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Challenges to Successful Thesis Completion among Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

This study utilized a descriptive quantitative approach to examine the key challenges that postgraduate students face in completing their thesis work. The target population for the research consisted of master's, and doctoral students enrolled in various academic disciplines at Universities in Mogadishu, and a random sampling technique was employed to obtain a sample size of 124 participants. The findings of the study identified several major obstacles that graduate students encounter during the thesis process. The most significant factors were time management issues, limited access to critical research resources, and various institutional barriers that did not adequately support the thesis completion. Specifically, the study found that Institutional Factors (mean 3.49) and Time Management (mean 3.4) were considered "Highly Challenging" by the participants. Access to Resources (mean 3.38), Supervisor Support (mean 3.22), Discipline-Specific Factors (mean 3.31), and Language Factors (mean 3.25) were rated as "Moderately Challenging". Personal Obligations (mean 2.9) were also seen as "Moderately Challenging" by the graduate students. The results of this study underscore the need for universities to provide stronger support systems and address these multifaceted challenges to enable postgraduate students to successfully complete their thesis work. Recommendations for improving thesis support are discussed.

Keywords: Postgraduate students, thesis completion, challenges, time management, resources, supervision, personal obligations, institutional factors, discipline-specific factors, language barriers

Introduction

Completing a thesis is a significant milestone for postgraduate students, yet many encounter challenges that impede their progress. Understanding and addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for improving the success rates of postgraduate thesis completion and ensuring that students can effectively contribute to their fields of study. Numerous studies have investigated the barriers and challenges faced by postgraduate students in completing their thesis requirements. These investigations have explored the various obstacles and impediments that postgraduate degree candidates encounter throughout the thesis process.

Effective research and supervision are essential for the success of postgraduate students. Proper supervision is critical, and major issues are often tied to the research process and the quality of supervision provided (Ismail et al., 2011). Numerous barriers can hinder the timely completion of graduate theses in postgraduate programs. The illustration below outlines relevant research on these barriers and strategies to overcome them:

The challenges faced by higher education institutions regarding the success rate of postgraduate students include supervision, and personal challenges (Wilson & Pool, 2024).

Bayona-Oré & Bazan claimed the challenges lay on lack of supervision, time constraints, and financial issues impacting the completion of theses. Approximately 50% of students face challenges due to time constraints in developing their research. (Bayona-Oré & Bazan, 2020). Arthur & Fenyi opined the challenges encompass various aspects, including financial constraints, balancing work and research, lack of commitment, family responsibilities, supervisory style, competence, relationship dynamics, and institution-related factors.

Postgraduate students faced work-related challenges and difficulty accessing supervisors, and recommended providing counselling services to support students in balancing work and studies. (Tikoko, 2021). Student characteristics, family commitments, financial problems, psychological barriers, and research barriers influence the research progress (Khozaei et al., 2015). The family support is a crucial factor in successful completion (Theodore et al., 2018). Supervisors lacking expertise and providing delayed feedback are barriers, while personal traits, peer support, and institutional support are enablers for student success. (Wilson & Pool, 2024). Information seeking, writing skills, supervisor support, and time management influence postgraduate students' thesis accomplishment. (Salehuddin et al., 2014), English proficiency was a significant barrier to academic success for international students, affecting their grammar,

