

Misaligned Expectations in Doctoral ESP Training:

Policy Directive vs. Student Needs in Algeria

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Abstract:

In Algeria, however, the doctoral research agenda was recently realigned to make Artificial Intelligence, programming, and philosophy core requirements for doctoral students, while English for Specific Purposes (ESP) was relegated to a secondary, optional role. Firstly, for ESP students, this has led to perceptions of mismatch between what they need and what exists. Secondly, these are being proved here through the application of questionnaires and supervisor and doctoral student participants' interviews. The outcomes indicate that a gap that persists, students greatly value continuous, specialist advice from experienced ESP teachers, yet supervisors recognize that such advice is thwarted by institutional considerations. Consequently, the result is a training system that is unrelated to students' future career aspirations, too generic, and piecemeal. Finally, to move forward, the study recommends reestablishing ESP as an integral component of Ph.D. training, initiating systems of formal mentorship, and integrating technology as an enrichment, not a substitute, for disciplinary breadth.

Keywords: *Algeria; Doctoral Training; ESP Specialism ;Policy versus Practice; Student Satisfaction.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education is comprehensively defined as the core of scholarly and professional education, preparing future academics with teaching, research, and leadership skills. Globally, doctoral education has been restructured so that education is delivered with strong theory, research skills, and pedagogical training (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). In Algeria, recent reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Higher Education strengthened interdisciplinarity and integration of technologies and have mandated courses in Artificial Intelligence, programming, and philosophy as required courses for all doctoral research students. While targeting modernization of higher education, reformatations have unintentionally isolated special fields such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as the latter are now considered as electives.

I.2 Background of Study

This policy change is of grave concern for ESP doctoral students, whose postgraduate training in applied linguistics, pedagogy, and discipline-based methodology is the very condition of future employment. Where systematic long-term preparation would be anticipated, training is instead infrequent and irregular, with erratic participation ("doctoral days") of workshops seen as ritual rather than pedagogical. In a previous examination of Algerian doctoral education, supervision (Belkhir, 2022), employability (Bennadji, 2020), and quality assurance (Bennadji, 2020) have been addressed, much less so the experiences of students of ESP. This disconnect between ministerial decree and actual doctoral needs is an area still too insufficiently researched.

1.3 Research Questions

Filling such a gap, the current research answers the following queries:

1. What are the key academic and professional competencies required for the training of ESP doctoral students in Algeria?
2. How satisfied are these students with the current training structures and practices provided by universities?
3. How do national policy decisions impact, strengthen, or impede the quality and relevance of ESP doctoral training?

1.4. Objective of the Study

The value of the research lies in the critical examination of the gap between policy guidelines and requirements for doctoral preparation of ESP students in Algeria. With regard to both students' and supervisors' perspective, the research makes an attempt at conceptualizing gaps on the structural level and providing possibilities for adjusting doctoral training and the profession and career of ESP specialists.

1.5 Hypotheses

Research is based upon the following assumptions:

H1: Algerian ESP doctoral students perceive serious gaps in their training in main disciplinary and pedagogic skills and suggest that existing training is not yet sufficient for their disciplinary and pedagogical needs.

H2: ESP doctoral students report low satisfaction with current training trends and protocols as lacking for doctoral and employment development.

H3: National policy advocacy for fundamental courses in artificial intelligence, programming, and philosophy affect negatively the quality and relevance of ESP doctoral education and is taken as an indication of reduced investment in ESP-specific development at the institution.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Doctoral Training in Global and Local Contexts

Doctoral studies worldwide have moved from non-formal apprenticeship to increasingly formal doctoral schools, offering an attempt at an equilibrium between extreme disciplinary specialization and transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, and interdisciplinary teamwork (Boud & Lee, 2009; cf. Dou et al., 2023). As Park (2007) highlights, redefining the doctorate entails balancing research training, professional preparation, and pedagogical competence to meet both academic and societal expectations. In numerous MENA and European programs, there is now an open focus on intermingling disciplinary rigor and pedagogical training, familiarization with digital methodology, and interdisciplinary breadth. Nonetheless, Algerian literature posits reforms as frequently mirroring topdown ministerial directives as opposed to bottom-up demands. For instance, ESP and Business English for Postgraduate Students in the Department of Economics, Tahri Mohamed University, Bechar (2023) established that ESP courses are disappointing as they fail to cater to needs. Conversely, *Voicing Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of ESP* (Bouhafs, 2022) depicts ESP lecturers in Algeria criticizing insufficient training in a specialization and lack of institutional support.

