

Benefits and Difficulties of Postgraduate Student-Researchers: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

It is a general objective of an educational institution to facilitate the needs of the students. Considering research to be a critical component of postgraduate education, this qualitative inquiry sought to ascertain the benefits and difficulties associated with conducting research by postgraduate students. These elements have an effect on their contentment and motivation, which in turn has an effect on the success of the research program's efforts. Ten postgraduate students who had taken Thesis 1 and 2 courses at a private university in Northern Mindanao were chosen for the study via a purposive sample technique. Findings revealed that undertaking research enables researchers to grow personally and professionally. The majority of postgraduate students asserted that conducting research enabled them to discover new information and allowed them to solve problems. On the other hand, the students' challenges highlighted areas of the research process where student-researchers require further direction and assistance. Concerning the impacts of conducting research on an individual's physical, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being, the study discovered that research has a positive or negative effect on an individual's well-being, depending on how they deal with the experience. This study disclosed that research students must understand the value of effective time management and must learn to create and apply it when conducting research in order to work around time restrictions. Research programs may place a greater emphasis on guiding and aiding students with the formulation of research questions, the examination of literature, the collection and analysis of data, as these were perceived as difficult steps in the research process by student-researchers.

Keywords: *student-researchers, postgraduate, benefits and difficulties in conducting research, Philippines*

Introduction

The integration of research in any degree course allows students to have a sense of control and autonomy of their learning (Neville (2007). It offers a chance to affirm, explain, and discover new knowledge on a specific topic, making it a remarkable characteristic of a Graduate School curriculum. Research-based learning ensures better education because it turns students from consumers of knowledge to knowledge producers by following the steps in learning and conducting research, according to Gupta (2017). Ruchina et al. (2015) also stressed that a research program is considered an essential component of graduate education for it leads to professional and personal development.

Considering all the advantages research program offers to students, the better quality of education it contributes to educational institutions as well as the significant changes it brings to society, research programs have been a part of the curriculum of Graduate studies for the past years. They have played a crucial role in students' educational journey. This notion has been supported and acknowledged in CHED Memorandum Order No. 52, series of 2016 where it emphasized the need for Higher Education Institutions to build a strong platform for research, development, and innovation, as it is one of the objectives of HEIs not only to become generator of knowledge, educator and transmitter of culture but also as a catalyst of social and economic change leading to strong nation building and transformation.

Yet, as the Commission on Higher Education acknowledges the importance of Research programs, it also recognizes the different structural challenges and concerns in attaining the objectives of HEI- based research which includes instilling the research culture and vocation and improving the capabilities of faculty, staff and graduate students, increasing research productivity, quality and impact - challenges which do not only primarily concerns the school administration, faculty and staff but also involves the students as the recipients of learning and as new generation of researchers whose learning experiences and perspectives influence research quality and productivity.

Some international and local studies have already revealed the benefits, learning experiences, and challenges students face in conducting research in different contexts. In the study conducted by Ruchina et al. (2015), in assessing the experience of master's students involved in research work, it revealed that research work brings positive effects on students' learning, develop their higher order thinking skills, essential professional and personal skills like self-discipline, social and interpersonal skills. On the other hand, challenges in conducting research were cited in the study of Olibie, Agu and Uzoehina (2015) which revealed that many postgraduate students in Universities in Southern

Nigeria received inadequate research support mentoring from their advisors. According to the students, their mentoring was limited only with selecting and planning research topics, stressing research ethics and giving guidance for the oral presentation to the experts. In addition, Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) exposed the difficulties faced by Libyan EFL learners in conducting research, such as in identifying the area of interest to collecting and analyzing data due to several factors such as weak background knowledge about research, lack of motivation and lack of resources in the library. On the other hand, Bocar (2009) revealed that personal problems like time and stress management might also disturb student- researchers' concentration. Her study also uncovered that gaining the cooperation of respondents beyond the academic institution is the most difficult problem being encountered by student-researchers. Qasem and Zayid (2019) of Saudi Arabia, also revealed in their study that 70% of the participants who are writing research or conducting research projects in English as a second language experienced composing and writing proposals and research projects as one of the predominant challenges for them.

