

## Doctoral Students' Migration to Other Universities: Expectations, Challenges and Coping Strategies

Nadia Gilani <sup>1</sup>, Syed Abdul Waheed <sup>2</sup>, Ekaterina Gavrishky <sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Pursuing doctoral studies is a challenging journey, and the higher education institutions where doctoral students are registered should support this endeavor. The present study aims to navigate doctoral students' journey of pursuing their studies in two different institutes when they had to migrate from one university to another for specific reasons. A phenomenological approach was employed to examine doctoral students' lived experiences of migrating to another university. Eleven doctoral students were selected purposively and were approached for data collection through a semi-structured interview guide. Six doctoral students were from the field of studies in arts, social science, and language, and the remaining participants were studying in physical science disciplines for the last two semesters before they migrated to other universities. The data was analyzed following the steps given by Smith et al. (2009). After the analysis of the data, three themes were identified: migrating to another university, challenges and coping strategies, and expectations from the 'new' university. The findings show that doctoral students faced various academic, social, and financial problems in their first university, and they were not supported in integrating, keeping in view their academic and personal challenges. Thus, they had to migrate to other universities with 'new' expectations and hopes. The study has implications for the public and private sector universities, which are required to restructure their support system that may facilitate students in fulfilling their academic requirements and financial needs and allow them to integrate into the universities.

**Keywords:** Financial needs, doctoral students, Phenomology study, support mechanism, academic integration.

### 1. Introduction

The dropout of doctoral students is one of the major challenges in higher education because such dropout leads to the loss of valuable, temporal and monetary resources (Fetene & Tamrat, 2021)). The unique challenge and prospects of overseas mobility of doctoral students have attracted increasing attention both in terms of students and institutions. Knowing and addressing factors that drive doctoral students to transfer to other universities in the middle of their study has drawn "attention" and "interest" increasingly (Chan et al., 2021). An understanding of their expectations, challenges, and coping mechanisms in a pragmatic form

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, University of Okara. Okara  
Email: [nadia.gilani@uo.edu.pk](mailto:nadia.gilani@uo.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, University of Okara. Okara.  
Email: [s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk](mailto:s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Institute of Languages & Linguistics, University of Punjab Lahore  
Email [ekaterina.ioll@pu.edu.pk](mailto:ekaterina.ioll@pu.edu.pk)

is important for the academic and research ecosystem, which feels the impact (Abdin, 2023).

It is a multi-faceted decision-making process influenced by academic, professional, and personal factors and a challenge as overseas doctoral education for researchers (Vilser et al., 2024; Waheed, 2020). This is normal since most of the doctoral students are searching for specialized training, advanced research access or go for the prestige of the global education point there. To them, an opportunity to engage with various academic perspectives, to work with top experts in their field and to experience peer-reviewed research methodologies and advanced technologies may be very attractive (Vedhathiri & Anita, 2024; Waheed, 2020).

However, acclimating to another learning environment, as well as its respective cultural climate, could prove to be daunting while students work to overcome possible linguistic obstacles and balance the new curriculum changes with social activity (Ao-tian, 2022; Waheed, 2020). For these new students, adjusting to the new academic standard, communication and networking style, as well as interpersonal dynamics, may demand a considerable investment of time and effort. There is a significant amount of research focused on international doctoral students and their experiences, including the factors that influence students' decision-making processes and the challenges they face (e.g., Vilser et al., 2024; Waheed, 2020; Waheed et al., 2019). Studying abroad is a critical decision filled with endless opportunities and can be life-changing, but it comes with challenges that students have to face with strength and perseverance.

