Postgraduate Research Students' Lived Experiences of Learning Research in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Studies on postgraduate research students' perceptions and experiences are highly valuable for developing supervisory policies and support mechanisms to enhance research quality at universities. Understanding how university research students experience learning research skills and the challenges they often face can provide insightful input for researchers and research supervisors. However, in the context of Nepal's higher education, there are very few studies on students' perceptions and experiences of learning research as part of degree programmes. This study aims to explore postgraduate research students' lived experiences of learning research as part of thesis writing at Nepalese universities. Employing a phenomenological approach, particularly semi-structured interviews and observations with six purposively sampled university research students, this paper reports their experiences, challenges, and struggles in getting started with research topics, collecting data from the field, and receiving supervisory support. The findings include delayed decisions on areas of interest, a lack of proper research orientation and counseling, researchers' dilemmas during the process, and superficial supervisory feedback on thesis drafts. These findings might help researchers, research students, and university administrations better understand students' lived experiences and develop supervisory policies, support mechanisms, strategies, and guidelines at universities.

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING RESEARCH IN NEPAL

Universities around the world have undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate programmes in various disciplines. They also have research programmes that require thesis writing. In most universities, thesis writing is part of their curriculum and a basic requirement for higher education degree awards (Roberts, 2010). Thesis writing is the process of writing the final product of a systematic study that is supervised during a certain period of time by supervisors. A thesis refers to a research product completed by a university student as a dissertation (Hornby & Cowie, 1995) that offers research results (Robinson, 2008). Etymologically, the Greek originated word 'thesis' which emerged from "tithenai" means "to place or to put forth" (Parija & Kate, 2018; Puri, 2023). In some countries, thesis and dissertation are used interchangeably. However, the thesis is an in-depth study of a topic that contributes to novel information in the field of research (Parija & Kate, 2018). A thesis is expected to provide support to the postgraduates in developing the art of collecting, recording, and critically analysing information instead of accepting it blindly as it appeared in the literature.

Conducting research and writing its report in the form of a thesis to achieve a degree can be viewed from two perspectives (Ylijoki, 2001). The first perspective highlights the academic nature and high ideals, bridging the worlds of science, scholarship, and research. On the other hand, the second perspective views the thesis as an inherent and necessary part of higher studies that guarantees academic qualification and status. In the process of thesis writing from both perspectives, students first acquire the basic knowledge and facts from books and lectures and later start working independently. Aittola (1988) opines that throughout the process of thesis writing as a product, students become producers of knowledge by gradually transforming themselves from consumers of knowledge. Moreover, recent demands from all concerned—such as governments, university research students, college graduates, and management—have increased the focus on the educational development of supervisors and also changed the concept of private supervision to mentoring and team supervision (Manathunga, 2005).

In this context, the experience of postgraduate research students can be a critical determinant of academic excellence and research productivity. Indeed, the journey of learning research through thesis/dissertation writing, particularly at the postgraduate level, is complex. While extensive studies have been conducted

in developed countries, there is a lack of studies focusing on the lived experiences of research students in developing countries such as Nepal. Understanding these experiences plays a key role in developing a supportive educational environment that fosters research skills and academic growth. Nepal, with its unique socio-cultural, economic, and educational landscape, provides a distinctive context for postgraduate research education. In addition, postgraduate research students have been facing various challenges such as limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and varying levels of institutional support. Despite these challenges, there is a growing interest in higher education and research within the country. However, the voices of postgraduate research students—their strategies, struggles, and successes—remain unexplored. This study aims to bridge the gap by exploring the lived experiences of postgraduate research students in Nepal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The thesis writing and supervision process, supervisors' feedback systems, and supervisors' and students' perceptions and experiences of research and supervision determine the success of writing a thesis and learning research skills. Many previous studies (Filippou et al., 2019; McGinty et al., 2010; Woolderink et al., 2015) have reported various perceptions of postgraduate research students on the supervisory process and feedback. Ali et al. (2019), in the Pakistani context, reported significant dissatisfaction with the supervisors; the majority of research students perceived supervision as a painful journey due to the supervisor's limited support in students' research work, weak commitment to the pre-scheduled meetings, and interaction with students for quality feedback, although a few of them appreciated it as positive, objective, encouraging, and for providing enough time for research skills. The study further indicated that the supervisory practice in Pakistan was power-centered, where students were perceived as passive recipients without much independence. These evidences demonstrated that positive, encouraging, and exciting experiences accelerate students' learning rates. At the same time, dissatisfaction with administrative and supervisory feedback could demotivate students from bringing about innovation in their field of study.

