeing small projects. Serving others helped me to realize that I still had academic value, despite the fact that I had procrastinated in earning my own degree”.

His coping is positive redirection and reassessment of self-worth.

Participant E is a female doctoral student who is working in one of the public institutions and was dependent on routine and time management:

“I established a habit of working, exercising, spending time with family, and reading every day. The structure provided me with the feeling of control and helped me not to get emotionally overwhelmed with the waiting”.

This plan shows that behavioural control is a resilience mechanism.

Participant F is a female doctoral student who explained the temporary disengagement as a self-care:

“First, I was emotionally drained and furious. A short academic break made me come to my senses and resume my academic work with a fresh mind and emotional resilience”.

Her story is an adaptive withdrawal to cope with.

Participant G is a male doctoral student who turned anger into action:

“I would rather write to the administration and propose to them an improvement in policy, rather than stay silent. By acting I felt empowered and less helpless”.

This reaction emphasizes the coping through agency and institutional involvement.

The results indicate that resilience in doctoral candidates was developed using various coping mechanisms, which included intellectual involvement, faith, peer support, productivity, routine, self-care, and advocacy. These reactions show that resilience is not a personal quality but a situational adjustment to the sustained delays in an institution. These strategies provided the candidates with psychological balance and motivation during systemic challenges.

Voices for Institutional Change

This is the theme where the doctoral candidates are asked to give their recommendations based on their own experiences in their study on how to enhance the practices associated with dissertation evaluation and defense in institutions. Nevertheless, after the long delays and bureaucracy, the participants made constructive and solution-focused recommendations that can be implemented to promote transparency, accountability, efficiency, and support to students in universities.

Participant A is a male doctoral student who highlighted the importance of well-structured timelines of the procedures:

“The universities ought to establish definite timelines of each phase of the doctoral process, starting with thesis submission and up to thesis defense. Students should be provided with transparency, and tracking system would help to avoid unnecessary delays and misunderstanding”.

In his recommendation, he emphasizes time conscious procedures and computer accountability.

Participant B is a female doctoral student who emphasized that supervisory capacity building was needed:

“Most delays occur due to poor communication between supervisors, who are not using digital means or communicate regularly. Supervisor training would be mandatory and may lead to better coordination and misunderstanding during the evaluation process”.

This recommendation by her identifies the faculty development as one of the ways of enhancing doctoral governance.

Participant C is a female doctoral candidate who suggested a

participative culture of academia:

“Universities are supposed to encourage teamwork among the staff members instead of competition. Professional jealousy would only cause unnecessary hurdles whereas teamwork would guarantee smooth and fair doctoral reviews”.

This recommendation lays emphasis on the influence of institutional culture on doctoral experiences.

Participant D is a male doctoral student that emphasized the necessity of institutional publication support:

“Publications should be supported by the institutions to doctoral candidates. The access to accepted journals or publisher’s assistance should be made available to the universities in order that students are not held up by circumstances beyond their control”.

His report represents institutional obstacles associated with the dissemination of research needs.

Participant E is a female doctoral student who has suggested the administrative streamlining:

“A single doctoral support desk should be established where all the administrative issues are addressed. The act of running across offices consumes time and will cause students unnecessary stress”.

The centralized coordination and responsibility are highlighted in her suggestion.

Participant F is a female doctoral student who requested the mechanism of psychological and emotional support:

“Emotional toll of the lengthy waiting is seldom noticeable in universities. It is possible that counselling services or frequent peer support sessions would enable doctoral candidates to overcome stress and uncertainty”.

That is why mental health assistance should be incorporated into doctoral systems.

Participant G is a male doctoral student who has placed stress on external control and responsibility:

“The grievance redressal system should be there such that doctoral students can report delays without fear. Universities should be subjected

to external monitoring bodies that will keep them accountable to unreasonable administrative practices”.

His suggestion emphasizes the change of policy at the level and the safeguarding of the rights of students.

Collectively, these voices have a holistic vision of institutional change based on the lived experiences of doctoral candidates. The respondents promoted open schedules, better supervision habits, collegial cultures at the academic level, centralized management, mental health and external accountability systems. These recommendations can help to minimize the administrative delays to a large extent and rebuild the confidence in doctoral education systems.