sentence structure, and communication in English. e (Singh & Jack, 2022). The difficulties in formulating a research topic go back to a lack of conceptual clarity, poor time management, and a lack of research culture. (Ameen et al., 2019). Key barriers affecting graduate students' dissertation-based scientific products include time constraints, lack of support from supervisors, cultural factors, language familiarity, fear of rejection, and dissemination challenges. Additionally, factors like lack of motivation, unfamiliarity with scientific writing skills, uncertainty of research results, and financial constraints, were highlighted as significant barriers(Lange & Baillie, 2008). Procrastination and associated traits like perfectionism are commonly linked to academic non-completion, (Norton, 2011). The difficulties for undergraduate students in completing their theses include infrastructure, communication, and time management. (Lobo, 2023). Personal characteristics impact the completion of postgraduate research like isolation, self-efficacy, financial issues, and research anxiety playing significant roles (UNESCO, 2015). Intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence the thesis's completion, including motivation, self-regulation, supervisor support, and conducive research environments (Shahab et al., 2021). Research skills, institutional support, and self-management skills significantly influenced postgraduate students' motivation to graduate on time (Muthukrishnan et al., 2022). Intervention strategies are required to improve communication, training of supervisors, clarification of roles, adherence to ethical considerations, and creation of research assistance centers (Cekiso et al., 2019). It's important to provide interventions to address procrastination(Norton, 2011). Collaborative efforts among students, supervisors, and institutions to address these challenges effectively, effective communication, and support play a crucial role in overcoming these hurdles(Arthur & Fenyi, 2023). Effective strategies for completing thesis requirements in postgraduate students include high-quality supervision, support, protected research time(Sugawara & Nikaido, 2014), and the supervisor-student relationship (Ezebilo, 2012). Proper guidance and support from supervisors are essential for postgraduate students to complete their thesis projects (Salehuddin et al., 2014). Additionally, the importance of effective resources and guidance support institutions to address these challenges(Abiddin & Ismail, 2011). Furthermore, early identification of research topics and faculty development in research methodology, - departmental culture, and prioritization of duties over research hinder research activity(Macharia & Kamya, 2024). It's important for a structured and supported research curriculum to overcome barriers to post-graduate research (Orwa, n.d.) Tthe improvement in supervisors' roles and enhancement of students' knowledge, training, and practice during coursework are essential for addressing the difficulties (Ameen et al., 2019). Effective faculty mentorship and the relationship between students and their advisors

or faculty members are crucial for student retention and success, (Brill et al., 2014). Research development programs and supervisory dialogues, guided by collaborative action research, successfully assist students in overcoming dissonance in their research level(Wisker et al., 2003). It was recommended that research courses should be introduced early in the student's academic program, as one semester is not enough to inculcate the requisite skills in the students. It's recommended also the research should be a practicum subject by using student-based approaches in delivering lectures(Ofem & Atah, 2022).

Problem Statement:

The completion of a graduate thesis represents a significant milestone in postgraduate education, requiring substantial effort and dedication from students. However, numerous barriers can impede successful thesis completion, posing challenges for postgraduate students. These barriers encompass factors such as time management, access to resources, personal obligations, supervisor support, institutional factors, and discipline-specific challenges. Understanding these barriers is crucial for identifying the areas where students face difficulties and developing effective strategies to support them throughout the thesis completion process.

Research Questions:

1. What are the main barriers faced by postgraduate students in successfully completing their graduate thesis?
2. How do factors such as time management, access to resources, personal obligations, supervisor support, institutional factors, and discipline-specific barriers contribute to the challenges postgraduate students face during the thesis completion process?
3. What suggestions and interventions can be implemented to mitigate these barriers and enhance the successful completion of graduate theses?

Objectives:

1. Identify and analyze the primary barriers experienced by postgraduate students in completing their graduate theses.
2. Explore the influence of factors such as time management, access to resources, personal obligations, supervisor support, institutional factors, discipline-specific barriers, and language barriers on the completion of graduate theses.

3. Propose suggestions and interventions to address and overcome the identified barriers, improving the overall success rate of graduate thesis completion.

Methodology

This study is designed as a descriptive quantitative approach, the target population is postgraduate students enrolled in various academic disciplines. This includes master's and doctoral students.