2.2 ESP as a Specialism in doctoral studies

ESP is described as one of the applied linguistics fields that needs robust theoretical foundation (e.g. in discourse analysis, genre analysis) as much as applied pedagogical competence (Basturkmen, 2010). ESP is also grounded in corpus-based research, which provides empirical bases for genre and discourse practices (Flowerdew, 2015). Recent work has justified these anticipations. For example: (Dou et al., 2023) records fresh attention to refining needs analysis, embedding ESP in technological contexts, and implementing intercultural awareness. In Algeria in particular, *The Status of ESP in Algeria: The Need for Highly Specialized Courses* (Assassi, 2022) shows that ESP programs are not necessarily specialty-oriented; some ESP teachers are not specially trained in preparing ESP courses; there is insufficient correlation between the content of the syllabi and the requirements of the students.

2.3 Technology and Technology Tools in ESP Doctoral Training

Technology is becoming an integral rather than an afterthought in ESP; recent research reveals digital tools are redefining ESP pedagogy and what skills are required of students. As Chapelle and Sauro (2017) remind us, technology and second language pedagogy must be seen in tandem rather than as separate domains. *ESP in the Digital Age: Mapping Tools, Platform, and Pedagogical Shifts in Higher Education* (Nuryanti, 2025) comprehensively surveyed research between 2019-2025 and revealed that mobile applications, LMS systems, and asynchronous tools enhance engagement, autonomy, and vocabulary building, particularly in subjects such as engineering, health sciences, and tourism. Developing online ESP teaching requires systematic training in digital pedagogy (Hampel & Stickler, 2015). Additionally, *Integrating AI literacy into an EAP module* (Ngo, 2025) provides a transferable framework for integrating AI with academic English preparation. As Weller (2020) observed, technological trends in education evolve over decades, shaping pedagogical practices. Yet even as there are gains, there are challenges as well: digital literacy is uneven, infrastructure is uneven, and generic IT

training may not transfer adequately to disciplinary requirements. Reforms in Algeria requiring AI and programming courses may be symptomatic of the national need for modernization, although recent localized research suggests that such requirements may come too late for ESP students without modification.

2.4 Research Gap

From the literature available:

1. There is empirical evidence that ESP in Algeria is under-resourced, under-tailored, and often optional.
2. The entire planet (and the region) is becoming increasingly enthusiastic about refining needs analysis, integrating technology meaningfully, and combining disciplinary depth and breadth of skills.
3. Better understood is the level of research and pedagogical preparedness of ESP instructors and course planners (instead of ESP doctoral students) for research and pedagogy in the new policy system; their level of satisfaction with training; and evaluative statements from supervisors about trade-offs between policy demands (AI, programming, philosophy requirements) and disciplinary specialization in ESP.

Therefore, the gap this paper addresses, timely and significant, lies in comprehending the lived experiences, understandings, and needs of ESP doctoral students in Algeria, particularly within the context of current reforms involving technology application, policy influence, and mentorship interaction.

3. Methodology

The research surveyed 20 doctoral students majoring in ESP, purposively selected from five Algerian universities, and 7 project supervisors offering institutional and supervisory insights. Selecting participants from different universities added variety in the experiences represented, although the small sample size restricts wider generalizability.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Questionnaires

An anonymous survey, carried out through Google Forms, was sent out to all 20 doctoral students. It integrated closed-form Likert-scale surveys of satisfaction, relevance of the course, and quality of mentorship with open-ended sections inviting participants to provide details regarding their experiences and perceptions.