The slow attrition rate in doctoral education poses challenges that extend beyond the individual student's success in completing graduation; the loss of students from doctoral programs a tremendous cost in lost academic and research contributions for society in general but also for the institution itself, in financial terms, human capital, and institutional investment (Matz et al., 2023; Barroso et al., 2022; Waheed et al., 2021). A number of factors go into why doctoral students struggle, involving both personal factors and academic and research competence challenges. These student-specific challenges, and they are many and context-specific, arise from multiple difference-based situational factors (academic, social or cultural background, disciplinary or research expertise or personal situation, i.e. part-time vs full-time vs. distance learning; local vs. international student; living alone vs. living with family) and the impact of these student-specific challenges are highly contextual depending on the individual student (Elliot, 2021).

There exist several studies that have focused on the personal hindrances of doctoral students, from the commencement of their doctoral studies to the submission and defense of their dissertation (Hove & Nkamta, 2017; Waheed et al., 2021; Nartey, 2021; Owens et al., 2022; Wright, 2021. 2020; Brill et al. 2014). However, the landscape is little investigated, specifically the case of the doctoral students whose experience led them to transfer to a new university during their PhD study (see Waheed et al., 2021), especially in the context of Asia and, more specifically, Pakistan (Waheed et al., 2022). The lack of such work, however, is worrisome; the migration patterns of doctoral students to other institutions have important implications for the broader academic and research ecosystem. It is important to understand the unique experiences and challenges these students face so that it can be able to orient policies and support systems that will assist them in their academic and personal endeavors (Kumkar et al., 2022).

Accomplishing the task of completing a doctoral dissertation is a right of passage in academia, serving as a finale to years of extensive studies (Ghoston et al., 2020). There can be a huge amount of anxiety and uncertainty for many doctoral candidates after they submit the dissertation. For example, in Pakistan, waiting for evaluation reports from external

examiners can help cultivate anxiety and stress in them, making them leave their most valuable study process halfway. It gets challenging, particularly for the PhD students, when they are about to step into academia, doing their best to know that all that farming they have been doing for years can be overturned (Waheed et al., 2021). A longer liminal phase may develop if examiners provide meaningless input, during which students may not know how to proceed with their research or what the ramifications of their research will be. This prolonged state of uncertainty can be exhausting not just in terms of the mental health and general quality of life of these doctoral students; as a matter of fact, some even decide to abandon their studies altogether simply due to the stress and frustration that has become unbearable (Bapat et al., 2021).

This research fills the gap, and that of the extant international and local literature reviews on the experiences of doctoral students transferring to other universities is significantly limited, especially in the context of Pakistan and from an Asian perspective (Hussain et al. Importantly, this investigation into post-dissertation doctoral student living and learning experiences will contribute original knowledge in this ever-expanding yet often under-studied field (Ghosh & Grassi, 2020). An insight into these specific and unique experiences would better equip institutions such and others who may find themselves in similar situations of pushing through doctoral programs with not much more than what they have as resources to be able to put in place policies and supports that could better ensure smoother transitions from one place of accommodation to another.

This would help better understand this phenomenon. This will lead us to formulate the academic policies and counseling systems to meet the better assistance requirements of the PhD candidates who are struggling to get back on track with their academic paths. If their complexity rises to academic standards, social eligibility, and financial budgeting, coping strategies of incoming international students to acclimatize to new routines and new embedded lifestyles is an ultimate necessity (Lee & Rice, 2015). These findings can be used in designing targeted support resources and programs to aid in the completion of degrees for doctoral candidates and the transition into successful academic or research careers, ultimately helping to strengthen the larger system of doctoral education.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

Doctoral studies are challenging journey, particularly in an environment that is not supportive and does not facilitate students in the academic, social, and financial domains while pursuing their studies. The purpose of the study is to find out doctoral students' experiences with migration to another university, their expectations while studying in the previous universities and the migrated university, and the challenges doctoral students face in the previous university and the migrated university, and how they cope with them.

## **3. Research Questions**

Following were the research questions of the current study;

1. What are the doctoral students' experiences with migration to another university?
2. What were doctoral students' expectations while studying in the previous universities and the migrated university?
3. What challenges did doctoral students face in the previous university and the migrated university, and how did they cope with them?