The perceptions and experiences of research students are mostly shaped by the research supervisors' time, skills, and engagement in the process of students' research. In Australia, Helfer and Drew (2019) reported that the lack of supervisors' engagement in the research, particularly the writing process, and also the lack of supervisors' expertise in the area being supervised, created dissatisfaction in the majority of engineering postgraduate student supervision processes. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) earlier reported similar findings

in South Africa, particularly regarding the feedback to develop research skills. Another qualitative study (Filippou et al., 2019) in Finland reported that the majority of students had an asymmetric relationship between teaching and learning in terms of trust, topic selection, and supervisory support at the initial stage of supervision. However, Cornér et al. (2017) argued that students' lack of satisfaction with feedback and unequal treatment by supervisors caused the termination of the study. De Kleijn et al. (2013) reported that the students perceived the supervisor's feedback concerning the theoretical concepts utilized in feedback literature, particularly in terms of feed-up, feedback forward, focus on tasks, self-regulation, and elaboration. It was also found that most of the students perceived little focus on self-regulation and feed-up but more focus on the tasks. These evidences show that supervisors' roles always remain dominant in creating a conducive research learning environment for the students, whereas students' self-explorative roles in becoming autonomous researchers are less explored.

Research supervisors' expertise in the research area, their skills to scaffold research skills, and the way they approach the students' problems are found to be detrimental to the successful completion of students' research. For example, a quantitative study (Muraraneza et al., 2016) in South Africa identified the time duration of research supervision, mode of attendance, and supervisor's status in the university as elements affecting the perceptions of the supervisor's support. Moreover, Ali et al. (2016) reported three important aspects of students' perceptions of postgraduate supervision: leadership skills in steering the supervisory process, the supervisor's knowledge, and support offered to the students. Jonck and Swanepoel (2016) reported that postgraduate students had expectations from their supervisors to pay more attention to their research, offer timely and constructive feedback, encourage them to work independently, present their work in the right forums, help them understand their weaknesses, follow the timeline, and be friendly and approachable. Filippou et al. (2017) suggested following an individual approach in supervision and stressed that the supervisor needed to understand the needs and expectations of research students from the early discussion of their plans. These studies suggest that supervisors need to have multiple skills and expertise to lead them towards successful skills learning in research. However, other factors related to the research students, university, and their relationship also determine success in learning research, which seems to have been ignored in those studies.

Supervision practices, university culture, and supervisors' dialogic engagement and relationship with students help students to experience thesis writing in a positive manner. Moreover, what practices are existent in the university also determine students' perceptions and experiences. For example, Lahenius and Ikävalko (2014) in Finland reported three unique practices in joint

supervision: complementary, substitutive, and diversified supervision to address students' needs and expectations. Complementary and diversified supervision practices utilize both principal and additional supervisors' expertise, similar to committee supervision, whereas substitutive supervision practices emphasize the support and expertise of the additional supervisor. However, Unda et al. (2018), in their study of PhD supervision in New Zealand and Australia, reported students' expectations of constructive and supportive feedback, pastoral care by their supervisor, and guidance on data analysis and interpretations. Moreover, Talebloo and Baki (2013) found that students preferred to have timely meetings with their supervisors during their first year and expected their supervisor to work as a guide, supporting them throughout their studies, from topic selection to the completion of the thesis writing.

