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Exploring the Role of PhD Scholars' Pre-entry Attributes in PhD Study: PhD Scholars' Perspective

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Abstract



PhD scholars' pre-entry attributes can play an important role in the quality of the doctoral experience, persistence, and timely PhD completion. This article explores how Pakistani PhD scholars perceive the role of pre-entry attributes, personal and familial, and previous academic experiences in influencing their PhD completion. 16 PhD candidates from four Pakistani universities across different academic fields were recruited through personal networks and interviewed using semi-structure schedule. Participants' experiences were captured using a constructivist approach and evaluated thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. The findings show three main themes. The first theme is the motivation to pursue a PhD as motivation is not only significant for enrollment but also for continuing during a PhD. The second theme is the intersection of gender, marital status, and familial obligations, as gendered roles have different effects: male breadwinners are strained, while females need in-laws' support during a PhD, and family obligations increase the propensity for delayed graduation. The third theme is the influence of prior learning experiences and anticipatory socialization, as good learning facilitates the progression of PhD studies, research skills, and research quality. The findings contribute to doctoral research in Pakistan and demonstrate the need to tailor institutional rules and practices enabling PhD candidates with these attributes to graduate on time.

Keywords: Doctoral Education, PhD Completion, Motivation, Socialization, Problematic Candidature, Pakistan.

Introduction

PhD completion and doctoral research are among the least researched areas in the higher education context in Pakistan. Compared with developed academic systems, the literature on this subject in Pakistan is scarce. Even though researchers have explored issues that arise when studying as a postgraduate, their work is usually more specific to the supervisor's problems, whereas a more comprehensive list of potentially factorial issues is often ignored. The works of Ali et al. (2019), Saleem and Mehmood (2017, 2018), Qureshi and Vazir (2015), Sarwar et al. (2018), and Shaikh (2015) are valuable contributions with some conceptual and methodological limitations, especially when it comes to personal, institutional, and pre-entry attribute interaction.

A lack of focus on factors such as institutional support, financial constraints, and individual traits has left many aspects of doctoral completion unexplored. Few empirical studies have examined pre-entry factors, such as academic background, previous research experience, and socio-economic circumstances. These factors, which underpin a scholar's readiness and flexibility, are key to understanding variation in doctoral success and completion rates. This creates an important knowledge gap that warrants closer investigation in the Pakistani context.

The dynamics of postgraduate success can be better understood in international literature. Researchers such as De Zoysa (2007), Meerah (2010), Hadi and Muhammad (2018), and Wareing (2009) have classified the factors into student, institutional, and supervisor dimensions. Equally, Wollast et al. (2018) identified personal, academic, and non-academic areas, whereas Gardner (2008) and Wamala et al. (2012) focused on the dynamics between academic, personal, and financial factors. Mushtaq and Khan (2012) further subdivided these influences into internal (academic/classroom-

related) and external (family and financial) and emphasized a complex environment in which doctoral progress and results are determined.

In Pakistan, PhD students are likely to face complex issues that can extend the graduation period or lead to dropout. There are many who stay longer than the usual length of their programs, sometimes lasting eight years, and many who drop out completely because of stress, lack of supervision, or institutional support. Supervision and research culture became the focus of attention across the country after the tragic case of Nadia Ashraf, a doctoral student at the University of Karachi who committed suicide in 2020. This was a highly publicized case that showed the mental and institutional stress students are feeling during their doctoral work, and just how far it needs to change.

With these problematic questions, there is a lack of empirical research on doctoral enrollment and Doctoral dropout rates in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2019, 2019; Hadi and Muhammad, 2018, 2019). The existing literature lacks a consistent perspective on how students' backgrounds, motivations, and institutional environments contribute to completion outcomes. Consequently, the issue of the attrition of doctors holds the thorn of Flemish flesh. The purpose of this paper is therefore to investigate the relationship between pre-entry variables and PhD completion, and to assess the ability of individual, academic, and institutional variables, combined, to predict the success of the doctorate in Pakistani universities.