3.3.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with an estimated 10 purposively selected students—guaranteeing breadth of opinion across institutions—along with all 7 supervisors lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and consisted of an interview guide administered through Google Meet. The interview guide introduced three main themes: (1) adequacy of doctoral training, (2) challenges with supervision and mentorship, and (3) reform proposals for the future.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Quantitative Data

Survey responses were described using descriptive statistics (percentages and frequency counts) so as to determine patterns in satisfaction, relevance of the course, and mentorship. The results were described in tables and triangulated using qualitative findings with the intention of enhancing validity.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data

Interview transcriptions and qualitative survey responses were subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The primary codes—that spanned from displeasure, non-relevance of AI courses, and mentorship gaps—categorized into broader themes. To ensure anonymity, students were assigned P1–P20 and supervisors S1–S7. Key findings are highlighted through selection of representative quotations. 3.5 Ethical Considerations The research followed a rigid code of ethics. All respondents gave informed consent prior to participation. Identities were de-identified using numerical codes (P for students, S for supervisors). Voluntary participation was encouraged, and participants may refrain at any point in time without penalty. All data were recorded exclusively for research purposes and kept safe with complete confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Findings

The data collected from twenty doctoral students specializing in ESP, complemented by insights from seven project supervisors, revealed three overarching challenges: dissatisfaction with current training, the irrelevance of compulsory courses, and the absence of structured mentoring. These concerns were substantiated by both quantitative survey results and qualitative testimonies.

4.1 Quantitative Results

These results demonstrate that dissatisfaction among Algerian ESP doctoral students is widespread and systemic, reflecting a significant misalignment between the training offered and their actual academic and professional needs.

Table 1. Quantitative Findings on ESP Doctoral Students' Training Satisfaction and Needs in Algeria

Aspect	Percentage (%)	Description
Dissatisfaction with doctoral training	75	A majority of ESP doctoral students reported current training as unsatisfactory.
Irrelevance of compulsory courses (AI, philosophy)	80	Students perceived mandatory courses as disconnected from their academic and professional trajectories.
Demand for ESP-specific seminars and modules	90	Strong student demand for targeted ESP training opportunities.
Mentorship deficit	65	Reported insufficient supervisory support and lack of structured mentorship.

These results suggest that dissatisfaction with Algerian ESP doctoral students is widespread and systemic and a reflection of large disparities between training received and their perceived needs in academics and profession

4.2 Students' Test

The voices of the students illuminated and added richness to the quantitative data.

On dissatisfaction with training:

P7 explained: "Our doctoral days are formalities. We read papers, but we do not acquire actual understanding of ESP.

P12 was disappointed: "I was expecting ESP courses, but what I got was taking philosophy classes, which do not equip me in teaching and researching in English."

P18 called it "fragmented." We jump from one workshop to the next, and it never follows up upon what it was last.

These descriptions shed light on the extent to which "doctoral days" and generic workshops are perceived as ritualistic and not developmentally oriented, providing pseudo-activity with minimal intellectual development

Regarding the non-relevance of mandatory courses:

P2 inquired: "Why do we need to study programming and AI? We are language specialists, not computer scientists.

P9 responded: "The system treats us all equally. But the ESP is in no way comparable with physics and mathematics. We require training in our own discipline."

P17 responded: "Artificial intelligence is interesting, but where you do not have past knowledge of methods of teaching ESP, it distracts.

P11 also added: "I do not mind learning about technology, but it should be complementary. It is currently dominating all other dimensions."

Even as students affirmed the necessity of technology, they repudiated a one-size policy in favor of training across the board rather than knowledge of discipline.

On mentorship requests:

P20 was resolute: "Without guidance, we are lost."

We cannot learn from reading alone about holistic ESP course design."

P6 noted: "Our managers intervene and try, but we need more than occasional one-to-one meetings."

P15 urged, "Virtually learning from experienced ESP practitioners would be orders of magnitude better value than attending generic workshops."

P3 said, "Some students are lucky and have supportive supervisors. There are some who quietly suffer and have no real guidance."