The existing literature on the perceptions and experiences of university research students focuses on the satisfactions/dissatisfactions of the supervisory process, feedback system, supervisors' supervisory skills, and research culture in various countries. While the needs and expectations of the students have been explored through studies, and solutions have been suggested, struggles, strategies, and practices of learning research at the universities and their affiliated campuses in Nepal are less investigated. Since thesis writing to achieve degrees is students' self-explorative journey, their initiatives, practices, and universities' supervisory supports need to be studied in distinctive contexts. How thesis writing students in Nepal's universities experience the whole process, ranging from topic selection to the final thesis report submission, and how supervisors support them remain unexplored. To address this gap, the current study aims to explore the postgraduate research students' thesis writing experiences by addressing the following research questions:
1. What are the perceptions and lived experiences of thesis writing students on researching and writing a thesis in Nepal?
2. What are the challenges they face while writing a thesis and receiving feedback from their supervisors?

METHODS

This phenomenological study employs in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis to collect data from seven purposively selected research students from three of Nepal's universities: King's University, Kantipur University, and Victorian University (pseudonyms), offering Master's to PhD programmes. King's University is Nepal's oldest and largest university, which offers bachelor's to PhD degree programmes. Kantipur University is a privately-managed public university offering Master's to PhD programmes, whereas Victorian University is an open and online university that

offers only bachelor's, master's, and MPhil programmes. To ensure representation, validation, and wider acceptance of the data, research participants were selected from these three universities, which include Master, MPhil, and PhD degree programmes and were easily accessible for data collection.

Table 1.
Participants' Details

Students	Gender	Level of Study	University/Campus	Subjects	Status of Research
Bhisma (Pseudonym)	Male	M.Ed.	King's University (Janahit Campus)	English Education	Final draft submitted
Abhisek	Male	PhD	King's University	English Education	Final proposal completed
Sakuntala	Female	M.ED	King's University (Suryadev Campus	English Education	First draft competed
Subeksha	Female	M.ED.	King's University (Janahit campus)	English	Faced viva
Bishal	Male	MPhil	Kantipur University	English	Faced viva
Ganesh	Male	PhD	Kantipur University	English	Completed
Shakti	Male	MPhil	Victorian University	English	Completed

The study was conducted in accordance with research guidelines of UGC Nepal by obtaining ethical approval from participants. The purposively selected research students, who were conducting their research as a part of their academic degrees at three universities, were first provided with an information sheet and asked to return it with their consent signature. They were given the choice to withdraw their consent at any time, but none of them did so. These seven students were interviewed using the ZOOM platform and recorded for transcription. After transcribing all interview data, it was sent to the participants for member checking, and they approved it without making any significant changes. After the first round of analysis, four participants were interviewed again for a follow-up on the unclear expressions and indications face-to-face.

The selection criteria for the participants included the level of their study, gender, types of university/campuses (public, private, and open) they attended, and their progress in thesis writing. The seven participants were from different levels of their studies: two were PhD students, two were MPhil, and three were

Master's degree research students from King's University-affiliated community campuses: Suryadev and Janahit (pseudonyms). There were two female and five male students. Among them, four participants were teaching in schools and studying at the universities as part-time students, while the three MPhil and PhD students were teaching at colleges/universities and pursuing their degrees. None of them were full-time students at the university. All of them were in the process of writing their thesis except for a PhD student whose research proposal was not accepted by the university. They were asked how they started thesis writing, how they received the supervisors' support, and what challenges they experienced during their research journey. Two Master's degree research students' supervisors' supervisory meetings were also observed and recorded in the field notes. Moreover, their thesis drafts, where supervisors had given written feedback, were also observed and recorded in the notebook.

The data collection process was aligned with the socio-cultural approach since I, as an insider, observed, interviewed, and recorded every detail of the participants. Later, while analyzing the data, phenomenological bracketing was used to detach the researcher's perceptions and experiences from the participants'. In a phenomenological study, we attempt to find the meaning in participants' lived experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Following the data analysis process as suggested by Van Manen (2016), I identified the essence of postgraduate research students' experiences and perceptions first through open coding. Then, I examined the list of codes and identified patterns to develop themes. I categorized the codes into themes, which are presented in the results section below.