Discussion

The current research aimed at investigating the experiences of doctoral learners who experienced lengthy periods of dissertation reviews and defensive processes because of institutional disputes and administrative inefficiencies within higher institutions of learning. The results indicate that the problem of slow doctoral defenses does not exist in isolated circumstances in terms of procedural flaws but is systemic in terms of bureaucracy, institutional power relations, and poor administrative interface. These results correspond to the current literature, which determines institutional constraints as one of the major impediments to doctoral progress and student well-being (Ahmad et al., 2025a; Gardner, 2009; Sverdlik et al., 2018; Waheed et al., 2021).

One of the most overwhelming observations that can be drawn on the basis of the findings is that bureaucratic barriers and disjointed administrative procedures are widespread phenomena that cause dissertation defenses to be delayed. The respondents mentioned ambiguous procedures, duplication of roles, and long approval processes as common aspects of their doctoral experience over and over again. These observations resonate with Ahmad et al. (2023a), who noted that the lack of an efficient administrative process and time-consuming decision-making process are crucial contributors to frustration among doctoral students and their inability to finish the program in time. Based on the findings, institutional systems instead of contributing to academic progress tend to be a hindrance, which increases uncertainty and undermines trust in university governance.

These delays were also exacerbated by institutional conflicts especially those related to the supervisors, departmental leadership and administrative offices. Such conflicts were viewed as mostly invisible

and highly effective in determining the academic paths of participants. In cases of disagreement between senior members of the faculty or between the academic and administrative units, the doctoral students felt excluded and not heard and their academic future was in jeopardy. This finding confirms the argument of Lovitts (2001) that the politics of the department as well as the academic culture tend to have a bigger influence on the progress of the doctoral student than the merit of the student. On the same note, Sweitzer (2009) noted that the lack of alignment between institutional expectations and student needs may worsen the procedure latency and administrative stress.

In addition to the procedural barriers, the researchers mention the substantial emotional and psychological implications of long delays in dissertations. Respondents complained of anxiety levels that were sustained, emotional depletion, lack of motivation and hopelessness brought about by long time uncertainty. Such results are in line with those of Sverdlik et al. (2018) who found that protracted institutional stressors are major causes of doctoral burnout. The findings also prove that administrative procrastination is not only a logistic issue but a psychological burden putting doctoral candidates at a loss of confidence, identity, and well-being.

The practical consequences of the postponing dissertation defenses were also immense. The respondents cited missed career growth and development and scholarships, which supports the findings of earlier studies in questioning the effects of longer doctoral time on career itself (Ahmad, Waheed, and Gilani, 2025). Notably, the outcomes of institutional delay were not limited to the sphere of academia, but they also impacted family relations and a sense of social identity. According to Hunter and Devine (2016), the problem of doctoral struggles tends to affect personal life and influence emotional health and self-perception, which is also deeply reflected in the stories of the participants.

Doctoral students showed great strength in coping with these issues in several adaptive coping strategies. The respondents reported using peer networks, religious beliefs, mentoring, routine setups, and ongoing professional involvement to cope with emotional tension and maintain their academic audience. These results are echoed by the work by Pyhhalt et al. (2012) who found the role of social connectedness, meaning making, and agency in persisting in doctoral studies through challenging circumstances to be important. Nevertheless, in as much as personal resilience helped the candidates survive institutional delays, the participants repeatedly stated that coping must not be confused with a solution.

More importantly, participants claimed that systemic reforming would be necessary instead of individual perseverance. Their suggestions were to set clear deadlines of dissertation review, better coordination between the administrative units and supervisors, the introduction of electronic monitoring, and the establishment of redressing grievances of delayed cases. These recommendations made by participants are consistent with the global best practices that promote student-focused doctoral management and institutional accountability (Golde, 2005; Guo & Liu, 2026; Lee, 2007). The respondents also provided the necessity of a policy level control within the framework of which equity and uniformity in doctoral review procedures in various universities can be attained.

In general, this work is relevant to the qualitative research on doctoral education since it predicts the institutional aspects of delay in dissertation. The conclusions show that not only is bureaucratic inefficiency and institutional conflict an impediment to academic progression; but also inflicts emotional, professional, and social effects on the doctoral candidates. In line with previous literature (Ahmad et al., 2023; Gardner, 2010), the research highlights the importance of clear governance, administrative responsibility, and sensitive practices in the institution. Through the amplification of the voices of doctoral candidates, this study will show the severity of the situation in which the doctoral evaluation systems need to be reformulated in order to foster a sense of equity, efficiency, and well-being in the institutions of higher learning.