Literature Review

Aina (2013) and Ghignoni (2017) both found that the likelihood of withdrawing from university is significantly lower for female students. Glasser (2006) observed that women are more than twice as likely as men to drop out of vocational training, whereas men are more than 16 times as likely. Behr *et al.* twice as likely as women to withdraw from a university programme. Van Bragt *et al.* (2011b) conducted a study of 1,176 students in the Netherlands, which shows that, in addition to a lower enrolment rate among male students, the dropout rate for males is three percentage points higher than for females. Smith and Naylor (2001) observed that only three percent of the total gender gap can be explained by observed characteristics, for example, because men prefer subjects with higher dropout rates.

Sarcelletti and Muller (2011), dropout rates for men and women depend partly on the gender composition of a course. If there is gender disparity, members of the minority class are more likely to face integration difficulties. Mastekaasa and Smeby (2008) analyzed 2,422 students from five Norwegian universities and concluded that male students' dropout is unrelated to the gender composition of study programmes, with the dropout rate among women from female-dominated study courses related to a lesser extent. Severiens and Ten Dam (2012) investigated gender differences at Dutch universities, including a sample of 10,000 university leavers. They made a distinction between male- and female-dominated study programmes, with at least 75% of students in each programme being male or female. Here, men have a very high attrition rate in female-dominated study programmes. According to this study, there are four reasons why men drop out more often from female-dominated study programmes, compared to male-dominated studies. The first reason is the home situation: men receive no support from parents and friends, who are instead often negative about their study choice.

Secondly, poorer job opportunities are more likely to be offered by female-dominated programmes, leading to lower-paying, lower-status jobs. Thirdly, men receive no support from their peers. Fourthly, men often drop out without a tertiary degree when they find a job outside university. The reason why women drop out of male-dominated programmes is mainly due to poor study choices, lack of motivation, and uninteresting courses. Compared to men, women seem to be more motivated and disciplined, and have better time-management skills, which are important characteristics for study performance. Brandstatter *et al.* (2006) also analyzed the interaction between gender and subject fields among 948 high school graduates who had participated in a career counselling programme in Austria. They observed that the dropout rate in Technical and Natural Sciences is higher for women and lower for men than in other subjects (Severiens & Ten Dam, 2012).

Brandstatter *et al.* (2006) found no influence of gender on the overall dropout rate. In contrast to the previous results, a study by Belloc et al. (2010), who examined 9,725 Bachelor students of Economics at Sapienza University in Rome/Italy, revealed that the probability of dropping out is lower for male students, but this was a study of only one cohort of Economics students. Age.

Regarding student age, there is evidence that older students are more likely to drop out, as observed by Muller and Schneider (2013). This may also explain the higher dropout rate for students who obtained vocational training before entering higher education. Lassibille and Navarro Gomez (2008) and Montmarquette *et al.* (2001) obtained similar results. A possible reason is the higher opportunity cost for older students who already have vocational experience. In contrast to these findings, a study on university dropouts found that women perform better with increasing age, while the best-performing group of male students is aged between 28 and 33 years. Belloc *et al.* (2010) observed that the longer the time between secondary school and university, the lower the probability of dropout.

The positive impact of high educational levels of the parents on the children's educational results and job careers has been thoroughly investigated in research. Smith and Naylor (2001), Di Pietro and Cutillo (2008), and Aina (2013) found that higher parental education is associated with better students' performance at university and a lower probability of dropping out. Aina (2013) pointed out that highly educated parents have a positive effect on students' enrolment rates. Other studies come to similar results. For instance, Ghignoni (2017) concluded that lower social class and a father without a tertiary degree increase the probability of dropping out. Johnes and McNabb (2004) investigated the effect of parental occupation and state that unskilled parents increase students' dropout risk. Gury (2011), who examined 5,383 students enrolled at universities in France, found that students whose fathers have blue-collar jobs are more likely to drop out during the first three years. Parental education is strongly related to parental occupation and, consequently, to family income and the financial support a student receives from his/her parents.

Various studies found that motivation plays an important role in PhD studies. The more motivated students are, the higher the chances of completing a PhD. Various studies empirically supported this finding. They stated that goals make an excellent contribution to students' motivation. As a result, motivated students can focus on their studies and are more likely to complete them. Other scholars have discussed the role of extrinsic and intrinsic factors in students' motivation and commitment. Intrinsic factors include reasons, aspirations, and enrollment objectives in academic institutions. These factors affect student persistence at a particular educational institution (Godwin *et al.*, 2018; Prince & Ford, 2016). Extrinsic factors include students' institutional and external commitments. External commitment could include employment, familial responsibilities, and other non-academic goals. Cook *et al.* (2017) and Heublin (2014) have supported Tinto's postulates. They stated that domestic responsibilities, jobs, personal goals, and external engagements negatively affect persistence and degree completion.