#### 4. Research Methodology

This research presents doctoral students' experiences in terms of their expectations, challenges, and coping strategies when they migrate to other universities. One of the most suitable approaches to examining participants' experiences while they live through them is qualitative research, particularly phenomenology research. This research approach explores how people experience, perceive, and think of a particular phenomenon they encounter in their lives (Hycner, 1985; Koopmans, 2015; Hourigan and Edgar, 2020; Gasparyan, 2021). Eleven doctoral students who had migrated to another university to pursue the remaining doctoral studies were selected purposively. There were seven male and four female doctoral students who were studying in different semesters at the previous universities. Six doctoral students were from the field of studies in arts, social science, and language, and the remaining participants were studying in physical science disciplines. Doctoral students who had completed at least two semesters at their parent institute and were available for data collection were selected for the sample.

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide consisting of questions related to the study's research question. The semi-structured interview is considered flexible and adaptable, allowing an in-depth exploration, building rapport with the participants, uncovering unexpected findings, and generating rich qualitative data (Fontana & Frey, 2000). The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and lasted from 47 to 56 minutes. The researchers transcribed them and prepared them for the analysis. The data was analyzed while familiarizing with the data, identification of significant themes, formulating the meanings, clustering and categorizing, and finally developing the themes and interpreting them (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The significant themes identified through the analysis of the data are described in the following section.

#### 5. Results of the Study

##### Migrating to another University

Most of the students' experiences studying in the first semester of their PhD were satisfactory, and they were thinking of fulfilling their dream of doing a PhD. They found that the teachers taught them well, and thus, they built a good image of the university. Finally, they got good grades in the first semester, which motivated them to move forward.

One of the student participants, 'A', perceived that the things emerged differently after the completion of the first semester. He perceived that *"we smelled 'threats' after the first semester, and it looked like we were 'trapped' now. We were unaware of what was going to happen next ... some of the friends realized these 'threats' well before time, and they left for another university"* (p. 3). He was of the view that this university was proved to us to have just a 'brand name' which was 'different from inside'.

Moreover, the university charged high tuition fees, and most of the students paid fees in monthly installments. One of the participants, 'A', felt while leaving the university for another one that *"they [the university] has received all the fee and it was not interested in us to continue the studies now"* (p. 13). Another married female participant 'B' remarked, *"It was very difficult to leave the university because I cannot spend more money in another university. I had already wasted money and time here, but I have to leave it"* (p. 9). She added that *"the university always demanded more money in the name of attending the courses suggested by them"* (p. 9). Then she started to search for other nearby universities because she did not want to travel more.

Similarly, a doctoral student 'I' who was working in an army-based educational institution preferred to do a PhD from a public university 'B', but before migration, he thought about the extra-ordinary fee that he needed to pay after migration because he would be required to study additional courses that will demand more time as well. The courses of other universities are also a little bit different, and one also needs to appear in a comprehensive examination again.

A male participant 'C' who was working as a teacher in a public school, remarked that *"It was not less than 'receiving a degree' while migrating to a public-sector university... I thought that 'receiving a degree' was not far away when I paid the fee to this university after migration"* (p. 8). An unmarried female participant, 'D' who has done her MPhil from a distance education university and got admitted in a private university, 'L', in a big city in Punjab province stated that

*It was such a non-cooperative university that I never imagined. All my dreams were dashed but I never thought to leave my PhD. I asked myself, one day, I will do my PhD and come to this university to tell them that I did it!* (p. 3) ... *Private universities have a name only; they do not look like they seem to be from a far away and the students are deceived* (p. 4).