The study employed a random sampling technique to obtain a sample size of 124 students; 95 males 76.6%, and 29 of 23.4% female from nine departments. Data was collected through a 21-item questionnaire. The instrument consisted of 8 sections: demographic characteristics, time management, access to resources, personal obligations, advisor support, institutional factors, discipline-specific, and language barriers. The instrument's reliability was estimated using SPSS, which yielded a high-reliability coefficient of 0.865. For the descriptive analysis, the responses were categorized into the following weighted intervals: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79). The study adhered to the highest ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

Results

Table 1. Time Management Results

Items	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1	I have difficulty balancing my thesis work with other responsibilities	3.49	1.055
Q2	Setting and sticking to deadlines for my thesis has been challenging	3.46	1.212
Q3	Procrastination hinders my thesis progress	3.28	1.116
	Grand Mean	3.4	1.127

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table presents the results for the "Time Management" factor of the survey instrument, which assessed various aspects of students' ability to manage their time while working on their thesis effectively. The key findings show that students found it highly challenging to balance their thesis work with other responsibilities (mean = 3.49) and to set and adhere to deadlines for their thesis work (mean = 3.46), both of which fell within the "Highly challenging" range (3.40-4.19). While procrastination was found to be moderately challenging in hindering their thesis progress (mean = 3.28, the overall "Grand Mean" of 3.4 across all three items fell within the "High Challenging" range, suggesting that time management was a significant challenge for the students in their thesis work.

Table 2. The Results of **Access to Resources Factor**

Item s	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q4	I have limited access to necessary research materials or equipment	3.56	1.113
Q5	The workspace and technological resources available to me are inadequate	3.26	1.161
Q6	I lack sufficient financial support for my graduate studies and thesis work	3.34	1.229
	Grand Mean	3.38	1.16

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table shows the results for the "Access to Resources" factor, which assessed the students' access to the necessary research materials, equipment, workspace, technological resources, and financial support for their graduate studies and thesis work. The findings show that students found limited access to research materials or equipment to be highly challenging (mean = 3.56), falling within the "High Challenging" range (3.40-4.19). While the adequacy of workspace and technological resources (mean = 3.26) and the availability of financial support (mean = 3.34) were perceived as moderately challenging, the overall "Grand Mean" of 3.38

across all three items fell within the "High Challenging" range, indicating that access to resources was a significant challenge for the students in their thesis work.

Table 3.The Results of the **Supervisor Support** factor

Items	Statement	Mea n	Std. Deviatio n
Q7	The guidance and feedback from my thesis supervisor are unclear or insufficient	3.20	1.249
Q8	There are mismatches between my expectations and my supervisor's expectations	3.27	1.112
Q9	Communication and collaboration with my advisor is problematic	3.19	1.131
	Grand Mean	3.22	1.16

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table depicts the results for the "Supervisor Support" factor, which assessed various aspects of the student's relationship and interactions with their thesis supervisor. The findings show that students perceived the guidance and feedback from their supervisor as moderately challenging, with a mean score of 3.20 falling within the "Moderately Challenging" range (2.60-3.39). Similarly, the mismatches between their own and their supervisor's expectations (mean = 3.27) and the challenges in communication and collaboration with their advisor (mean = 3.19) were also found to be moderately challenging. The overall "Grand Mean" of 3.22 across all three items indicates that the students experienced a moderate level of challenge in terms of the support and guidance provided by their thesis supervisors.

Table 4. The Results of **Personal Obligations Factor**

Items	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q10	Managing work, family, or other personal commitments is challenging.	3.43	1.204
Q11	Mental health issues negatively impact my thesis progress	2.44	1.135
Q12	Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is difficult	2.87	1.097
	Grand Mean	2.9	1.14

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table reveals the results for the "Personal Obligations" factor, which assessed the impact of various personal commitments and mental health issues on the students' thesis progress. The findings show that managing work, family, or other personal commitments was perceived as highly challenging, with a mean score of 3.43 falling within the "High Challenging" range (3.40-4.19). In contrast, mental health issues were found to be only slightly challenging in negatively impacting thesis progress (mean = 2.44, "Slightly Challenging" range), and maintaining a healthy work-life balance was moderately challenging (mean = 2.87, "Moderately Challenging" range). The overall "Grand Mean" of 2.9 across all three items indicates that personal obligations posed a moderate challenge for the students in their thesis work.