Conclusion

The qualitative research analyzed the effects of institutional tensions and administrative procrastination on dissertation defense experiences of doctoral students in institutions of higher learning. The results show that long delays are majorly caused by the systemic deficiencies, such as bureaucracy, poor interaction between administrative departments, and internal friction within academic departments. These institutional obstacles not only increase the time taken to complete doctoral defenses, but they also bring feelings of emotional distress, professional inertia and decreasing academic motivation in doctoral candidates. In line with previous studies, the research reveals the emphasis of organizational culture and bureaucratic inertia, which may override academic merit and academic inquiry (Ahmad et al., 2025a; Lyons et al., 2026).

Basing research on the experience of the participants, the study demonstrates that the delays in dissertations are not just procedural inconveniences, but institutional issues rooted in the institutional

governance. Lack of well-defined systems of accountability, vague policies and administrative failures became the key factors of the uncertainty of an extended period. This kind of institutional inertia inhibits the legitimacy of the doctoral education systems as well as the trust that the candidates have in the academic institutions. These results support the arguments of (Lovitts, 2001; Sverdlik, 2019) who stressed the notion that the lack of alignment between the practices of the institutions and the expectations of the doctoral candidates sets the stage towards frustration, lack of engagement, and delays. Notably, the fact that these problems persist indicates the necessity of policies and governance-oriented changes instead of administrative ones.

This paper also highlights the grave emotional and professional impacts of a prolonged delay in the dissertation. The most common responses among the participants were anxiety, uncertainty, emotional depletion and lack of motivation with regard to long waiting times. The state of having a sense of academic invisibility and balancing work life with family life in the face of persistent uncertainty were described by many. These findings are consistent with the existing literature that has associated doctoral delays with mental health issues and decreased productivity (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the results indicate that doctoral candidates were resilient due to peer support and spiritual coping and did not stop their academic activities. This resilience justifies the claim made by Pyhältö et al. (2012) that the social connectedness and perseverance are important in supporting doctoral persistence in times of institutional strain.

To sum it up, the research has been added to the increasing sphere of qualitative literature highlighting institutional aspects of doctoral education. It reveals the dire necessity of clear administrative procedures, responsible system of governance and enabling academic cultures by foregrounding the voices of doctoral students. The need to overcome institutional conflicts and administrative inefficiencies is critical not only to ensure doctoral completion on time, but also to provide the emotional, professional and scholarly involvement of doctoral students in the higher education systems.

Recommendations

According to the opinions of the participants and the results of the study conducted, a number of specific recommendations can be offered:

1. **Adoption of Clear Timelines:** Universities are advised to be able to create transparent and enforceable dissertation appraisal, defense

schedules, and results notification schedules. This would reduce the uncertainty and guarantee procedural fairness.

2. Enhancement of Administrative coordination: Inter-departmental communication: It should also be strengthened by establishing centralized monitoring systems to monitor the performance of dissertation between the submission and defense of dissertation.
3. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms: Academic institutions ought to come up with institutionalized systems of solving faculty-administration wrangles to ensure that such wrangles do not interfere with the academic schedules of students.
4. Student Support Structures: Having doctoral support groups that would provide counseling, academic advice, and grievance redressal would help to alleviate stress and offer wellness to the candidates.
5. Accountability and Training: The administrative staff and supervisors would receive professional training to become more aware of their involvement in ensuring academic integrity and student-centered practice.

Through proper implementation, these recommendations will be able to enhance the general experience of the doctoral field by creating an atmosphere of trust, openness, and prompt academic advancement. With the effort of improving their international reputation, the educational establishments of higher learning in Pakistan must struggle to facilitate fairness and efficiency in the process of conducting the doctoral programs. Further studies may also cover comparative institutional models in universities in order to find the best practices in doctoral governance.

To sum up, the presented study illuminates the plight of doctoral candidates that are subjected to institutional barriers in addition to their scholarly work. These systemic issues can be resolved by caring leadership and administrative change to restore the real meaning of scholarship, which is that which honors intellectual input, justice and the integrity of all researchers.

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