RESULTS

The participants expressed diverse experiences of learning research as a part of thesis writing at their universities. The analysis of the data revealed how research students struggled to start with the research issue, to find authentic resources, to complete a lengthy administrative process, and to connect their theoretical knowledge obtained from the research methodology course with actual research in the field. Furthermore, the study found that their unique experiences of receiving feedback from their supervisors were marked by dissatisfactions with the university and research supervisors.

Getting Started with the Research Issue

The students involved in this study expressed that getting started with the research issue was particularly challenging for many of them. After completing their written exams, they were found wandering without having begun a research project, which they had to complete to receive the degree certificate. They

reported a delayed decision on the area of research interest, a lack of timely and adequate orientation to students about research, and a dilemma faced by both students and supervisors in the research process.

Delayed Decision on the Area of Interest

Participants involved in this study expressed that they received approval of the area of their research interest from their university department after a long time. They mentioned that in Master's degree, students were normally asked to submit at least three potential research topics. However, they complained against the delayed response from the department. For example, Bhisma, a research student at Janahit Campus said:

I had submitted three topics for my study and waited for the decision for almost six months. I could not also choose the topics quickly at the beginning because I was in a dilemma about what could be the best and easy topics for my study.

Bhisma's comment indicated the students' inability to explore researchable issues. They had to take the help of other friends and teachers for deciding what area could be suitable for their research. For example, Sakuntala from Suryadev Campus expressed the fact that the process of deciding the research topic delayed the completion of her research. She said, "I had understood that I had to do the research but I was not sure which topic could be my area of interest for long. I asked my relatives and also teachers to suggest to me the best topics". Her experience reflected that research students were not prepared to explore their research issues themselves.

The students in this study complained against the university administration for not becoming supportive in their research. For example, Abhisek, PhD scholar at King's University expressed his frustration with delayed responses and decisions of the university administration. He complained that the public universities in Nepal were not quick to respond to the students. He further said:

I didn't get a supervisor for up to six months and sirs said to submit the proposal. I wonder what our teachers are saying like the master's students. We require the change. We need to understand why research is carried out. It takes time to reach the proposal defense. There are many processes to complete before the defense. One of the teachers said to bring a proposal like in Master's Degree.

Abhisek's responses showed that the administrative process as well as supervisors' limited support in the initial stage of research increased research students' frustration of doing research. It was evident from the interview that the students quit their study at a university and joined the next due to the carelessness of the university. The students shared their struggles for getting their topic and proposal approved by the department on time.

Lack of Proper Orientation and Counseling

The participants in this study expressed that universities and their campuses did not have effective thesis writing orientations that could guide them on how to start, continue and complete the thesis writing. They also expressed their dissatisfaction against the thesis orientation conducted by the campuses at universities. The students complained that the thesis writing orientation was a continuation of ritual formality. Their complaints indicated that the thesis writing orientation could be made a significant step to get started with the thesis writing process. For example:

> I am not a regular student because I had a paper (one of the courses) to pass. I wanted to participate in the orientation programme and I contacted the Head of the Department. He also said he would call me but I never received notice of the orientation programme. Actually, I had a hope to learn the new trend of thesis writing from the orientation. They conducted orientation but I didn't know. (Bhisma, a student at Janahit campus)
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> I attended the orientation hoping that I could get ideas about how to write my thesis. After sitting in 5 hours long orientation, I became more confused. They wanted to share everything at once in the orientation but didn't help me personally. I think they need to orient properly. I mean how to start, what topics, whom to contact, and when to finish. (Sakuntala, student at Suryadev Campus)
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> I could not start my thesis on time because I was not sure what my area of study was and I needed orientation. After a long time, I selected a topic and again I changed that. I met the head of the department but he was always busy. I could not get concrete ideas for the topic selection. (Shubeksha, student at Janahit Campus)

These comments indicated that although students expected adequate academic support to conduct their research, the initial one-shot induction programme did not help them as much as they expected. The strategy of preparing research students through an induction programme did not seem effective, as many students could not reflect on what they heard during the process of research development. While the induction programme for the research students could be the starting point for research, I believe that students expressed dissatisfaction with the research orientation on their campuses because they did not receive adequate support from the administration or their supervisors.