In connection to this, the researcher undertook a study to identify the benefits gained and the difficulties encountered by the students in conducting research in the context of the Philippine setting, specifically in Northern Mindanao. These factors influence their satisfaction and motivation towards research and will also affect the effectiveness of the research program endeavors. In addition, knowing these facts may become a basis for improvement and revisions of existing policies to better facilitate the students' needs as it is one of the general objectives of an educational institution.

Objectives of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to determine the (1) benefits that postgraduate students gained in conducting research; (2) the difficulties that students encountered in conducting research; and (3) the effects of conducting research on the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional aspect of postgraduate students.

Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative research approach for this study as it aims to interpret an issue or phenomenon systematically from the point of view of the individual or population and build new concepts and theories from the results of the study (Viswambharan & Priya, 2016). Specifically, this is a qualitative-phenomenological study, a type of qualitative research that focuses on the life experiences of a concept or phenomenon experienced by one or more individuals and attempts to understand how participants make sense of these experiences (Haradhan,2018). In this study, the researcher focused on the experiences of postgraduate student researchers, specifically on the benefits they experienced in conducting research and the difficulties they encountered during the research process.

The participants of the study were selected through a purposive sampling technique, with 10 postgraduate students who have undergone Thesis 1 and 2 courses from a private university in Northern Mindanao. The researcher decided to employ purposive sampling broadly used in qualitative research to identify and select data to effectively use limited resources.(Patton, 2002). It is also appropriate considering that it is a phenomenological study where individuals or groups of individuals who have the knowledge and experiences with a phenomenon of concern are essential for the credibility and success of data gathering (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Long interviews via google meet platform was employed. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' approval to ensure a complete transcript. Typed notes were taken during all interviews to get the key points to return to later and for better data analysis. The one-on-one interviews were conducted and generally covered 20-30 minutes.

After gathering the data through the interviews, the researcher conducted thematic data analysis, a method used in analyzing qualitative data by examining the data set to identify, analyze, and check repetitive patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1. Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis

Phase		Description of the process
1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing material, reading and reviewing it, jotting down initial thoughts
2	Generating Initial Codes	Coding essential characteristics of the data in a systematic manner across the complete data collection and collating data pertinent to each code
3	Search for themes	Collecting codes into possible themes and compiling all data pertinent to each possible theme
4	Reviewing themes	Examining the theme's relevance to the coded extracts (level 1) and the complete data set (level 2), and creating a thematic map of the

		analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	Continuous analysis to fine-tune the specifics of each topic and the overall story told by the study, generating precise definitions and names for each theme.
6	Producing the report	This is the final opportunity to conduct the analysis. Selection of vivid, engaging extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, connection of analysis to research topic and literature, and production of a scholarly report on the analysis.

The researcher adapted the six steps of Clarke and Braun's thematic analysis cited by Kiger and Varpio (2020), which involved familiarizing the data, generating initial codes, searching and reviewing themes, describing and identifying themes, and generating the report.

Results and Discussions

1. What are the benefits that postgraduate students gained in conducting research?

Table 1 shows the common themes of the benefits of Post-Graduate Student- Researchers in conducting research projects as claimed during the interview.

1.1 Experienced fulfillment, excitement, and happiness

It is the responsibility of a productive higher education to ensure the development of self-fulfillment of an individual's personality and improvement of his basic abilities (Shutenko, 2015). Thus, this notion justifies and supports the conduct of research in postgraduate education as student-researchers claimed that they feel a sense of fulfillment in accomplishing and presenting a research project.

In addition, students also acknowledged that doing research projects creates excitement and motivation in learning new things. Participants said:

"Doing research opens doors to opportunities, gives us excitement and happiness once you are done, when you can defend it to the panel. It is fulfilling to our part once we are done with our research" (P1).

"I love doing research because it keeps me motivated and excited to learn new things and also to explore many possibilities" (P2).

