ALTRALANG Journal
e-ISSN: 2710-8619 p-ISSN: 2710-7922
Volume 7 Issue 2 / December 2025 pp. 488-496

Hindrances in Master Thesis Projects: An Exploratory Study at the Department of English - University of Tlemcen

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Received: 23/02/2023, **Accepted:** 18/10/2025, **Published:** 10/12/2025

ABSTRACT: *While research is an indispensable part of university student learning, little attention has been given to why researchers, including Master students' thesis projects are not progressing favourably. The present study endeavours to find out the challenges students face when conducting thesis projects for the fulfillment of their Master Degree in the Department of English of the University of Tlemcen. Data were collected using group discussions with five students. The results show that there are five problematic areas as regards undergraduate thesis projects challenges. These are student motivation; student-supervisor relationships, skills and knowledge; student's workload; and resources and ICT tools. Seeing that these areas are multifaceted, further research should focus on the complexity of these issues to give a general picture on why students have experienced those problematic areas while carrying out their research works.*

KEYWORDS: Master Thesis Projects, Students, Hindrances, Department of English, University of Tlemcen

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Introduction

Most studies in research methodology focuses on how a researcher can do a research, collect data or construct his thesis. Because much research has reported on the complex, difficult and stressful experience of learning through inquiry from the part of both students and supervisors at the postgraduate level (Connell & Manathunga, 2012; Burton &Steane, 2004; Hansson, Larsson & Wettergren, 2009; McMichael, 1993), the present research sees it important to investigate on the different kinds of issues at the undergraduate level and this is for two main reasons. The first is the large number of undergraduate students. The second reason is that all the students in that level are required to produce a thesis for the fulfillment of their Master degree.

The recognition of the research problem stated above and a thorough review of related literature (the neglection of undergraduate students' research projects in previous studies) led the researcher to carry out this study which aims at exploring the different challenges that Master students face when conducting their research projects by answering the main research question underlying this research, namely, 'what are the students' challenges in producing their Master thesis projects?' To answer this research question, group discussions were used as research tools. Seeing the sensitive relationship between the supervisors and their supervisees, the researchers decided to involve in their research only the students who had completed their degree lately partially for not getting any negative consequences for criticizing the process or persons involved. Using the thematic analysis method, five main challenges were identified and qualitatively analyzed. They are: student motivation, student-supervisor relationships, skills and knowledge, students' workload, and resources and ICT tools.

Literature review

In its general sense, research is a methodical, scientific process of enquiry that is meant to generate new knowledge, understand something or gain insights about something. In fact, varying definitions have been given to the term *research*. To start with, the Oxford Encyclopaedic English Dictionary defines research as *"the systematic investigation into the study of materials, sources, etc, in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions"*. In view of that, research is thereby a systematic process which aims at the discovery or interpretation of new facts. Despite the varying definitions of the concept research given by scholars, they all consider research as a learning and sharing process that one undertakes systematically to find out things, answer questions, solve problems or increase. By way of illustration, Leedy (1989) defines research as a procedure by which we attempt to find systematically, and with the support of demonstrable facts, the answer to a question or the resolution to a problem.

Besides this, research has become a learning method known as 'learning through inquiry'. The latter is a kind of pedagogy that is of paramount importance tobe used in many educational institutions including universities (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Brown, Lewis, & Bevan, 2016; l'Anson & Smith, 2004; Gonzalez, 2001; Hannigan & Burnard (2001); Lopatto, 2004; Valentin & Alexandra, 2011; Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, &DeAntoni, 2004; Greenbank & Penketh, 2009; Taraban & Logue, 2012; Scott, 2006). Beit research-based inquiry where the researcher is supposed to solve a problem and add new knowledge to the discipline or project-based inquiry in which the researcher is supposed to apply existing knowledge in an innovative way to solve a practical problem (Brew & Jewell, 2012), both inquiries require students to submit a report called thesis or dissertation under the direction of one or more supervisors.

Research can be applied in various domains in life like travelling, cooking, and working to name a few and in different fields of studies such as sciences, social sciences, humanities, academic … etc. Conducting research has become an integral part in university students' daily life be it in their undergraduate studies or post graduate studies. This is because university students are very often required to do research and that is

for different purposes. These include but are not limited to writing a thesis, writing a research proposal, getting a mark, getting a degree or having a desire to understanding something or discovering new things. Typically, any undergraduate student can engage in research. The latter can be it in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) or in social sciences humanities and professional fields such as business and education. The type of research done by undergraduate students is called undergraduate research. The latter is defined by the Council of Undergraduate Research as "*an inquiry or investigation which is conducted by an undergraduate student to make an original or intellectual contribution to the discipline"* (What is undergraduate research, n.d.). Accordingly, undergraduate research is an inquiry into a topic to better understand or learn more about a major and contribute or produce new knowledge.