Table 5. The Results of **Institutional Factors**

Items	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q13	The program requirements or administrative processes are overly rigid	3.23	1.127
Q14	There is a lack of training or professional development opportunities	3.82	1.141
Q15	The departmental culture does not prioritize thesis support	3.42	1.134
	Grand Mean	3.49	1.13

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table presents the "Institutional Factors" results that impact the students' thesis work. The findings show that the lack of training or professional development opportunities was perceived as highly challenging, with a mean score of 3.82 falling within the "High Challenging" range (3.40-4.19). Additionally, the departmental culture that does not prioritize thesis support was also found to be highly challenging (mean = 3.42). While the rigidity of program requirements or administrative processes was moderately challenging (mean = 3.23), the overall "Grand Mean" of 3.49 across all three items indicates that institutional factors posed a significant challenge for the students in their thesis work

Table 6. The Results of **Discipline-Specific Factor**

Items	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q16	The thesis requirements and expectations in my academic field are particularly demanding	3.40	1.035
Q17	My discipline's methodological approaches or resource needs present significant challenges	3.44	1.007
Q18	My department's norms, culture, and expectations create barriers to thesis progress.	3.09	1.028
	Grand Mean	3.31	1.00

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The table presents the results for the "Discipline-Specific Factors" that impact the students' thesis work. The findings show that the discipline-specific methodological approaches or resource needs were perceived as highly challenging, with a mean score of 3.44 falling within the "High Challenging" range (3.40-4.19). Similarly, the demanding thesis requirements and expectations in the student's academic fields were also found to be highly challenging (mean = 3.40). While the departmental norms, culture, and expectations that create barriers to thesis progress were moderately challenging (mean = 3.09), the overall "Grand Mean" of 3.31 across

all three items indicates that discipline-specific factors posed a significant challenge for the students in their thesis work.

Table 7. The Results **Language Factor**

		Mean	Std. Deviation
Q19	Language barriers have hindered my ability to effectively communicate my ideas and arguments in my thesis work.	3.33	1.248
Q20	Understanding and interpreting academic texts and research papers in a non-native language has been challenging for me	3.24	1.205
Q21	Language barriers have affected my confidence in presenting and defending my thesis in an academic setting	3.20	1.307
	Grand Mean	3.25	1.25

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

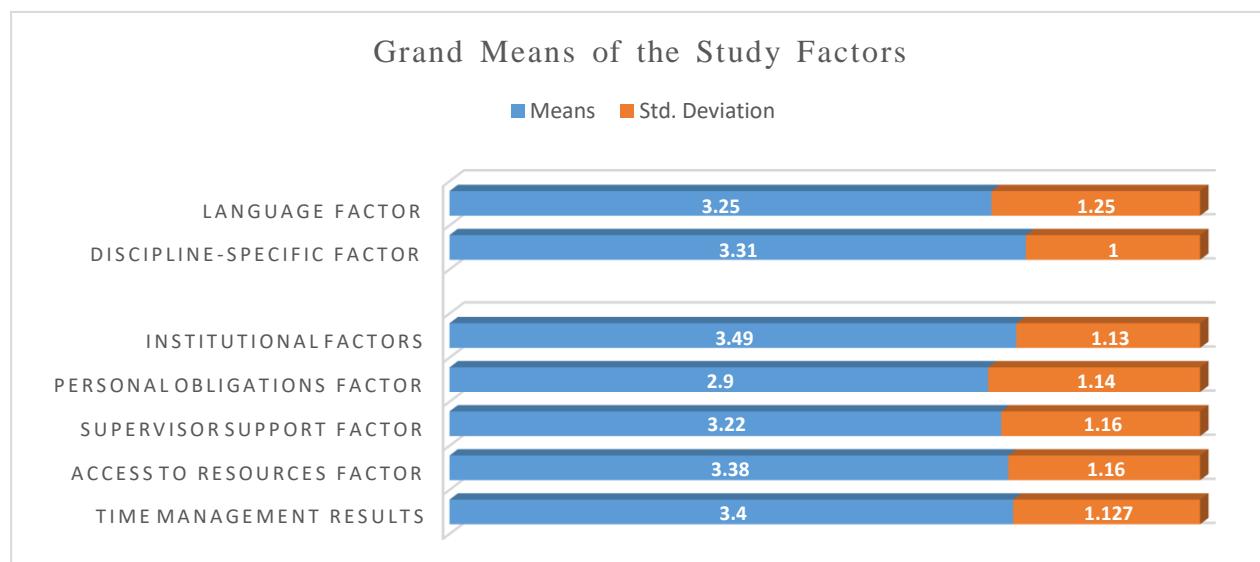
The table depicts the "Language Factors" results that impact the students' thesis work. The findings show that language barriers have been Moderately challenging across various aspects of the thesis process. Specifically, the students perceived language barriers as having hindered their ability to effectively communicate their ideas and arguments (mean = 3.33), made it challenging to understand and interpret academic texts and research papers in a non-native language (mean = 3.24), and affected their confidence in presenting and defending their thesis (mean = 3.20). The overall "Grand Mean" of 3.25 across all three items indicates that language-related challenges were a moderate obstacle for the students in their thesis work.