Table 1 Benefits of Post Graduate Student- Researchers

Benefits	f	%
Experienced fulfillment, excitement and happiness	2	20
Discovered new information with the given opportunity to solve problems	7	70
Gained wider knowledge about research and developed critical thinking skills	3	30
Developed Professionally	2	20
Improved Self- confidence	2	20
Learned life skills	3	30

1.2 Discovered new information with the given opportunity to solve problems

Research aims to answer questions, generate new knowledge and solve problems using a scientific approach (Kabir, 2016). Most of the participants affirmed having attained this objective, as according to them, through conducting research, they were able to get new information about the situations in their workplaces. It gave them a deeper understanding of how things work and allowed them to think of ways to solve problems and improve programs. According to them, research opened the doors to help solve problems even in the classroom setting. In addition, by knowing the status of implementation of programs, student researchers discovered the strengths and areas to be improved, allowing them to give recommendations to make things better. Three participants stated that:

"It (research) open doors to opportunities in solving problems in the classroom by doing, from action research or just by doing basic research in order to understand, for example the status of the implementation of Modular distance learning", (P1).

"...you will get new information and you can suggest for a better future especially in your workplace if what to do and how things will go on" (P7).

"...the perk of having this research is that I have been able to help all those teachers who are having the same problem with me.", (P8).

This response by the participants confirmed a study that found that students are motivated to conduct research when they gain in-depth knowledge and are interested in writing research because they believe they can gain valuable experience while discovering new things and accomplishing something vital and significant (Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

1.3 Gained wider knowledge about research and developed critical thinking skills

By doing research, the participants claimed that they could apply concepts and theories into practice. They have acquired a deeper understanding and skills. For a participant who is currently teaching, she stated that conducting research helps her encourage her students to engage in research projects. She stated that:

"I have acquired research understanding and skills which I am now using to teach my LIS students to appreciate research and engage with it", (P6).

It can be implied from the given response that conducting a research project can be considered as an experiential learning, an approach where the experiences and reflection of the students who are actively engaged in finding answers to questions, examining the relationship of variables, constructing meaning from the data and taking accountability to the results - leads to analysis, critical thinking, and synthesis (Schon, 1983).

It also affirmed the findings of a study where research has been considered as a crucial component of postgraduate student's training as it opens great opportunity for students to hone their creative problem solving and information processing skills, develop potential area of interest and build on their theoretical knowledge (Ruchina, et al., 2015).

1.4 Developed professionally

According to the participants, conducting and presenting research projects gave them the chance to meet experts in the field of research. It enabled them to seek assistance and guidance from these professionals, leading to professional development.

"Research helps promote a professional community. It starts with sharing ideas and giving feedback on how it should be done. We can also gather important techniques and strategies, and we also learn opposite ideas, then we can reflect." (P1).

This response confirms the view of Kirkwood and Christie (2006), as cited by Rahimi et al. (2018), that students' academic engagement in research provides an avenue for professional development. It also supports the findings of Ulla (2018) in his study on the perceptions of public school teachers towards research where the teachers claimed that conducting research helped them improve professionally and personally; it helped them become better teachers and improved their facilitation of the teaching and learning process.

1.5 Increased Self- confidence

As defined by Shrauger et al. (1995) cited by Uglanova (2014), self-confidence refers to "people's sense of competence and skill, their perceived capability to deal efficiently with different situations". Confidence helps a person feel better about himself and gets energized and motivated to take action. In this study, student-researchers claimed that they had acquired this positive feeling to accomplish a research project.

"Yeah, the advantage, is you are learning while doing this endeavor. It will increase your confidence" (P4).

"Prove myself that I can do research though at first, I have many doubts and apprehensions", (P5).

This response towards research has been supported by the view that greater confidence value can be gained in accomplishing challenging tasks that are attempted independently, and tasks accomplished early in learning with only occasional failures compared to easy tasks accomplished with external assistance, or tasks in which recurring failures are experienced early in the learning without any sign of progress (Bandura, 1986). It can be implied that conducting research as a challenging task, claimed by one of the participants, gives a person a greater self-confidence upon completion.

1.6 Learned life skills

As conducting a research project requires research skills, students affirmed that they have also acquired life skills from doing research, particularly patience, perseverance, and interpersonal skills while conducting their research. Participants asserted that:

“Doing research helped me progress in my career as well as my personal growth. I have gained not only knowledge but also important life skills such as patience and perseverance” (p9).