She thought the other people would also leave this university after me. She heard from other students that its degree was not 'acceptable', but she was not concerned as she had left it. Another male participant of the study, 'E,' who was an assistant professor at a public university in Karachi, migrated from a private university, 'H,' to another private university, 'I,' and stated that he faced all the problems at the university individually. He described that *"There were many difficulties in migration as well. It looked as if I was asking for an appointment as an officer in grade 17. The vice chancellor of the university motivated me to stay in the university"* (p. 3). In the end, the participant decided to change the university after consultation with older students and teachers. It was interesting to note that certain universities did not have rules for migrating to other universities. In some cases, the students have to leave the university and have to get a new admission into another university. As an example, a male participant 'J' who migrated from a public university 'E' to another public university 'A' described, *"I was surprised to know that there were no rules for migration when I requested the university for a No Objection Certificate (NOC) for migration"* (p. 26).

The participants of the study thought that a public sector university is more planned; it does not charge heavy tuition fees and does not offer courses unnecessarily for the sake of earning money. Therefore, a public sector university is a better place to migrate. On the other hand, a male participant 'J' who migrated from a public university 'E' to another public university 'A' was of the view that *"the education at PhD and MPhil level in the previous university was not better. It seemed that they were wasting time of the students. There was good infrastructure but nothing else"* (p. 8).

The public university was nearer to the students' area of living, and they could spend less money there. It was unfortunate for most of the students that this university did not start PhD at the time of their admission to the private university. Also, the fees were affordable, and the students had many hopes for the university to which they migrated. A female student 'B', who migrated from a private university 'U' to a public university 'O', described that *"I should have waited even for 3 years that this university starts PhD and I could not have wasted huge money and much time in the private university"* (p. 14).

An unmarried female participant 'D', who has done her MPhil from a distance education university and migrated from a private university 'L' to a public university 'F' stated that "most of the students did not think of migration because it involves extra fee for other university and many troubles during the process ... but I have to migrate as I was extremely dissatisfied" (p. 13).

Some of the students migrated to the universities where they had completed their last degree, i.e., an MPhil in Education. For example, the students who migrated from a private university, 'U', to a public university, 'O', had completed their MPhil in education at the university, 'O'. Similarly, another male participant of the study 'E', who was an assistant professor in a public university in Karachi, migrated from a private university 'H' to another private university 'I' stated that "I went to university 'I' because I had done my MPhil there and the teachers already knew me. I met the dean and vice chancellor, and they asked that we support you as you have been our old student" (p. 5).

In the same way, a male married doctoral student, 'G', who was head of an elementary school and had got a scholarship from HEC, migrated from one of the most reputed public sector universities in the country, 'P' to a private university 'U' because in addition to few other factors, his supervisor was retired and he had joined a private university 'U' to where he has to migrate. He added,

*There was no other way to complete the degree timely because I had started my PhD with that supervisor, and only he could further guide me better despite I could change supervisor. It could be very hard to create harmony with the new supervisor if I changed. Also, the head of the institute treated us very roughly, which made me think about migrating (p.21).*

He shared that the other factors for migration include the university 'U', which was among the top ten HEC-ranked universities, a competitive and supportive environment, the latest facilities in the library and computer laboratory, and his supervisor's advice to migrate to a private university. Most of the students left the university at the end of the first semester or after the course work of two semesters. It is very hard to migrate after 2-3 years of their PhD. Some of the doctoral students did not migrate due to a waste of time and money, and they were also uncertain about the environment of another university. A male doctoral student 'H' who was studying at a public university 'P' added that "Students don't know what is going to happen to them in the near future, and the time has *passed when they know*. *Many students searched for a 'good' university to migrate to, and some of them have already left*" (p. 11).

It was noticed from doctoral students' experiences that some of their class fellows did not migrate due to the very difficult procedure of migration. Most of the students were from the middle, middle-middle, or lower-middle class. They had to study extra courses, defend their research proposal again, and sometimes appear in comprehensive and viva-voce examinations. They have to pay heavy fees to join the other universities for the additional courses and semesters, and that is why most of them did not intend to migrate and thought that they may have less suffering rather than more in an unknown world of other universities.

### **Challenges and Coping Strategies**

Most doctoral students realized that problems may emerge during the course of their studies but thought that solutions may also be possible. They faced the problems of traveling, the challenge of affording a high tuition fee, qualifying the courses and viva voce examination, defending the research proposal in an unplanned way, and selecting a supervisor who is 'most beneficial' for the student.