Table 8. Grand Means of Study Factors

Challenging Factors	Means	Std. Deviation	Decision
Time Management Factor	3.4	1.127	High Challenging
Access to Resources Factor	3.38	1.16	Moderately Challenging
Supervisor Support factor	3.22	1.16	Moderately Challenging
Personal Obligations Factor	2.9	1.14	Moderately Challenging
Institutional Factors	3.49	1.13	High Challenging
Discipline-Specific Factor	3.31	1.00	Moderately Challenging
Language Factor	3.25	1.25	Moderately Challenging

Scale: Extremely Challenging (4.20-5.00), High Challenging (3.40-4.19), Moderately Challenging (2.60-3.39), Slightly Challenging (1.80-2.59), and Lowly Challenging (1.00-1.79).

The key factors that pose challenges to successful thesis completion among postgraduate students, based on the provided data, are as follows: Institutional Factors (mean 3.49) and Time Management Results (mean 3.4) are considered "Highly challenging"; Access to Resources Factor (mean 3.38), Supervisor Support Factor (mean 3.22), Discipline-Specific Factor (mean 3.31), and Language Factor (mean 3.25) are rated as "Moderately Challenging"; while the Personal Obligations Factor (mean 2.9) is also seen as "Moderately Challenging".

**Figure 1. Grand Means of the Study Factors**

Findings and Discussion

Time Management Factors

The findings indicate that time management was a significant challenge for the students in their thesis work. Students found it highly challenging to balance their thesis responsibilities with other commitments (mean = 3.49) and to set and adhere to deadlines for their thesis progress (mean = 3.46). While procrastination was moderately challenging (mean = 3.28), the overall high grand mean of 3.41 suggests that effective time management was a major obstacle for the students. A similar result was found by (Saidin et al., 2016). These results highlight the need to provide thesis students with better time management training and support systems to help them juggle the various demands on their time during the thesis process.

Access to Resources Factors

The results show that access to necessary research materials, equipment, workspace, technological resources, and financial support was a significant challenge for the students. Limited access to research materials or equipment was perceived as highly challenging (mean = 3.56), while the adequacy of workspace, technological resources, and financial support were moderately challenging. The high overall grand mean of 3.38 indicates that lack of access to critical resources posed major impediments to the student's thesis work this result is in line with Ngozi & Kayode, (2013) claimed that the availability of needed resources is one of the major attributive variables to delay in thesis completion by postgraduate students (Ngozi & Kayode, 2013). Based on that Universities should evaluate ways to improve access to research infrastructure and provide greater financial assistance to support graduate students during their thesis projects.