Merton coined the term Anticipatory socialization in his classic study, *The American Soldier* (Merton, 1968). Merton defined anticipatory socialization as "taking on the values of the non-membership group to which they aspire, finding easier acceptance and adjustment by that group" (Merton, 1968). Merton believed that anticipatory socialization starts with informal preparation for future roles (Merton, 1968). Merton also stated that anticipatory socialization occurs in educational institutions where students are unintentionally oriented to higher levels. (Merton 1968). Mortimer and Simmons (1978) expanded the concept of anticipatory socialization. He defined anticipatory socialization as "all mental, behavioural, or social activities performed in preparation for role acquisition." This notion can be applicable to doctoral studies, too. Literature suggests that students with good prior learn thrive in PhD studies, and students with poor learning experiences in previous schooling are susceptible to thesis blocking and dropout.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilized Tinto's social integration model (1995), and Braxton revised it (2014). Both theoretical models explained factors that contribute to persistence in undergraduate and doctoral education. They posited that personal attributes and students' academic and social integration directly affect their persistence and degree completion (Braxton, 2014; Tinto, 1995). They believed that completing or quitting a degree is a decision-making process and an outcome of several factors, i.e., pre-entry attributes, social and academic integration, quality of interaction with faculty/staff, and institutional commitment to students' welfare. Based on the theoretical framework, some pre-entry attributes of PhD scholars were identified. Pre-entry attributes, also called pre-study and pre-college/university attributes, refer to characteristics before college or university admission. The key pre-entry attributes include gender, marital status, motivation, parental education, prior schooling, and anticipatory socialization.

Research Methodology

The researchers adopted a qualitative methodology exploring Pakistani PhD scholars' pre-entry attributes in their PhD competition. This approach was well-suited because it was designed to explore participants' experiences of PhD completion in their academic context. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, data were collected from 16 PhD scholars across the four major universities in Pakistan. These universities were the Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, and the International Islamic University. The researchers used personal networks to collect data from the participants mentioned. To ensure data versatility and richness, PhD scholars from diverse academic backgrounds and genders were contacted. These participants were asked about their motivation, employment status, familial responsibilities, and support from family and peers during their PhD completions. They were also asked about their previous learning experiences. Interviews ($n = 16$) occurred from March 2022 to May 2022 and lasted 50 minutes on average. Data were collected in Urdu, which was easy for all participants, and were analyzed thematically (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Terry et al., 2017). The data were then translated into English for coding and theme development. Summaries were prepared and mailed with transcript participants after transcription. This process of member-checking enabled the participant to confirm their account, which gave credence to our transcriptions and summaries of the data (Barnard, Lan, Paton, and Lai, 2009). Raw data were then managed and interpreted using the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software by speaking into transcripts. Participants in the final report were given pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach was used for analysis. We used a thematic framework to explore interview data, inductively coding the data to allow codes and themes to emerge and develop from the data. We subjected codes to continuous refining and revision, grouping and agreeing on sub-themes and themes in the final stage. Peer debriefing was used throughout the research to test emerging themes and embed credibility into the analytical process. We acknowledge that representing raw data as quotes in the results is an interpretive process that is open to bias.

Findings

Theme 1: Motivation to Pursue a PhD

The importance of motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, is critical for a doctoral program. Extrinsic motivation helps students maintain behaviors over time; intrinsic motivation is critical for strengthening learning. Motivation is a crucial factor for doctoral students, but self-regulation and intrinsic motivation are essential given the unstructured nature of most doctoral programs. PhD scholars need to develop self-regulation skills and internal motivation to succeed. Several factors motivated scholars to pursue their PhD, including personal commitment and the desire to join or advance in academia. Some scholars also noted that family, friends, and teachers played a role in their decision. While some pursued a PhD to improve their qualifications, others saw it as a requirement for career advancement. One scholar mentioned having a longstanding commitment to pursuing a PhD since their bachelor's degree. The scholar added, *"I am doing it for the sake of my career. My colleagues got promoted to higher ranks. I am also doing a promotion. My main aim is to get the promotion and specialization in a particular area of our subject."*