Dilemmas in the Process

Research students shared their experiences of being confused in the process of conducting and writing research. They also stated that they were

reluctant to decide their research area, methodology and theoretical framework. For example, Bishal, an MPhil researcher at Kantipur University, shared:

> I didn't have confusion on issue or topic selections earlier because I was a teacher and I wanted to raise the issues of my local contexts. However, I got confused while selecting the topic, methodology, and theoretical perspectives for the study in practice.

Bishal's comment provided a picture of how research supervisors supported research students in their research. I believe that the support research students received from their supervisors was indeed inadequate. As a result, research students were left in frustration. It was evident from the observation that sometimes supervisors became confused and could not provide the expected supervisory support. For example, Bhisma shared, "I wrote thesis using the survey method and showed it to my supervisor. He told me it was okay at first, but later he told me to interview teachers for their perceptions. I got confused that time." His comments reflected the research supervisor's lack of adequate research knowledge and supervisory experience. When I searched research supervisors' academic profiles on the Internet, I could not find their academic publications in international journals and books. This confirmed that the research supervisors involved in this study lacked academic excellence and probably continued the ritual of research at these universities without making it productive or impactful.

Struggle for Collecting Materials

Research students shared their struggling experience of collecting materials for research because their universities did not manage an e-library as well as a physical library for their research. It also indicated that research supervisors also seemed to be helpless to provide materials for their students' research. For example, Masters students from community campuses expressed their experiences of finding reading materials for the research:

> My guide didn't give me any material and I didn't ask. I got from others like a teacher from another campus. I went to his library and read the materials. My topic is about deviation in poetry which was related to his area of interest. My supervisor, to be honest, only gave me instructions. I had only a few old theses. I requested another teacher to give me the books that he had. He gave me books and also taught me how to cite in the thesis because I didn't know it. (Bhisma, research student at Janahit campus)
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> The literature review was a very difficult part. I had a relative who was doing MPhil. He supported me to review the literature. He searched on the Internet and gave lots of ideas. Next, my supervisor provided a few materials and techniques to review which was not sufficient. Our library

has very limited resources and I couldn't find materials online.
(Sakuntala, research student at Suryadev campus)

These comments indicated the existence of limited learning materials for research students in the libraries of community campuses. However, the research students from Kantipur University and King's University received some materials from their supervisors. Moreover, their universities initiated efforts to manage online repositories where they could find previous theses and journal articles. Nevertheless, they never got access to the university's repository on the university-affiliated public campuses. The students of MPhil and PhD were informed about online search engines such as Google Scholar, Library Genesis, and ProQuest, although they were not taught how to access these materials. Due to the lack of a rich e-library at the university, research students resorted to various pirate search engines such as Library Genesis and Sci-Hub to download e-books and paid journals. For instance, Ganesh, a PhD scholar who also supervised Master's and MPhil theses, stated:

There is a big database in the central library now. We can find so many theses written by even my students there. I can give them from the repository that I have or students can go to the library and then find the thesis. (Ganesh, King's University)

However, none of the research students in this study reported that they utilised the library. Instead, they complained that they could not find the latest books and journal articles in the library. I believe that the physical library in Kathmandu that had limited old books was not accessible for many students from other parts of the country. They had to rely on the materials provided by their supervisors and the openly available materials they found on the Internet.