On ministerial reforms and ESP marginalization:

S3 said: "After the ministry made ESP theoretical training optional, the universities ceased investment on it. We cannot hold the students responsible for feeling neglected."

S6 explained: "Resources go into programming and AI, but ESP modules are not planned at all. We suggest two or three modules in a semester as a proposal, but the content is not predesigned, the teacher is finally deciding, and attendance is even facultative."

On the lack of systematic mentoring:

S4 claimed: "Mentoring is left up to the individual supervisor. There is no system institutionally. Students are lucky sometimes, other students are left alone."

S7 added: "We try to bring guest teachers, but these are isolated initiatives. Without consistency, their impact is limited."

Both opinions reassert that ESP training is inadequately funded and fragmented, and that mentoring is founded upon personal benevolence rather than system arrangements.

4.4 Thematic Illustrations

Three thematic patterns stand out clearly:

4.4.1 Policy–Practice Gap

Even while the ministry mandates the study of AI and philosophy, students disproportionately find it irrelevant, infringing on doctoral training integrity. Corroborative accounts from students (P2, P9) and comments from supervisors (S3) substantiate this gap.

4.4.2 Fragmented Training

Both groups criticized doctoral days and workshops as symbolic rather than cumulative. Students (P7, P12) and supervisors (S2, S5) consistently described these activities as lacking rigor, progression, and evaluation.

4.4.3 Inadequate Appropriate Mentorship:

Students described inadequate systematic guidance (P20, P15) and supervisors likewise answered that there was non-uniform and person-specific mentorship (S4, S7).

4.5 Synthesis of Results

The compiled data identify systemic issues with ESP doctoral students in Algeria. Quantitative surveys uncover that 75% are dissatisfied, 90% need training led by ESP, and 65% are poorly mentored. Qualitative descriptions enumerate the lived experiences of the gaps: time wasted

on non-applicable courses, superficial workshops, and non-institutionalized mentorship. Supervisors also validated the findings, confessing that universities deprioritized ESP since the ministerial reforms and training is thus fragmented and inconsistent.

These results reveal four interrelated issues shaping ESP doctoral students' experience: policy–practice gaps, disconnected practices of training, inadequate mentorship, and overemphasis on technology and an insufficient breadth of disciplinary focus. The next thematic model is a visual summary of the major conclusions.

Figure 1. Thematic Structure of ESP Doctoral Training Research in Algeria

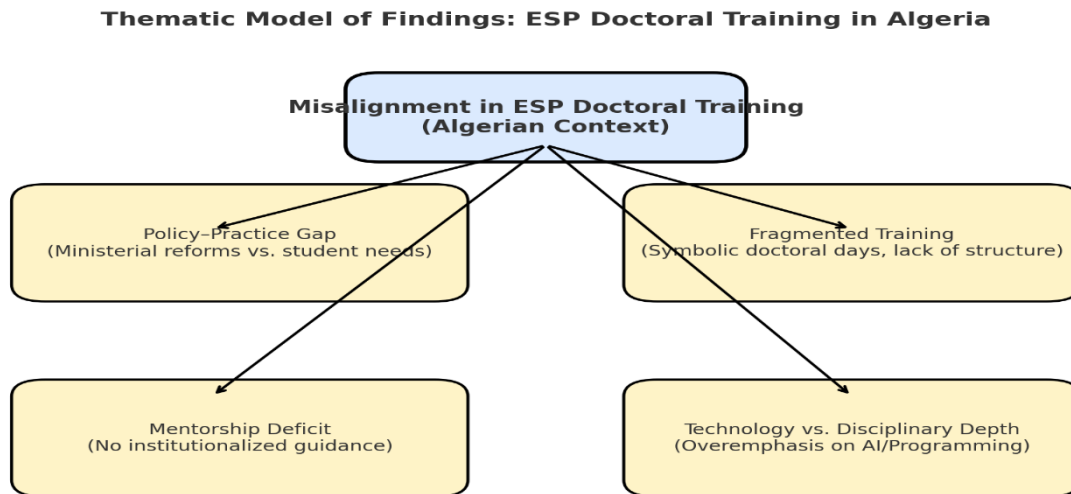


Figure 1 summarizes the thematic structure of ESP doctoral training research in Algeria. The central issue of mismatch is framed by four intersecting themes: policy–practice gap, disconnected training, lack of mentorship, and technological versus disciplinary breadth.