One scholar identified a quest for knowledge and a desire to solve a specific problem as the reason for starting a PhD program, while another noted that he was jobless and applied for HEC's indigenous scholarship, which led to his enrollment in the program. This scholar stated that he was aimless during his studies. Additionally, some individuals were motivated by friends or family members who had already enrolled in a PhD program. One scholar added, *"I belong to an educated family. My father is retired from school. My two elder brothers hold PhD My mother also wished to see me with a PhD So, all these factors motivated me to enroll in a PhD and get a PhD My elder brother mentored me in my M.Phil. Then, I got enrolled in a Ph.D."*

Friends and teachers with doctorates and good reputations inspired respondents to enroll in PhD programs, highlighting the impact of social networks and role models on individuals' decisions to pursue a doctoral degree. A scholar explained, *"Since childhood, I have been interested in becoming a medical doctor or a PhD. My family members also motivated me to do a PhD Similarly, when I saw respect and regard for my teachers. They inspired me and encouraged me to enroll in a PhD."* Ironically, one scholar revealed that I was not motivated by anything, but I enrolled in the PhD program without any purpose in mind.

Theme 2: Intersection of gender, marital status, and marital obligations with doctoral studies

This theme is about how gender, marital status, and family duties meet with the process of earning a PhD. It addresses how these elements could influence the student's experience in a doctoral program, as well as the challenges and obstacles they might encounter. It also emphasizes the necessity of taking into account the individual experiences of students with other gender identities, marital statuses, and family obligations, and how these elements may influence their capacity to complete their PhD. Scholars were asked to share their views on how gender affects their experience in pursuing a PhD. The scholars showed mixed views, with no clear consensus on whether gender has a significant impact on one's doctoral journey. However, most scholars agreed that pursuing a PhD requires complete dedication, commitment, and determination, which are qualities that transcend gender. The scholar argued, "A PhD has nothing to do with gender. If one has devotion, gives time to their studies, and works hard, they can do it. I do not think that gender can hinder my PhD. An important requirement for a PhD is students' devotion to their PhD."

Some scholars believed that gender could negatively impact the PhD journey. Specifically, male scholars have reported that their gender can create additional responsibilities beyond their role as PhD scholars, which they consider equally important. One male scholar narrated that "I am a male. I must support my family. I must take care of my family members. I must participate in social events. Sometimes I have PhD-related tasks, but familial responsibilities are coupled with them. I must prefer domestic work."

Another male scholar shared his views on how male breadwinners' responsibilities can affect PhD progress. "Family is one of the most important things in human life. In our society, the male is the breadwinner. Family is the primary concern, while a PhD is secondary. The PhD degree can be sacrificed for family, and I do the same often." It was also observed that female scholars face challenges in their PhD journey due to their gender. They may struggle to get enrolled and require male approval and support to continue their studies. Additionally, financial dependence on males can also be a factor. However, it is noteworthy that gender's impact on PhD is more indirect, with social factors playing a more significant role than academic ones.

Marital status emerged as a factor impacting the PhD journey. Marital status can prolong a PhD journey, according to scholars. Married students take longer to complete their PhD as they must balance marital obligations with their studies. In contrast, unmarried students are better positioned to focus on their studies. One unmarried scholar explained and compared himself to a male married scholar. "I am single and can give more time to my studies than married scholars. I am staying at the hostel and do not go home often. I talk to them telephonically. Those married or have kids will have to look after their families. It will affect their working schedule or style."

Likewise, another scholar added that bachelorhood is advantageous. "A single person may be in a better position to complete their PhD than those with familial responsibilities. The student can manage his domestic obligations and PhD. However, I feel that students with fewer familial responsibilities would have more time and energy to focus on their PhD." Another scholar also validated that marriage affects a PhD, regardless of gender. He added, "I am single. I am free from familial responsibilities. However, married individuals, both male and female, face domestic duties. I believe in one job at a time."