Follow up by the Administration

The students in this study shared that the administration in their department did not follow the progress of research during the research writing process, particularly in the Master's Degree. They expected that the university would regularly follow up with them on where they were and in what condition they were. The research participants from community campuses shared their dissatisfaction with the lack of supervisors' limited correspondence and feedback on their writings. For example, Bhisma, Sakuntala, and Subeksha from community campuses blamed their supervisors for missing the deadline to submit their thesis. Abhisek, a PhD student at King's University, also expressed frustration towards the university administration because it did not even assign a supervisor or respond to him timely. However, it was not visible whether or not they responsibly communicated with the department and supervisors. Most MPhil and PhD researchers in this study, however, appreciated supervisors' and universities' support for their research. They stated that their supervisors often telephoned them when they had a long gap in communication. They received emails, phone calls, and also timely inquiries from their supervisors. For

example, Shakti, who recently finished his MPhil from the Victorian University, said:

> If I missed submitting my work progress, my supervisor used to telephone me. My supervisor had English culture so he maintained professionalism and punctuality. He reminded me about my work time and again so that I completed my research on time. He always encouraged me to read and find authentic sources.

Shakti's comments reflected that his supervisor's follow-up communication encouraged research students to consistently work in research activities and complete their theses in time. It also indicates that supervisors' working culture and honest support in students' research are important to develop a research culture at the universities. Bishal, an MPhil student at Kantipur University, had a similar experience of receiving follow-up calls from his university. He expressed:

> In course of my research, I forgot to inform and submit the progress to my supervisor. After 15 days, I received a call from the department. His call really encouraged me to complete the work and submit it.

However, most of the participants' responses provided a picture of how the poor support from research supervisors and university administrations impacted students' research. I believe that research supervisors' research capability, as well as honesty in research supervision, is essential for the development of research culture at the universities.

Field Visit for Data Collection

Research students shared the difficulties they experienced when they had to collect data in the research fields. Their expressions reflected their limited knowledge of research methodology although they had already completed the research methodology course in an academic session. The majority of research students regarded fieldwork as a challenging job since they could not identify research participants and build up a rapport with them for the data. Their expression also indicated the lack of research awareness of the participants and its consequences in the interviews, surveys and observations. Similarly, the students were not given the ethical approval letter from the campus when the school head teachers demanded it. This indicates the supervisor's negligence to support students to obtain ethical approval letter from the campus. However, the school head teachers seemed to be aware of research and human rights. For example:

> But while collecting data, in a school, the head teacher behaved quite abruptly. I learned some lessons there. On our campus, we had talked about the letter but few teachers advised me to go to school even without a letter from campus. The head teacher said that he would not allow me to observe the class without an official letter from the campus. He gave

some examples of the bad practices of earlier researchers. (Sakuntala, research student at Suryadev Campus)

While collecting data, a few teachers scolded us. In a school, when I requested them to fill up the survey form, one of my respondents asked so many questions and called me the next day to collect the form. The next day, when I went there, he was absent. I had to visit the school four times for a response. (Bhisma, research student, Janahit campus)

I sacrificed my job while collecting data. I was working in a private institution then. When I went to collect data in the field, it took a long time. At first, my respondent didn't like to talk much with me. I visited three times at least to collect data. It was a challenging task. (Bishal, research student, Kantipur University)

These comments indicated that they experienced difficulties while collecting data and also learned how to connect theoretical knowledge into practice. During the interview, they realised that they had missed the preparation of interview guidelines and questionnaires to collect the data from the field on their campuses. This indicates that research students were not well-prepared and their supervisors also ignored the potential challenges of collecting data from the field.

Supervisors' Feedback for Improvement

The participants of this study shared their experiences of difficulties while receiving feedback from their supervisors on their thesis draft. They reported that their supervisors did not receive phone calls, respond to emails and give enough time for feedback. Supervisors, who had teaching jobs and responsibilities, could not provide adequate feedback on students' thesis drafts. For example, Abhisek, a PhD student at King's University said, "My supervisor had not responded to my email for three months. Then I telephoned him but he didn't receive my call." Interviews with supervisors affirmed that they did not receive students' phone calls because of their duties and busy schedule. For example:

We become really busy and cannot receive the phones of the students all the time. Personally, I do not entertain students' phones because they call me at any time. What I usually do is give them a certain time for a meeting and call. (Ganesh)

Although students expected hands-on support from their supervisors through means such as email and phone, it was probably not possible for their supervisors to provide this support via these methods. However, students did not seem to be aware of standard communication etiquette with their supervisors. For example, they complained about their supervisors because they did not answer students' phone calls. They were probably unaware that it was inappropriate to use personal contact numbers. Moreover, it was evident that official contact information was rarely available. On one hand, students' dissatisfaction with

their supervisors' feedback raised the issue of how research supervisors support students in their fieldwork and research writing.

