

Strengthening research capability: Addressing graduate students' struggles in thesis and dissertation writing

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ABSTRACT

Thesis and dissertation writing remain a critical but challenging requirement for graduate students, which often delays degree completion and discourages persistence. This study uncovered the difficulties experienced by 31 graduate students of Northeastern College, Santiago City, Philippines, in completing their research reports. Using a descriptive design, survey questionnaires and interviews were conducted to assess students' perceived difficulties, hindering factors, and suggested interventions. Results revealed that students considered thesis writing "*much difficult*," with data analysis, literature review, and methodology selection as the most problematic areas. External barriers such as heavy workloads, financial constraints, personal issues, and unsupportive adviser-student relationships further hindered completion. No significant differences were found between master's and doctoral students in difficulty perception. Students recommended seminar-workshops, instructional modules, access to databases, and stronger faculty support. These findings emphasize the need for institutional strategies to enhance research capability, foster supportive supervision, and strengthen graduate research culture.

Keywords: thesis and dissertation writing, graduate students, research difficulties, institutional support, research report

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a thesis or dissertation, also known as research report writing, is often described as the most demanding stage of graduate studies. It represents a final requirement before students are granted a master's or doctoral degree. As Lacaba (2009) observed, the complexity of thesis

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writing has become a global concern. Campillan (2019) noted that these challenges may either discourage students from completing their work or, in some cases, motivate them to persist. For many, however, the difficulty of writing research reports remains a major reason why graduate students are unable to complete their degrees. Research itself is a rigorous process that requires deep subject knowledge, careful planning, and sustained effort (Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

In the Philippines, advanced education is often pursued for career advancement. Professionals who complete the coursework of graduate programs must still meet one essential requirement: the completion of a thesis or dissertation. The Commission reinforces this mandate on Higher Education (CHED) through Memorandum Order No. 15, series of 2019, which emphasizes graduate programs' responsibility in developing higher competencies in research, teaching, and knowledge application. Thesis writing, therefore, serves as a vital benchmark of academic and professional growth.

Despite its importance, numerous studies confirm that students struggle with this process. Difficulties range from formulating a research problem, selecting methodologies, and reviewing literature, to analyzing and interpreting data (Turmudi, 2020; Steinke, 2011; Hinkle, 2007; Basey, 2010; Tiwari, 2019). Such struggles often result in delays, extended residency in graduate school, or even program withdrawal.

The situation at Northeastern College (NC) reflects these wider patterns. NC offers master's programs such as MAEd, MBA, MPA, and MAEd-Language and Literature, and doctoral programs including PhD and EdD. After completing required coursework or academic requirements, students must take six (6) units of thesis writing at the master's level and twelve (12) units of dissertation writing at the doctoral level. It is during these stages that most encounter significant challenges. Based on the researcher's teaching experience and participation in thesis defenses, difficulties cover from topic selection and literature review to data analysis, interpretation, and the preparation of conclusions and recommendations.

Although earlier research has identified common obstacles, there is still a need to document these challenges in greater detail within specific institutional contexts. Doing so can guide the design of interventions that directly support graduate students in completing their research requirements. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the particular difficulties faced by graduate students at Northeastern College, identify contributing factors, and propose possible interventions. The findings also align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal No. 4, which highlights the importance of ensuring access to quality education.

Statement of the problem

This study examined the difficulties encountered by graduate students of Northeastern College, Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines, in writing their theses or dissertations. Specifically, it sought to address the following questions:

1. What is the perceived level of difficulty experienced by graduate students in various aspects of thesis and dissertation writing?
2. What factors hinder students from completing their research reports?
3. Are there significant differences in the perceived level of difficulty between master's and doctoral students?

4. What interventions do graduate students suggest to help them cope with thesis writing challenges?

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a descriptive research design to determine the level of difficulties encountered by graduate students of Northeastern College in thesis and dissertation writing, as well as the factors that hindered their progress and the interventions, they suggested to address such challenges. This design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to obtain accurate descriptions of the respondents' experiences, focusing on both academic and non-academic dimensions. The research was conducted in Northeastern College, Santiago City, Isabela, Philippines, which offers various master's programs such as Master of Arts in Education (MAEd), Master in Business Administration (MBA), Master in Public Administration (MPA), and MAEd in Language and Literature, as well as doctoral programs including Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and Doctor of Education (EdD). In these programs, students are required to enroll in six (6) units of thesis writing at the master's level and twelve (12) units of dissertation writing at the doctoral level, which often constitute the most challenging phase of graduate education.