Some of the students found it difficult to bear the expenses of the study, so they met these expenses by earning money by teaching privately. A very ambitious participant of the study, 'A', sold his motorbike and borrowed money to pay the admission fee to the university. He also paid the remaining fee in monthly installments. Similarly, long, uncomfortable travel and eating from outside were other issues for them.

### **Expectations from the 'new' university**

The migrating students were extremely disappointed, but they had new hopes and expectations from the university to where they were migrating. A female participant 'B' remarked that "a man has many wishes, but limited resources. Not every wish is fulfilled, but we expect that there would not be hurdles in getting a degree in this 'new' university" (p. 8). Participant 'C' stated that "the reason to migrate was the fulfillment of the 'unfulfilled desired.' I wish that I should have a conducive and good learning environment, timely conduction and the result of the comprehensive examination, and availability of the supervisor or second supervisor" (p. 10).

An unmarried female participant, 'D,' who has done her MPhil from a distance education university and migrated from a private university, 'L,' to a public university, 'F,' described that "a migrating student holds expectations from the new university which were not fulfilled in the previous one. I suggest one must deeply investigate before migrating to another university because one's expectations may be even fulfilled in that university" (p. 14). Another male participant of the study 'E' who was an assistant professor at a public university in Karachi, migrated from a private university 'H' to another private university 'I' stated that "there is a good learning environment in the university [I] and I have got my few papers published. I also attended few conferences what I was missing in the previous university [H]" (p.7).

A male doctoral student who migrated from a public sector university, 'E' to another public sector distance education university, 'A', stated that "I had some expectations which I had from the previous university. Here, I would like these to be fulfilled, although I heard that this university delays PhD degree" (p. 12). He thought that this university's 'A' was better in every way than the 'E.' He remarked that "teachers are highly qualified, motivated, cooperative, regular and professional. They never say that I am not in a good mood to teach you. There is no other university like this" (p. 14). Similarly, another male doctoral student, 'J,' who migrated from a public university, 'E,' to another public distance education university, 'A,' was happy to be in the new university. He remarked, "It is good to complete the course in workshops; the teachers are cooperative and did not need to travel a lot" (p. 31).

A male married doctoral student, 'G', who was head of an elementary school and had got a scholarship from HEC, migrated from one of the most reputed public sector universities in the country, 'P', to a private university, 'U' desired that he should get the degree timely and wished that his thesis should be evaluated without any delay after the submission and there should be no hurdle. However, he found that there were more barriers in this university, like approval of the topic at three forums (DGC, SGC, & BASAR) and qualifying comprehensive and viva-voce examinations. He added that "this university gave me many sorrows, many more than the previous university. I spent 9 years to get the degree, which is a big part of one's life, and it unforgettable for me" (p. 35).

The other students were also expected to get their degrees in a timely manner. A male doctoral student, 'H', who was studying in a public university, 'P', and he was the first person in his family to earn a doctoral degree, remarked that "I could have got paradise if I

could have served my parents instead of putting much effort into my PhD; in fact, I might have got paradise in this world” (p. 12).

## 6. Discussion

The findings of the study bring attention to the issues of migration experience owner PhD students, specifically in Pakistan. Some of the overall problems faced by respondents included a lack of understanding of academic institutions and structures, financial and administrative problems, and delays in thesis evaluation. Such challenges in adjustment were often compounded by adjustments to new research methodologies, scholarly traditions, and academic expectations at the new institution (Yang & Bai, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2021).

The findings highlight that the transitioning challenges experienced by doctoral students referenced by literature on doctoral students transitioning into and moving institutions (Waheed, 2020; Ivins et al., 2017; Trout, 2018) apply to this cohort of doctoral students but also that transitioning between disciplines came with its own set of challenges whereby the students needed to acclimate to different methods, research styles, and scholarly norms. The change often entailed adjustment to new theoretical and methodological paradigms, data-gathering practices, and publication standards, which contributed to challenges experienced by students in the new academic context (Holmes, 2022).