This response upheld the view of Fash (2017) that managing independent research results in the development of important personal skills. On the other hand, Murtonen et al. (2008) study indicated the importance of students’ perception on acquiring research skills. The study revealed that students who believed that acquiring research skills is vital in their future works were more task-oriented, used a better method in learning and experienced lesser struggles in developing research skills than other students. The study implied that setting a positive approach and view towards the experiences in research could help students develop research skills and be better in their works.

2. What are the difficulties that postgraduate research students encountered in conducting research?

Table 2 shows the themes of the difficulties of postgraduate student- researchers. The hurdles presented are difficulties encountered by students in conducting research projects.

Table 2 Hurdles of Post Graduate Student- Researchers

Hurdles	f	%
Time Constraints	5	50
Formulating the Research Title and objectives	4	40
Finding Related Literature	2	20
Lack of focus	1	10
Gathering and Analyzing data	2	20

2. Difficulties Of Postgraduate Student- Researchers

2.1 Time Constraints

Five (5) student researchers revealed time constraints as one of the hurdles in conducting research. According to them, finishing a research project on time is a struggle since they must fulfill other activities and responsibilities in their workplaces and personal priorities like families and involvement in other civic organizations. Two participants shared:

“It is difficult to finish it on time, especially if there are many other activities” (P2).

“Another is time constraints. Because I was not able to retrieve all the questionnaires, so I have to go back again, and then I still have other responsibilities towards my family, my school and in the church, and some of my organizations” (P10).

This response emphasized the view of Bocar (2009) and Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) with regards to the importance of time in conducting research stressing that to be able to attain the goal of finishing it on time; there is a need for the researcher to manage his/her time wisely. Establishing effective time management not only increases the chance to finish the research project on time, but according to Mancini (2007), it also reduces stress and frustration, brings confidence, and make you feel better.

Bocar (2009) also cited Dombeck and Wells-Moran’s (2006) components of time management skills- awareness, organization and commitment. This involves recording the tasks, prioritizing important things to be done, committing to a schedule, and avoiding distractions. These skills may not only be applicable and helpful in conducting research but also in accomplishing other tasks.

2.2 Formulating the Research Title and objectives

Formulating research title, problem and objectives is the first step of the research process. It directs the researcher to explore an area of concern and leads him to the need for careful inquiry (Ratan et al., 2019). In the interviews conducted, participants disclosed that it was hard for them to conceptualize research titles and objectives. One of the participants stated that:

“...it is difficult to formulate the appropriate title...” (p1)

“(hurdles)... Conceptualizing the problem because I have so many lingering thoughts.

Writing broad research titles with unclear and vague content in introduction, not well-formed research questions and research methodology were also found as common mistakes committed by student-researchers as cited by Qasem and Zayid (2019) from the works of Kikula and Quorro (2007), Kombo and Tromp (2011), and Repoa (2007).

Libyan EFL Learners have also encountered this hurdle, it was revealed that they encountered difficulty in starting the research process- in identifying the area of focus, selecting topic, formulating research problems, and writing review of related literature. The researchers attributed these problems to students' lack of training, less confidence on the topic they chose to write about and not reading extensively (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017).

2.3 Finding Related Literature

Reviewing related literature is one of the tasks that student-researchers undergo. The purpose of doing this is to obtain deeper understanding on the field being studied. By reviewing related literature, the researcher can build knowledge and learn important concepts, techniques, and insights from the findings of previous studies (Western Sydney University Library, 2016). This has been denoted by the participants and expressed difficulty in finding literatures that are related to their studies. One participant shared:

“I think one of the main struggles in research is literature review ,studies and research on your topic, because you need to form your conceptual framework from it, which is the direction or guide of your study,” (P9).

In the case of Libyan EFL students, (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017), the difficulty of finding related literature has been attributed to the lack of resources in the library. According to the study, searching for the books they need for their study consumes their time and they do not find the necessary references. This tends to cause a delay in completing their projects and make them feel discouraged in continuing the project.

2.4 Lack of focus

According to Wall (2020), the ability to excel at work, at school and carrying out other important tasks are greatly interfered with the problems of focus. During the one-on-one interview, one of the participants mentioned that he lacks focus in accomplishing a research project.