Seeing that research supplies students with advanced knowledge, awareness, understanding, innovation and creativity, all in evidence-based practices, participating in undergraduate research is beneficial to students. This is because research expands students' academic knowledge and experience; builds their knowledge and problem-solving skills; exposes students to new challenges and opportunities; enables them to network with professionals in their fields and explore career opportunities; and strengthens their profile. Yet, it is worth noting here that the above-mentioned benefits are not easily attained due to the challenges and hindrances that might face students while conducting their research.

When reading about the challenges students face while conducting research projects for the requirements of a degree in education, most literature entails studies on postgraduate thesis projects while few studies about undergraduate thesis projects were found. Below, a review on the above-listed issues is going to be discussed. To start with, in the literature of thesis projects (Adedokun, Dyehouse, Bessenbacher & Burgess, 2010; Kember, 2016; Hasan, Imran, Muhammad Aslam Khan & Kashif, 2010; Pintrich, 2003) asserted thatstudent motivation is one of the central issues in understanding academic performance. From their part, Ayub (2010); Everaert, Opdecam and Maussen (2017); Hasan, Imran, and Muhammad Aslam Khan & Kashif (2010) found out a positive and mutually causal relationship between student motivation and academic performance. Therefore, student motivation is identified as one of the chief challenges.

One more central issue is student-supervisor. Hettige (1995 as cited in Perera, 2014, p. 98) emphasized the importance of interaction between supervisees and their supervisors. Similarly, Christie and Jurado (2013) report on the way low professional and emotional support and poor communication during the thesis projects affected the students' thesis projects. Form their part, Atkins and Brown (1988) and Cook 1980) stressed the fact that successful supervision necessitates supervisors to play multiple roles during the research project. In addition, Todd, Smith, and Bannister (2006) confessed that students need support and encouragement in order to get the confidence needed to fulfill their thesis projects.

Other studies also show that developing countries are subject toshortage in resources such as access to literature, computers and the Internetconnectivity and all that result in bad effects a propos the realization of thesis projects on their due time. Typically, Kayode (2014) and Zenzele (2010) indicated that a student's study and research skills play a vital role inthe accomplishment of thesis projects. For Barratt (2004, 220–222), "students' problems start with the selection of the topic. They find it difficult to find relevant information, how to filter available information,and how to use the information. It also seems that they have insufficient subject knowledge". In a word, a student's lack of knowledge prevents progress in research projects.

Methodology

This section presents aspects relating to the research methodology, namely, the research method, research instruments and sampling, and data collection and analysis procedure.

To begin with, the explorative case study method was used throughout this study to answer the research question underlying this research, namely, 'what are the students' challenges in producing their Master thesis projects?

The instrumentation for this study included focus group discussions designed to capture students' difficulties in conducting research, Master dissertation projects, in this case. Data was collected from 5 undergraduate students who had completed their degree lately in order to avoid them any negative consequences for criticizing the process or the personsinvolved. At the beginning the students who agreed to take part in the study were13, but later only 5 students acted as the respondents of this study. Regarding gender, all the participants were females. In terms of age distribution, four of them were between 24 years old, while only one was aged 25 years old. This demographic information gives a general overview of the participants' demographic information.

At the beginning of the focus group-discussions, English was the leading language. But later, students code-switched from time to time using French and Arabic while expressing themselves throughout the discussion.. The researchers sought to keep the students expressing themselves regardless the language they were using and to translate their French and Arabic utterances to English before the transcription phase. After careful reading and note writing, some codes were used to put together and categorize the collected data into themes or categories following the requirements of the thematic analysis method.

Results and discussion

When in the phase of data analysis, several themes were identified aschallenging for the students and their supervisors in carrying out and supervising the research projects, respectively. The main challenges related to student-supervisor relationships, student motivation and workload, educational resources and ICT tools, and the skills and competences of the students and supervisors. The analysis of each challenge is going to be discussed in what follows.

Supervisee-supervisor relationships

Our data recommend that students and supervisors did not have enough face-to-face meetings to communicate. It seems that though these meetings are planned beforehand, they are not always successful. One student says, *"I seldom meet with my supervisor; and when planned I hardly discuss with him because when I went to the staffroom to discuss with him my work we had many interruptions by other teachers, the head of the department, or other supervisees...".* Another student explained, *"I went to meet my supervisor, and sometimes he was busy and as a results he provided me with quick and very few remarks and corrections about my work".* Theses quotes clearly illustrate the difficulty of students in having a proper meeting with their supervisors. This finding confirms previous research which reports on the social distance between university students and their teachers and the successive lack of communication (Hettige, 1995 as cited in Perera, 2014, 98). It is worthy to note at the end of this section that even when available, supervisors are not *all* professional because those who have recently joined university do not know how to carry out research project supervising. Thus, they have problems understanding the issues that students are facing when conducting research projects and supervising them.