The respondents of the study were 31 graduate students who had already completed their thesis or dissertation requirements. They were selected through convenience sampling, as the researcher sought participants who were readily available and capable of providing reliable insights based on their actual experiences. This sampling technique ensured that the study could capture real accounts from individuals who had successfully navigated the thesis or dissertation process, making their reflections and suggestions particularly valuable.

The primary instrument used in data collection was a survey questionnaire adapted from Ocbian and Gamba (2015), which was further modified to align with the specific objectives of the study. The instrument was designed to measure students' perceived levels of difficulty across different components of thesis writing, including topic selection, formulation of the problem, review of related literature, methodology, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and proper academic writing such as paraphrasing, citation, and abstract writing. In addition, the tool included items that identified hindering factors such as heavy workloads, financial constraints, personal problems, low motivation, language proficiency issues, and adviser-student relationship concerns. To enrich the data, unstructured interviews and focus group discussions were also conducted. These qualitative methods elicited students' personal accounts of their struggles and provided more detailed suggestions for possible interventions.

The data collection process involved the distribution of survey questionnaires to recent graduate students. To address the difficulty of reaching some participants in person, follow-up interviews were conducted through Messenger, phone calls, and video calls. This approach ensured wider participation and allowed respondents to provide more comprehensive answers at their convenience. The triangulation of survey responses with qualitative insights from interviews and discussions enhanced the reliability and depth of the findings.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, weighted means, and rankings were employed to summarize the survey data. A five-point scale was used to interpret

the levels of difficulty experienced by the respondents: 5 (4.20–5.00) indicated “very much difficult,” 4 (3.40–4.19) denoted “much difficult,” 3 (2.60–3.39) represented “moderately difficult,” 2 (1.80–2.59) reflected “less difficult,” and 1 (1.00–1.79) signified “not difficult.” This scale provided a clear framework for quantifying students’ perceptions of their struggles. Furthermore, to compare the experiences of master’s and doctoral students, a t-test was applied to determine whether there were significant differences in their perceived levels of difficulty. The results revealed that no significant differences existed between the two groups, suggesting that thesis and dissertation writing posed comparable challenges regardless of program level.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were fully informed of the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained prior to their participation, ensuring that they voluntarily agreed to contribute their experiences. Confidentiality and anonymity were upheld by omitting names and personal identifiers from all reports and analyses. These measures were undertaken to protect the rights, privacy, and welfare of the respondents while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the research process.

By combining quantitative measures of perceived difficulty with qualitative accounts of personal struggles, the methodology provided a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by graduate students in thesis and dissertation writing. The inclusion of statistical analysis ensured objectivity in assessing difficulty levels, while interviews and focus group discussions captured the nuanced experiences of students and their proposed solutions. Overall, this methodological framework not only allowed for the identification of specific problem areas but also paved the way for practical recommendations that can strengthen research capability, improve adviser-student relationships, and enhance institutional support for graduate students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 31 graduate students from Northeastern College participated in this study, representing both master’s and doctoral programs. These respondents were selected through convenience sampling and had already completed their thesis or dissertation requirements, making them reliable sources of insight into the challenges of academic research writing. Data were gathered through a survey questionnaire, supplemented by interviews and focus group discussions conducted via Messenger, phone calls, and video calls. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, weighted means, and rankings were used to analyze the survey responses, while a t-test was applied to compare perceptions between master’s and doctoral students. The findings are presented in relation to the perceived difficulties, hindering factors, comparative perceptions, and suggested interventions.

The results showed that graduate students experienced varying levels of difficulty across fifteen identified areas of thesis and dissertation writing. Overall, the weighted mean score was 3.77, indicating that research writing was generally perceived as “much difficult.” The most challenging task was presenting, analyzing, and interpreting data, which obtained a mean score of 4.20 and was classified as “very much difficult.” This finding confirms earlier studies suggesting that data analysis requires advanced logical reasoning, critical thinking, and the ability to link findings to existing literature (Tiwari, 2019; Ocbian & Gamba, 2015). Students also found it highly difficult to search for related literature and studies ($M = 4.19$) and to write

the review of related literature ($M = 4.17$). These challenges were closely tied to their limited access to updated references and insufficient skills in synthesizing scholarly sources, echoing observations by Manchishi, Ndhlovu, and Mwanza (2015) as well as Qasem and Zayid (2019).