> When I met and showed my draft to my supervisor, he said to write again. He never gave me an example of doing the best. He only said 'this is not the way, revise that again'. Next time, when I submitted after correcting as he said, again he crossed that and said 'this is not the way. Do again'. The same process continued many times. (Bhisma)

On the other hand, research students expected concrete feedback on their writing from their supervisors to complete the theses instead of verbal comments on their writing. Research students' voices made me think about whether or not their supervisors had adequate research knowledge and skills to support research students in their research activities. For example, Abhisek, PhD student, said:

> When I was a Master's degree student at King's University, my professor asked me to bring my proposal. I didn't learn anything because they didn't involve me in step-by-step thesis writing process. But when I joined MPhil, I wrote a lot. I published many research articles in various forums besides the assignment. The supervisor provided a lot of feedback on my thesis at Kantipur University which inspired me to learn. The professors are comparatively more resourceful there.

His comments indicated that supervisors' feedback on research writing and behaviour towards research students were essential for developing students' research skills. However, students at Kantipur University found their supervisors more supportive and professional than the supervisors at other universities. Moreover, I found that students' research quality depended on the quality of research supervisors. For example:

> When I met my supervisor first, he told his story of being PhD students including how his supervisor supervised his study in a foreign country. He recommended some of the materials like books, research articles, previous theses and also websites related to my area. That really helped me understand my area. He motivated me. Now my destination is clear. I felt the honour to find such a professor. They do nothing but make us do the research. They take care whether we are derailed from the main argument or the objectives. I am satisfied with my professor because he gave me what I had expected. (Abhisek)

Abhisek's comments provided much clearer picture of how research supervisors' research knowledge and the ways of supporting students in their research determined the completion of students' theses.

DISCUSSION

This study found students' diverse experiences of learning research in universities. Particularly, they experienced difficulties in getting started with the research issue, finding the required resources, fulfilling the lengthy

administrative process, collecting data from the field, and receiving feedback from the supervisors. The research students in this study, having no experience in previous research, could not start their research project on time. They struggled to find and frame the researchable issues of their interest. This indicates that students' theoretical knowledge was insufficient to start research in practice. Even the experienced researchers spent much time and effort conceptualizing and commencing the research project (Bell & Waters, 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). In this situation, students expected more research inputs and supervisory support to consolidate their ideas into a doable project, which often lacked in Nepal's universities. For example, supervisors were allocated to the students only after the research topic/proposal submission, which seemed late and impractical for them. The confusion and dilemmas cause demotivation, and eventually, students might derail and drop out from the course, which degrades the university's reputation and trust. To rescue from this situation, timely support for the students needs to be provided (Cornér et al., 2018). Regarding supervisory support, Cornér et al. (2018) reported that Finnish and Danish universities have researchers' communities and student support systems where students can obtain support from peers, supervisors, and seniors. Similarly, other studies (Medvecky, 2021; Okuda & Anderson, 2018) in Canadian and US university contexts have suggested receiving research and writing support from the writing centres established in their respective universities. This study also suggests establishing such researchers' communities, peer support groups, and writing centres in the universities to support research writing students.

Students were also found to be in difficulties, particularly in finding the relevant reading materials for literature review because they lacked ICT skills and the availability of resources in the library. This indicates that many universities and university campuses did not have access to digital libraries and even ICT courses. Although very few universities offered their higher degree programs in online and distance modes, the majority of the students were unable to access online libraries and repositories due to a lack of awareness and digital skills. Vindača and Ļubkina (2021) stressed the necessity of ICT skills and digital resources in higher education for research students, particularly in difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has also recognized the necessity of teaching research students to explore online resources at university campuses, since digital literacy is an integral part of research and research writing.