During interviews, PhD scholars hinted at a link between parental education and PhD studies. Parental education significantly impacts children's personalities and academic success. Educated parents can guide their children better and provide them with academic and financial support. It is applicable to early or elementary education. However, the link between parental education and completion of a PhD program is weak and indirect. One scholar opined that his parents' love for education helped him enroll in a PhD program. He added, "My father was educated and had a great love for education. He was aware of the importance of education. He already worked in education in his area. He wished to see me educated. He used to celebrate our academic success. His love for education motivated me to enroll in a PhD."

Similarly, other scholars also agreed that literate parents could facilitate a better understanding of academic needs. They are also better positioned to provide them with the resources required for their educational journey. "Educated parents can instill social capital in their children. Their children will have a good background. Educated parents can better understand children's academic needs. They can provide better resources for their children. So parental education has a

good impact on PhD completion.” Illiterate parents can encourage and provide emotional support to their children, even if they cannot help with their education directly. A scholar narrated how his illiterate mother helped him. *“My parents are illiterate. However, parental education is vital to academic achievement. My illiterate mother is also aware of the importance of education. She always supported and motivated me to pursue my education, and her commitment and motivation have played an essential role in my PhD studies.”*

Theme 3: Influence of previous learning experiences and anticipatory socialization on progression of PhD students

Scholars had varied experiences in their MPhil programs. Some scholars had positive experiences, while others had reservations about the quality of teaching and research, as well as malpractice. Additionally, scholars pursuing MPhil leading to Ph.D. faced challenges during their Ph.D., while another scholar with an MPhil (without research) explained how he managed to complete the Ph.D. program. A scholar explained how his previous degree oriented him regarding his research area for his PhD. *“My M.Phil. level learning and grooming have prepared me for my PhD research project.”*

Another PhD scholar in the natural sciences related his MPhil-level learning to his PhD research. He added, *“I did my M. Phil through the Higher Education Commission (HEC) project. I did Experimental research in my M.Phil. So, the previous schooling enabled me to learn about experiments, techniques, and writing skills.”* M.Phil. must be considered a preparatory degree for a PhD. Scholars must be trained to be able to undertake independent research. A social sciences scholar opined. *“I earned an MS degree from the University of Malakand, studying the impact of Facebook on academic performance. Training and supervision were valuable, though challenging. These experiences led to PhD admission, where I researched drug addiction, drawing on previous learning.”*

Theory and research are interrelated and should be taught effectively to M.Phil. students. They must learn to recognize relevant theories and base their research on them. Training and workshops complement classroom learning and offer valuable information. It's crucial for universities and supervisors to arrange such activities and motivate scholars to attend training at other universities. A botanist shared his views on this. He explained how a technique helped him to conduct his experiment and complete his thesis quickly. *“I gained experience in this area during my BS and M. Phil studies, and attending various conferences and trainings further helped. Utilizing new data for research requires practice, which I received during my M. Phil, enabling me to conduct my research efficiently and submit my thesis on time.”*

He further added that his M.Phil. supervisor inculcated the qualities of a researcher in him. He guided the identification of problems, conducting experiments, and, most importantly, interpreting data. He detailed, *“During the M.Phil. stage, our supervisor trained and guided us regarding research design. He enabled us to identify the problem and solve it. Our supervisor taught us about the lab and related equipment and encouraged us about the experiments and interpretations.”*

PhD scholars start their studies after a particular gap. It also happens that some students change their academic discipline. For example, they hold a bachelor's degree in one discipline and do an MPhil in another. In such a context, introductory and advanced learning is required. An anthropology graduate who was pursuing a PhD in sociology narrated, *“I enrolled in M.Phil. Sociology, despite not having a sociology background, taught me the basics and advanced concepts through mentors and teachers, making me a scholar. The university provided many learning opportunities, for which they deserve recognition. My training and supervision were positive experiences, aided by helpful classmates.”*

Poor academic and training in previous degrees result in problematic candidature. Problematic candidature refers to the shortcomings of individuals pursuing a PhD. In other words, problematic candidates are those who are not fit for a PhD degree due to a lack of a PhD (Akpaprep *et al.*, 2017; Rennie & Brewer, 1987). A scholar who had zero research experience shared his story: *“I have completed my 18 years of education. I had some theoretical knowledge, but did not conduct research. When I was asked to submit a research proposal, I had no clue how to do it.”*