Other areas that were rated as “much difficult” included determining appropriate methodologies ($M = 3.80$), selecting statistical tools ($M = 3.81$), conceptualizing research problems ($M = 3.74$), writing results and discussion sections ($M = 3.77$), and formulating clear statements of the problem ($M = 3.73$). These results are consistent with the findings of Kombo and Tromp (2011), Turmudi (2020), and Campillan (2019), who reported that methodology, problem formulation, and topic conceptualization remain recurring struggles among graduate students. Even basic technical writing tasks such as paraphrasing and quoting ($M = 3.68$) and preparing proper citations ($M = 3.55$) were identified as difficult. Students expressed fear of committing plagiarism due to weak writing proficiency, a problem that has been similarly observed by Puspita (2019) and Ocbian and Gamba (2015). Interestingly, the only task rated as “moderately difficult” was writing the research abstract, which received a mean score of 3.26. Although still demanding, students felt that summarizing their work into a concise abstract was more manageable than other parts of the research process. Collectively, these findings indicate that graduate students face substantial challenges in nearly every stage of thesis and dissertation writing, from initial conceptualization to final reporting.

The results also revealed that students’ difficulties were compounded by external hindering factors. The most serious challenge reported was heavy workloads from teaching, office responsibilities, or field assignments, which left them with little time and energy to devote to their research. This supports the earlier conclusions of Ocbian and Gamba (2015) and Qasem and Zayid (2019), who noted that time constraints are a major obstacle to thesis completion. Financial constraints ranked second among the hindering factors, as thesis writing often entails significant expenses for materials, printing, and defense fees. In addition, students reported personal problems such as family obligations and health concerns, which affected their ability to stay focused on academic work. Lack of determination, low motivation, and weak language proficiency were also frequently mentioned, consistent with findings by Kombo and Tromp (2011), Tiwari (2019), and Komba (2016) that highlighted diminished interest, poor academic writing skills, and motivational issues as barriers to successful thesis writing.

A further issue that emerged from the interviews was poor adviser-student relationships. Some respondents described their advisers as unsupportive or overly critical, which they perceived as discouraging rather than constructive. This is consistent with the difficulties reported in earlier research by Turmudi (2020), Lestari (2020), and Manchishi et al. (2015), who observed that unsupportive supervision and the absence of timely, constructive feedback often complicate the research process for graduate students. These findings highlight that thesis writing challenges are not merely technical but also interpersonal, shaped by the quality of academic mentoring and institutional support systems.

In comparing the experiences of master’s and doctoral students, the application of a t-test revealed no significant differences in their perceived levels of difficulty. Both groups considered thesis and dissertation writing equally demanding, suggesting that the challenges identified—such as data analysis, methodology selection, literature review, and external barriers—are

pervasive across graduate programs, regardless of the degree pursued. This finding underscores the universality of these challenges within the graduate education context.

Despite the difficulties, students identified several interventions that they believed could ease the process of thesis writing. The most frequently recommended intervention was the conduct of seminar-workshops focused on specific problem areas, particularly methodology, data analysis, and literature review. This echoes the recommendations of Brawner (1999) and Ocbian and Gamba (2015), who argued that such capacity-building initiatives improve students' research skills and confidence. Students also suggested the development of instructional modules that include practical examples of well-written thesis components, which could serve as models and guides during the writing process. In addition, they recommended participation in research conferences and colloquia to increase exposure to scholarly work and develop familiarity with academic standards.