Student motivation and workload

Because of the lack of their supervisors' availability, students are less likely to be motivated in doing their research and as a result they will experience extra problems in finishing their research project. Todd, Bannister, and Clegg's (2004, 344) findings confirm a similar relationship. Due to the fact that student at the last year of their undergraduate studies are required to perform presentations and produce small projects in nearly all their modules, prepare themselves for the first semester exams/make up exams and work in some part-time jobs to support their economy and to earn some money, students complain of the high workload due studies, research works, exams and extra jobs. One student said this *"The reason is I didn't have time to meet my supervisor since I did a job"*. Other student said, *"We had many projects, modules and exams together with our thesis project [in] the final year"*. Most students confessed that they stopped working on the project when they had exams or when theirturn to present a small research in a module approached.

Learning resources and ICTs

Students stressed the lack of access to relevant research literature. One student explained, *"There are not recent and sufficient resources in thelibrary and therefore the only source we have at hand is internet"*. Another student, however, mentioned that *"though there are sufficient resources, we don't know how to use them. Also, we found that the university library allows access to online articles but students are not aware of how to use these resources."*As far as ICT tools are concerned, students confessed that though university has invested in library and ICT tools, books, textbooks, guides, free Wi-Fi and internet rooms, desk-tops, these tools are sometimes not professionally used by students a fact that led students to lose time, efforts, even their docx. or to redo their work or retype their docx. for having serious problems with the desk-tops available or the hard disk they used to upload or download their docx. Other students, however, admitted that they knew how to use ICT tools to share documentsand to communicate their supervisors but not to analyze data and organize references. This is because none of them mentioned the use of data analysis softwares, such as SPSS or reference management tools like Zetro, which do assist researchers in analyzing quantitative data and managing and writing references and citations.

Students' research skillfulness and competencies

The research participants have recognized the lack of knowledge, skills, and competences when conducting their research because of the negative effects they experienced while doing their thesis projects. Based on students' responses, it is safe to say that although students have followed a research methodology course, it seems that it has not been enough. One student explicated this situation by saying, *"We should create a research milieu. We have a lack of research competencies and skills"*. Another student explained that *"We didn't have the chance to do a practical research until the final year. We didn't have prior experience with practical research since all we did before was secondary research".* This denotes that students have not experienced conducted research that involve data collection, analyses and discussion and that all they have experienced before is reviewing or analyzing relating literature to their research topics or areas.

Oppositely a student related her master thesis hindrances partly to lack of knowledge on citation and reference conventions and partly to her unawareness of proper citation and reference forms and practices. She explained that by stating *"sometimes the sources are available, but the problem is that I do not know how to use or insert the information I find original sources into the literature review of my thesis".* Following this, Master students will undoubtedly tend to have lack of confidence and motivation in conducting research and overuse of integral/reporting citation forms rather than non-reporting/non-integral

forms, a fact that would result in a decrease in the authenticity and originality of their work and lack of critical thinking and evaluation of the cited works in their research projects.

All in all, students seem to not be able to act independently due to the lack of research skills. This is because their research challenges are multifaceted and differ from one to another and that they are spoiled by varied hindrances at different research levels.

Conclusions

The aim from undertaking this study is twofold (a) to bridge the gap in the literature that has to do with the lack of consideration in the challenges involving undergraduate thesis projects realization, in that much about postgraduate thesis projects is carried out in the literatures and (b) to uncover the challenges students face when conducting their Master thesis projects. In this study, five main challenges were indentified. They are: student motivation, student-supervisor relationships, skills and knowledge, students' workload, and resources and ICT tools. From these challenges, student motivation and the student-supervisor relationship are the key challenges which are directly affected by the realization of the thesis projectseeing that all the remaining challenges can be vanished if these two challenges are well griped. Given that the challenges are intertwined, further studies are recommended to tackle for instance the dynamics of the student-supervisor relationships related to student motivation and the accomplishment of the thesis. Also, we suggest studyingthe effects of these challenges in different academic contexts situations.

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ALTRALANG Journal
Volume 7 Issue 2 / December 2025

Appendix: Focus Group Discussion Questions

Greeting.

Thank you very much for accepting to participate in this discussion.
To learn from everyone from you today about your Master thesis projects challenges and hindrances, let's me explain for you how the discussion will proceed.

I will ask you some questions and each time I ask one, please feel like you are in a conversation in which you talk to each other by letting everyone take part in the discussion and having a turn to speak and discuss together without directing your talks to me.

Please feel comfortable to have your own opinion or esteem an opinion.

Please feel like you can disagree with an opinion or share your thinking with another opinion but respect all opinions.

Questions:
- What is it like to be an undergraduate student then an undergraduate researcher?
- What are the benefits of conducting your Master thesis projects?
- When it came to conducting your Master thesis project, what did you think you were good at?
- When it came to finishing your Master thesis project, what did you think you were poor at?
- What are the main challenges you had had in your Master thesis research process?
- Anything else you want to share or add?

Thanking