In essence, Algerian ESP doctoral students are sandwiched between policy-inspired reforms favoring technological modernization and their professional requirement for disciplinary specialization and formal mentorship. This incongruity underscores the dire need for programmatic readjustment so that doctoral education meets both educational and professional demands.

5. Discussion

The research uncovers a deep mismatch between policy-oriented Algerian doctoral education system and doctoral students' requirements as ESP specialists. While doctoral research is meant to equip students with knowledge of discipline and transversal skills, the evidence is that these intentions are mostly theoretical and not practical in application. This incongruity is similar to earlier comments made by Belkhir (2022), who criticized systemic failings in Algerian doctoral study, and particularly with regard to the tractability of the system with regard to students' needs.

5.1 Policy–Practice Tensions

The introduction of mandatory courses in philosophy, artificial intelligence, and programming with the aim of up-date doctoral training has evoked considerable resentment on the part of

students. In P2's words: "Why are we required to do AI and programming? We are not computer scientists; we are language specialists." In similar vein, P9 observed that the system "treats us all the same" and so blunts disciplinary specificity. These findings are shared with Bennadji's (2020) claim that Algerian doctoral reforms often privilege ministerial aims over disciplinary depth. Comparative international samples reinforce this incongruity: in Europe, doctoral schools value interdisciplinary schooling without relinquishing disciplinary specialization (Dou et al., 2023). In contrast, Algerian reforms seem to blur disciplinary focus in ESP and so fail to prepare students for their double roles as researchers and professors.

5.2 Symbolic and Fragmented Practices of Training

Another common theme is the symbolism of doctoral seminars and workshops. Students panned such events as superficial, with P7 saying that they are "mere formalities" and P12 complaining that they provided "little more than generic lectures." Supervisors shared that opinion, with S2 arguing that doctoral days "tick administrative boxes" instead of contributing to competence. This is similar to Wisker's (2012) analysis that poorly conceived doctoral events become bureaucratic exercises instead of development milestones. Across the world, formally structured doctoral programs are cumulative with defined syllabi and outcomes (Nerad & Evans, 2014). Omission of such building blocks in Algeria makes students unprepared, repeating Pearson and Brew's (2002) criticism that fragmented training is ruinous for research capacity and pedagogic preparedness.

5.3 The Mentorship Deficit

The report also shows a chronic shortage of mentorship. Students as P20 reinforced that "without mentoring, we are lost," and supervisors like S4 acknowledged that "mentoring is left to individual supervisors." These inequalities reinforce earlier doubts raised by Aitchison et al. (2012) that applied linguistics doctoral students need regular supervisory and pedagogical support to grow as scholars and teachers. Globally, formalized mentoring is documented extensively as improving doctoral completions significantly (Lee & Danby, 2012). In Algeria, however, the mentorship is ad hoc and inconsistent, and the learning outcomes are therefore unequal. This is similar to Bouhafs' (2022) report that ESP instructors themselves are usually unsupported by institutional setups and thereby contribute directly to what doctoral students experience.

5.4 Technology vs. Disciplinary Depth

The other salient theme is an excessive focus on technology at the expense of disciplinary grounding. While technological capability is indisputably central in modern academia, interviewees urged caution against technological proficiency becoming the centerpiece of doctoral study. P17 commented thus: "Artificial intelligence is interesting, but without some background in ESP pedagogy, it is a distraction." This follows Hyland (2006) in noting that ESP is an inherently practice-led field that cannot be replaced with generic training. New studies (Ngo, 2025; Nuryanti, 2025) show that technological tools may reinforce ESP pedagogy as long as applied with intention, corpus-based analysis or AI-powered feedback—but as long as embedded in robust disciplinary paradigms. Algerian reforms, in contrast, require students of all doctoral programs to study programming and AI without adaptation, jeopardizing relevance for linguists and diluting disciplinary skills.