Another strong recommendation was for institutions to subscribe to online databases, which would provide students with easier access to updated and reliable references. Expanding library holdings to include more local and international journals was also proposed, as students felt that existing resources were insufficient. These suggestions align with the recommendations of Mullan, Weston, Rich, and McLennan (2014), Hepworth and Duvigneau (2013), and other scholars who emphasized that resource provision and structured institutional support are crucial in addressing the difficulties of thesis writing.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of thesis and dissertation writing challenges. Students struggle with technical skills such as data analysis, methodology selection, literature synthesis, and academic writing conventions, while also facing external pressures related to workload, finances, personal responsibilities, and adviser relationships. Yet the interventions they proposed demonstrate that these difficulties are not insurmountable. Strengthening research training through workshops, providing access to instructional modules and academic databases, expanding library collections, and fostering supportive supervision are practical steps that can significantly reduce barriers. Addressing these issues not only promotes the timely completion of graduate theses and dissertations but also strengthens research capability and contributes to building a more robust research culture within graduate education.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide clear answers to the research questions and allow for meaningful conclusions about the difficulties experienced by graduate students in thesis and dissertation writing at Northeastern College. With a total of 31 respondents drawn from both master's and doctoral programs, the study revealed that research report writing was generally perceived as "much difficult," with an overall weighted mean score of 3.77 across fifteen identified areas. The most challenging aspect was presenting, analyzing, and interpreting data, which was rated "very much difficult" ($M = 4.20$), followed closely by searching for related literature ($M = 4.19$) and writing the review of related literature ($M = 4.17$). Other major difficulties included selecting statistical tools ($M = 3.81$), determining appropriate methodologies ($M = 3.80$), writing results and discussion ($M = 3.77$), conceptualizing research problems ($M = 3.74$), and formulating statements of the problem ($M = 3.73$). Even technical writing tasks such

as paraphrasing and quoting ($M = 3.68$) and citing sources properly ($M = 3.55$) were seen as difficult, while only writing the abstract ($M = 3.26$) was rated “moderately difficult.” These results directly address the first research question by confirming that students struggle with nearly every stage of thesis and dissertation writing, from conceptualization and literature synthesis to methodological choices and data analysis.

The second research question, which sought to identify the factors that hinder thesis and dissertation completion, was also answered by the data. Students reported that heavy workloads from teaching, office, or field assignments were the most serious barrier, depriving them of sufficient time and energy for research. Financial constraints emerged as another critical obstacle, with costs for materials, printing, and defense fees often becoming burdensome. Personal challenges such as health concerns and family responsibilities further affected students’ ability to focus on their research. In addition, lack of determination, low motivation, and limited language proficiency made the process even more difficult. Finally, poor adviser-student relationships, marked by unsupportive or overly critical supervision, surfaced as a significant problem. These factors illustrate that the challenges extend beyond academic skills, encompassing social, financial, and interpersonal dimensions that must be addressed for students to succeed.

The third research question asked whether there were significant differences in perceived difficulty between master’s and doctoral students. Results of the t-test revealed no significant difference between the two groups. Both sets of respondents reported that thesis and dissertation writing were equally demanding, indicating that these difficulties cut across degree levels and programs. This finding underscores the universality of the struggles associated with research report writing, suggesting that interventions must be designed to support graduate students broadly, rather than tailored exclusively to one academic level.

Finally, the fourth research question addressed the interventions that graduate students suggested to help them cope with the challenges of thesis writing. The respondents provided several constructive recommendations. The most frequently mentioned was the conduct of seminar-workshops focusing on specific research problem areas, including data analysis, methodology, and literature review. Students also recommended the development of instructional modules with concrete examples of well-written thesis components to serve as guides throughout the process. Participation in research conferences and colloquia was proposed as a way to build research confidence and exposure, while institutional subscriptions to online databases and the expansion of library holdings with local and international journals were seen as critical in ensuring access to updated and credible references. These suggestions reflect both a need for capability-building initiatives and for institutional support through resources and guidance.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that graduate students face multifaceted and interrelated challenges in thesis and dissertation writing, encompassing both technical tasks and external barriers. The absence of differences between master’s and doctoral students further reveals the systemic nature of these struggles. Addressing them requires graduate schools to adopt a holistic approach that integrates technical training, motivational support, and institutional resources. Organizing workshops, providing instructional modules, ensuring consistent and supportive adviser supervision, and improving access to scholarly materials through databases and expanded libraries are essential measures. Strengthening research culture through mentoring

programs, in-house reviews, and regular colloquia can also foster engagement and reduce delays. By implementing these interventions, institutions can help graduate students finish their degrees on time, improve the quality of research outputs, and enhance research productivity, thereby contributing to the broader national and global goal of promoting quality education.

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