The research states that migrating students had their hopes high for new universities because they were desperate to fulfill their 'unfulfilled desires' such as timely finishing of degree, nice learning environment, availability of supervisors, bureaucracy etc. The migrating students believed that these foreign universities would be in the best position to give them the rights and resources they could not access before in different institutions in order that they should organize an academic adventure without having to go through challenges they might not enjoy (DeWine et al., 2016; Baguri et al., 2020).

They had to put up with extra burdens such as financial difficulty, traveling issues, and the stressors of adapting to a new academic setting. Many students struggled with the expenses associated with achieving their doctorate, as they needed to secure funding from different sources in order to pursue their studies. What's more, the travel between and back from their new universities has added another layer of stress and hardship to the moving process, particularly for students who have no choice but to relocate. Without a doubt, the academic dimension is the greatest challenge for a student crossing from their own academic culture indexed by a PhD program to a foreign institution in the grip of foreign systems, expectations and modes of scholarship (Ismail et al., 2020).

A major trend in the study was a migration from public universities to private ones for doctoral students. This was particularly the case for developing nations students, such as those from Pakistan, who faced difficulties adjusting to the academic settings and culture of academically developed countries (Waheed, 2020). The current analysis corroborates this issue, demonstrating that the migrating pupils had difficulties grasping and managing many demands, formalities and procedures that were imposed on the students at the new college atmosphere. Furthermore, these transitional hindrances were often compounded by the hurdles associated with recognizing alien theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and academic traditions (Busher & James, 2015), rendering the entire transition process even more complex (Amankwah & Manguvo, 2014).



In Pakistan, those same doctoral students are forced to shuttle between universities to meet their academic, professional, and personal needs (Haider & Mahmood, 2007; Haider et al., 2017). The findings of this study suggest that Pakistani universities need to form and implement better support mechanisms for those students who migrate from one institute to another so that they can take similar action to mitigate potential difficulties with respect to their transition episodes and with an aim to complete their doctoral degree. From financial support and over-academic mentorship to an administrative structure — these support systems should work together to create a space in which migrating doctoral students can thrive and become nurtured to meet their educational dreams (Young et al., 2019).

To summarize, the findings of this study revealed that doctoral students in Pakistan faced myriad hurdles in their endeavor to attain their degrees, which eventually led to an increase in drop-out rates and greater time taken to completion of doctoral studies. There were also issues with finances or finding a proper supervisor or accrediting the thesis etc. Therefore, there is an imperative requirement that the higher education authorities of Pakistan make a constructive policy and a robust mechanism to annihilate the apprehension among the learned and to adopt mechanisms to run the PhD programs in mosques so that the war horses could achieve their educational thick diploma in due time with the potential to lose a battle, but not a dawn.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The migration of doctoral students to another university is a worthwhile phenomenon from the Pakistani perspective, which has unique characteristics, experiences, and perceptions. Different factors urged students to migrate to another university, including delayed examination results, poor examination mechanisms, high tuition fees, the university's non-cooperative attitude, and a lack of certain facilities such as relevant books, poor internet connectivity, computer laboratories, hostel facilities, etc. Most of the migrating students were of the view that they must fully investigate the migrating university, particularly in view of all the deficiencies, limitations, and weak areas of the university where they were studying presently. Most of the doctoral students realized that the problems may emerge during doctoral studies but thought that the solutions may also be possible. The migrating students were extremely disappointed, but they had new hopes and expectations from the university to where they were migrating. It is recommended that the universities should facilitate doctoral students during their studies, and their policy for higher studies should be reviewed to accommodate the student's interest and needs for pursuing doctoral studies. Universities should put less financial burden on students by charging high course fees, and their time should be saved so that they can complete their studies in the given period.

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