Supervisor Support Factors

The findings suggest that the level of support and guidance from thesis supervisors was moderately challenging for the students. While the guidance and feedback from supervisors (mean = 3.20), alignment of expectations (mean = 3.27), and communication/collaboration (mean = 3.19) were all in the moderately challenging range, the overall grand mean of 3.22 points to room for improvement in the supervisory relationship. A similar result was found by Amani et al., (2022), they found out the heavy supervisors' workload, and supervisors' lack of motivation are the factors delaying thesis completion,(Amani et al., 2022). Enhancing supervisor training and promoting better advisor-advisee communication could help address these challenges.

Personal Obligations Factors

The results indicate that managing work, family, or other personal commitments was highly challenging for the students (mean = 3.43), while mental health issues and work-life balance were only slightly to moderately challenging. The moderate overall grand mean of 2.9 suggests that personal obligations outside of the thesis work created significant burdens for the students as was opined by Rauf, (2016), who pointed out that personal situations have been identified as an important factor influencing the completion thesis. Universities should consider providing gre(Rauf, 2016). Therefore, Universities should provide support systems and flexibility to help students better navigate their responsibilities alongside their thesis demands.

Institutional Factors

The findings reveal that institutional factors posed substantial challenges for the students. The lack of professional development opportunities (mean = 3.82) and the departmental culture not prioritizing thesis support (mean = 3.42) were both highly challenging. The rigidity of program requirements was moderately challenging (mean = 3.23). The high grand mean of 3.49 underscores the need for universities to reevaluate their institutional policies, resource allocation, and support structures to better enable graduate students to complete their thesis work. Based on the suggestion made by Hadi and Muhammad ,(2019) the underlined, the institutional factor is a crucial influence on the performance of research students. (Hadi & Muhammad, 2019).

Discipline-Specific Factors

The results show that discipline-specific factors, such as methodological approaches, resource needs, and thesis requirements, were highly challenging for the students. The mean scores for the discipline-specific methodological needs (mean = 3.44) and demanding thesis expectations (mean = 3.40) fell within the high challenging range. Even the moderately challenging departmental norms and culture (mean = 3.09) contributed to an overall grand mean of 3.31, indicating that the unique demands of the student's academic fields posed significant obstacles. This result is supported by the findings of Ngozi & Kayode, (2013) who discussed students' predisposition toward research work, and students' skill in the conduct of research are major attributive variables to delay in thesis completion. Based on that, greater collaboration between departments and students to address these discipline-specific issues could help mitigate these challenges(Ngozi & Kayode, 2013).

Language Factors

The findings suggest that language-related challenges were moderately challenging for the students. Language barriers hindered their ability to effectively communicate their ideas (mean = 3.33), made it difficult to understand academic texts and research (mean = 3.24), and affected their confidence in thesis presentations and defences (mean = 3.20). The moderate overall grand mean of 3.25 indicates that language proficiency was an impediment, but not to the same degree as other factors like time management, access to resources, and institutional support. However, It was found that academic language demands were challenging, and this affected writing (Jeyaraj, 2018). Providing language support services and training could help address these language-related challenges.

Conclusion

The study identified several major challenges that graduate students face in completing their thesis work, with the most significant factors being time management issues, limited access to critical research resources, and various institutional barriers that did not adequately support the thesis process. Students struggled to balance thesis responsibilities with other commitments and set/meet deadlines, suggesting a need for improved time management training and support. Inadequate access to materials and resources also posed substantial obstacles, indicating the importance of universities enhancing their research infrastructure for graduate students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it's recommended to enhance the thesis experience for graduate students, universities should consider a multifaceted approach. This could include implementing mandatory time management workshops and individualized coaching to help students adhere to deadlines, investing in expanded access to research materials and financial assistance, reviewing institutional policies to prioritize thesis support, facilitating interdepartmental collaboration to address discipline-specific challenges, enhancing supervisor-student relationships through training and regular communication, offering flexible scheduling and providing language proficiency training and presentation preparation workshops to build students' confidence in communicating their research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that this study was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial interest. Thus, no competing interests exist.

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