“(hurdles) lack of focus direction on and off,” (P3).

This hurdle was also revealed in Bocar (2009) study where it was found that students' lack of concentration in completing the research project can be attributed to personal problems like time and stress management.

Lack of focus has negative effects as mentioned, therefore, understanding its possible reasons and managing these problems can be considered as a step closer towards achieving goals, in this case accomplishing a research project with lesser distractions.

2.5 Gathering and Analyzing data

As defined by Bhandari (2020), gathering of data or data collection is the process of gathering observations and measurement which allows the researcher to gain direct knowledge and insights relevant to the topic being studied. He emphasized the considerations in collecting data, including the aim, the type of data to be collected, and the methods and instruments to be used.

Based on the interview conducted, this process has been difficult for student researchers as they stated ,

“I find it challenging to do quantitative research compared to qualitative (P1).

“The data that you want to collect is one of the difficulties in researching because you need to analyze if this data is suited to your research” (P7).

“I encountered lots of difficulties, and one of them is the location of my respondents because some of them were assigned in other municipalities, some are in the far-flunged areas, in which I have to ride on habal-habal (motorcycle), ride on the horse just to reach their school and administer my questionnaire.” (P10)

Adding up to this hurdle is the struggle of student-researchers to float their questionnaires with the financial constraints in floating the survey questionnaires. As one participant said that:

“if the location of the school will not be passable by a four-wheel vehicle, I have to ride in the motorcycle and much worse, on a horse so I have to pay for all the transportation, then I still have to give some presents to my respondents” (P10)

The hurdle in gathering data experienced by student-researchers uncovered in this study has also been affirmed in the study of Bocar (2009). In her study, students claimed that floating and retrieval of questionnaire, the availability and participation of respondents, and getting on hold to the cooperation of respondents in general has been contributed to a very great extent of difficulty in conducting research, student-researchers found it hard to approach unfamiliar respondents and participants and convince them to answer the survey questions and participate in the study.

It is vital that students be guided in gathering data and overcome this hurdle because it is crucial for the outcome of study being conducted. It is considered an essential part of research work.

3 What are the effects of conducting research to the physical, intellectual, social and emotional aspect of postgraduate students?

Effects Of Conducting Research To Student- Researcher’s Physical, Intellectual, Social And Emotional Aspects

3.1. Physical Aspect	<i>f</i>	%
3.1.1 Backpains and headaches	5	50
3.1.2 Exhausted	4	40
3.1.3 Weight loss and gain	2	20
3.2 Intellectual Aspect		
3.2. 1 Enhanced intellectual capacity	4	40
3.2.2 Changed mindset	1	10
3.2.3 Became open minded	2	20
3.2.4 Developed and practice intellectual honesty	1	10
3.2.5 Learned to adapt research culture and process	1	10
3.2.6 Caused Overthinking and sleepless nights	1	10
3.2.7 Brain draining	2	20
3.3. Social Aspect		
3.3.1 Developed patience, Make attitude adjustments	2	20
3.3.2 Able to build social relationship to different personalities, and Developed interpersonal skills	7	70
3.3.3 Increased welfare of humanity	1	20
3.3.4 Becoming sensitive to the needs of others	1	10
3.4. Emotional Aspect		
3.4.1 Self-doubt	3	30
3.4.2 Becoming more mature in handling emotions Being calm and focused in doing the task	3	30
3.4.3 Become anxious and problematic	2	20
3.4.4 Developed empathy, Learn to give than receive	2	20

3A. Physical Aspect

Physical health is important as it is positively correlated with higher levels of concentration, reduced stress level, improved retention and memory, and improved focus and creativity (Coulzman. 2021) In this study, the participants expressed that because of the large amount of time they spent in using laptops, they experienced back pains and headaches and found it exhausting. They disclosed that:

“...it is really tiring, it requires a lot of effort and discipline, so sometimes I would have sleepless nights and long hours in front of the computer. It resulted to backpains and headaches”(P2).