This study also found difficulties of the students in fulfilling administrative processes such as getting their research topics or proposals approved on time and receiving continuous mentorship and follow-ups. Moreover, due to the supervisors' indifference and lack of research awareness, students experienced challenges in collecting data from the field. As Hamiduzzaman et al. (2021) reported the challenges for early career researchers

in collecting authentic data from the field, the students faced ethical and procedural issues during their study. Furthermore, students faced challenges with supervisors' availability and appropriate feedback during the research process. The hierarchical power relationship between supervisors and students also caused challenges in receiving corrective and formative feedback on their thesis drafts. In this situation, Timonen et al. (2018) suggested that novice researchers be trained on how to tackle challenges while collecting authentic data from the field. Moreover, the university needs to be updated according to the times and mass expectations to cater to quality services.

Similarly, students' autonomy was rarely exercised during the research process because of their dependency on the supervisors. It was found that research students waited for the supervisors' feedback, and whatever they received was dependent on that. Their independence and autonomy during the research and writing process seemed to be less practiced. Smith and Darvas (2017) suggest that research students need to be intrinsically motivated for self-regulated learning for higher-order thinking skills. However, students in this study expected ready-made and quick responses from the supervisors, as well as frequent and detailed feedback on their thesis drafts. These findings contrast with the findings of Willison et al. (2017), who reported the increasing and shifting autonomy among master's degree research students. They stated that students scaffolded research skills in connection with their supervisors and groomed themselves as independent researchers. Contrary to international practices of learning research, research students seem to be dependent on their supervisors. This might be due to the lack of research skills and culture.

The findings further revealed that research students often complained about their supervisors' suppressive behavior, surficial feedback on the drafts, low confidence in research, and rigid behavior and styles, which resonates with the finding of Odena and Burgess (2017), who reported that research graduates faced challenges in their supervisory process, leading to a decline in students' participation. The supervisors' bullying and hierarchical power relations might result in negative experiences in the supervisory process (Odena & Burgess, 2017). This suggests that supervisors need to have a collegial relationship with the students and provide detailed feedback to improve the students' writing. When students lose faith in their supervisors and express dissatisfaction, they cannot learn from them (Cook et al., 2018). Supervisors' feedback and discussions can serve dual purposes: timely output as successful accomplishment and the learning of autonomous research skills (Carter & Kumar, 2017). The students' experience of dissatisfaction with their supervisors suggests that they need to develop skills and confidence in supervision. To address the students' dissatisfaction in the process, universities need to develop a supervisory support

system: peer support, supervisory committee feedback and discussions, and group supervision (Medvecky, 2021; Okuda & Anderson, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Postgraduate research students' diverse lived experiences of learning research from their supervisors comprise their difficulties in getting started with the research issue, finding adequate resources, fulfilling the lengthy administrative process, collecting data from the field, and receiving feedback from the supervisors. The students faced problems with delayed decisions from the supervisors and universities and a lack of proper orientation for beginning the research journey, which left them in dilemmas and confusion. This paper also reports the students' struggles with finding authentic reading materials and their sources because they had to depend on the limited availability of previous theses and research-related books in the campus libraries. The study finds the students' dissatisfaction with the process of supervisor appointment and administrative follow-up because students were not given the opportunity to choose supervisors based on their interest and the supervisors' expertise. Moreover, collecting research data from the field and receiving feedback from their supervisors were equally challenging for them. It is evident that students could not connect the theoretical knowledge obtained from the research course to practice due to a lack of preparation and research awareness. The findings suggest that supervisors need to scaffold research skills to empower students and develop independent research scholarship because students, at least at the postgraduate level, should not only blame the university and their supervisors for the challenges encountered during the supervisory process. Since university research is part of their degree course, students need to be self-explorative and independent. Moreover, the research and supervision process at the universities needs to be socio-culturally situated and student-centric. To enhance students' research learning experiences, universities in Nepal could establish support mechanisms, writing centers where students can seek help, research supervision guidelines, and supervisory strategies such as peer, expert, and team supervision.

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