As he did not conduct research in his previous degree, he had to learn many things in his PhD. I had to learn computer skills, MS Office, and internet surfing before starting to write. Despite working slowly and putting in a lot of time and effort, I was behind my PhD classmates who had prior research experience. I submitted my research proposal a semester later than they did. Some scholars

conducted research in their previous degrees but were dissatisfied with their experiences. They lacked quality research training and needed to learn how to conduct research independently. Their theses were substandard. One scholar expressed it as follows. *“Though I conducted research at MPhil, I think it was not up to the mark, or I would say I could not do it well. There was less emphasis on research tools and research ethics. I got an MPhil, but I was not trained to research. I was unable to use SPSS. Many of our classmates were unable to conduct research.”*

Scholars revealed that the research module needs to be taught better. This hinted toward the skills and capabilities of course instructors. A scholar implicitly questioned the teaching and pedagogical skills of PhD course instructors. *“Here, students are not trained academically and research-wise. The research methodology module is not taught correctly. There may be deficiencies in teachers or institutions. I do not think that they prepare students for a PhD level.”* M.Phil. and PhD scholars must have a strong grasp of research, theory, and practice. Without proper theoretical knowledge, conducting high-quality research is impossible.

Another scholar narrated a sad and grim part of the story. He identified that one of his classmates hired the services of a paid thesis writer and is now enrolled in a PhD. He expressed, sadly, *“Students who did not know about research even got an M.Phil. They get a thesis from the market. Supervisors are also part of this process. Supervisors do not want to bother themselves to compel students to conduct genuine research and write a thesis.”* This situation calls for more stringent monitoring and checking by the university administration. Supervisors must also ensure that scholars do not engage in malpractice and that they conceive the idea, conduct research, and author the thesis. University administration must also make efforts to curtail such malpractices and misappropriations.

Scholars found some skills that should be addressed to become a good scholar in a PhD. As mentioned above, M.Phil. is pre-training and as such, academic and research training is critical. A scholar said that one must be trained at the BS level. They should then be able to survive at the PhD level later with M.Phil. He also wrote that group work in BS level is not advisable. Individual and practical research should be taught to students. It will assist them in acquiring novel concepts and methods. One researcher talked about the role of technological and digital literacy. In addition, students will need to be familiar with learning devices to make their writing and productivity easier. ‘

Reading behaviors were also emphasized by scholars in their emphasis on terminology, theories, and methods in their field. Readings also help them make sense of what they have to offer and hone their argumentation. Researchers recommended peer mentoring as a means by which older or graduate students might support their younger counterparts. This is beneficial to both the mentor and mentee and encourages integration, transition, and retention in learning institutions. Research indicates that peer mentoring is an effective tool for encouraging student achievement. MPhil students might be asked to support junior students with their work and theses. M.Phil. students can contribute to their experience and expertise. It enhances their mentoring ability and allows them guide, organize, and oversee a research project.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the continuation and progression of PhD students in Pakistan depend on a complex combination of pre-entry factors, social and family responsibilities, prior academic training, and individual motivation. The findings indicated that intrinsic motivation and self-regulation remain highly significant to success in doctoral studies. More extrinsic factors, such as family expectations, work advancement, and financial opportunities, also play a significant role in enrollment and persistence. Gender and marital status intersect with culture, and they tend to place an extra burden on them, particularly on married scholars, who need to provide for the bread and butter, whereas women face challenges related to social acceptance and economic reliance.

Poor training and exposure to research during their previous degrees created issues with the candidates, retarding their development and, in a few instances, jeopardizing their probability of dropping out. It was noted that anticipatory socialization and peer mentoring are important factors in preparing students to participate in independent research, and thus, students should be exposed to research methodology and writing early on. The article reveals that to improve doctoral completion rates in Pakistan, research training at the undergraduate and MPhil stages, counseling and mentoring before PhD admission, and alleviating socio-cultural barriers through institutional support mechanisms are needed. Identifying the current issues facing PhD scholars, universities, and

policymakers can help develop interventions that promote motivation, enhance readiness, and foster a conducive environment that supports doctoral persistence and timely completion.

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