On the other hand, one positive effect of conducting research on students is that they become proactive, which involves taking responsibility for your life and actions rather than just watching how things happen. It is a positive outlook that can be applied in conducting research and achieving other life goals.

3B. Intellectual Aspect

As Participants claimed to gain knowledge, deeper understanding and developing critical thinking skills as perks in conducting research, it implies that research develops the intellectual aspect of student-researchers. Participants stressed that conducting research enhanced their intellectual capacity, changed their mindset, and became open-minded. It also helped them develop and practice intellectual honesty and learned to adapt research culture and process. According to them:

“Intellectually, doing research sharpened my critical thinking skills and made me better in some aspects of life.” (P9).

This finding has been supported the view of Azim (2020) that doing research serves as an avenue to increase one’s knowledge, build unique perspectives, develop the habit of reading and learn to express constructively through writing. In addition, it also makes a healthy curiosity as the mind constantly absorbs logic and creativity in conducting research.

On the other hand, participants expressed that conducting research caused them overthinking and brain draining. One participant expressed that:

..it is also brain-draining you need to know the different aspect of the research, you should be hands-on from all of the details so that your analysis is accurate and valid,” (P8).

These challenges can be connected to the hurdles being encountered by student-researchers as mentioned above such as lack of focus and time constraints. It is essential to address these hurdles and manage them properly because they will negatively affect the intellectual aspect of student-researchers.

3C. Social Aspect

Students claimed having developed their social aspect in conducting research. Research enabled them to build social relationships with different personalities, develop interpersonal skills, develop patience, attitude adjustments, and become open-minded, especially in dealing with the respondents and other professionals. One of the participants shared:

“, it has helped me reach out to different personalities”, (P2).

In addition, conducting research also helped students become sensitive to the needs of others, as one participant stated that:

“...it makes me more sensitive to teachers' needs, connect with them to achieve goals and objectives”, (P1).

This response supports the view of Al-Assaf (2014) that research at universities should be considered as an opportunity to solve real-world local and global challenges. By doing this, individuals will be sensitive and conscious of the problems being faced by other people and the society and strive to find solutions through research.

3D. Emotional Aspect

Considering that conducting research is experiential learning, emotions are expected to be felt during this journey. The study revealed the positive and negative impacts of doing research on the emotional aspect as claimed by student-researchers. These emotions are brought by the experiences they have during the research process and the way they handle them.

“...in doing our research, we feel weak, I feel weak, I feel discouraged, and when those times come, I enjoy sleeping to get rest for a while. And you will doubt yourself if you can do this or not because there are so many priorities”(P1).

“ I was anxious and problematic during those times when it pressured me a lot”, (P6).

On the other hand, doing research helped student-researchers become more mature in handling emotions, being calm and focused, and developing empathy. One of the participants shared:

“Emotionally, I believe, I become more mature. Being calm and being more focused on the task at hand”(P9).

This response implies that conducting research can help students learn how to manage their emotions and thus benefit them. The American Psychological Association (2019) emphasized that learners who can effectively manage their feelings perform better than those with lower emotional intelligence.

Conclusions

Student-researchers acknowledged both the advantages and disadvantages of undertaking research in this study. The benefits they shared aided in their personal and professional development and provided them with the opportunity to become better employees and contributors to society. Additionally, it honored the University's research programs for their good impact on professional development. On the other hand, the difficulties encountered by students reflected both the aspects of the research process – formulation of the research title and objectives, review of related literature, data collection and analysis – for which student-researchers require additional guidance and assistance, as well as the personal struggles – time constraints and lack of focus – they face while conducting the research. In terms of the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional components of research, it can be concluded that research has an effect on an individual's well-being, both positive and negative, depending on how they deal with the experience. As a result, students must intentionally evaluate their experiences and appropriately handle problems while performing their research projects in order to grow personally and professionally and to make the research journey meaningful.

Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- (1) Research students must understand the value of effective time management and be able to develop and apply it when conducting research in order to work around time constraints; and
- (2) Research programs should place a greater emphasis on guiding and assisting students with formulating research questions, reviewing related literature, collecting and analyzing data, as these tasks were perceived as complex by student-researchers. This can be accomplished through the sharing of techniques and strategies via seminars and webinars.

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