5.5 Systemic Implications

Combined, these outcomes suggest that the challenges faced by ESP doctoral students in Algeria are systematic rather than episodic. The quantitative results: 75% dissatisfied, 90% demand ESP-specific training, and 65% experience deficits in mentorship, indicate a similar pattern of unmet needs. Qualitative descriptions corroborate testimony of frustration with irrelevant courses, symbolic seminars, and diffused mentorship. These results replicate international concerns raised by Morley (2016) and Wellington & Sikes (2006) regarding the peril of policy-driven doctoral reforms without consideration of disciplinary realities. In Algeria, supervisors themselves confirmed that institutional apathy about ESP directly follows ministerial decrees, supporting the perception of a top-down system that never takes bottom-up realities into account. Briefly, Algerian ESP doctoral students are caught between two rival currents: ministerial reforms based on modernity, interdisciplinarity, and informatization and disciplinary exigencies for depth, mentorship, and pedagogic competence. What is needed is not symbolic reforms but substantive restructuring that recovers disciplinary saliency, embeds mentoring, and incorporates technology as an auxiliary rather than an alternative.

6. Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study, several targeted recommendations are advanced to address the misalignments identified in doctoral ESP training in Algeria:

1. Specialized training in ESP should be reinstated as a compulsory and integral element of doctoral programs. This will ensure that candidates acquire the discipline-specific knowledge and pedagogical expertise necessary for their academic and professional careers.
2. Hybrid training approaches that combine in-person sessions with online instruction from experienced ESP specialists should be developed. Such models can provide accessible, flexible, and continuous learning opportunities that align with students' diverse needs.
3. While digital and technological competencies are increasingly vital, they must complement—not replace—ESP disciplinary foundations. Curricula should avoid uniform, one-size-fits-all mandates and instead integrate relevant technological tools in ways that strengthen, rather than dilute, disciplinary expertise.
4. Structured mentorship programs formally linking doctoral students with senior ESP practitioners should be established. Such systems can enhance academic guidance, facilitate knowledge transfer, and support professional development. Institutional commitment is critical to ensure equity and sustainability in mentoring practices.
5. Doctoral seminars should evolve beyond symbolic or bureaucratic functions to become continuous, rigorous, and cumulative learning experiences. They must include predefined syllabi, clear learning outcomes, meaningful evaluation, and structured follow-up.
6. Doctoral students should be actively involved in the formulation of policies and reforms. Their participation ensures that training frameworks genuinely reflect their academic needs, career aspirations, and disciplinary realities, thereby increasing the legitimacy and effectiveness of doctoral education reforms.

7. Conclusion

This study has revealed a significant disjuncture between the professional development needs of Algerian doctoral students specializing in ESP and the training structures currently in place. While ministerial reforms emphasize interdisciplinarity and technological modernization, they simultaneously marginalize the disciplinary foundations essential for producing competent ESP educators.

The evidence shows that students perceive their training as fragmented, superficial, and often irrelevant, while supervisors corroborate the absence of coherence, rigorous evaluation, and structured mentoring. Crucially, doctoral students emerge not as passive recipients of reform but as active stakeholders with clearly articulated needs and aspirations. Their dissatisfaction stems not from resistance to innovation but from a legitimate call for specialized, cumulative, and context-sensitive training that prepares them for the dual responsibilities of research and teaching.

Bridging the policy–practice gap therefore requires more than sporadic workshops or imposed generic modules. It necessitates a comprehensive recalibration of doctoral programs, restoring disciplinary depth, institutionalizing robust mentorship, and integrating technology as a supportive rather than dominant element.

Ultimately, aligning ministerial directives with institutional practices is vital for producing confident, well-prepared, and professionally competent ESP specialists who can meaningfully advance both scholarship and pedagogy in Algerian higher education.

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