

A Silent Drift from Research to Coursework: Investigating Research Disengagement in MPhil English Programs in Pakistan



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Abstract: *This study investigates the phenomenon of research disengagement among MPhil English students and explores the underlying factors influencing this transition. This study adapted a quantitative research design. The data was collected through a structured questionnaire from 15 MPhil English students and was subject to quantitative analysis using descriptive statistics. The findings reported a significant preference for coursework and a noticeable trend of students shifting from research to coursework during their MPhil English study. Contrary to common assumptions, the results indicate that disengagement is not primarily due to lack of research skills or academic ability. Instead, key factors include lack of supervisor availability, delays in thesis processing, time constraints, and inconsistent institutional support. Moreover, although most of the scholars are aware of the academic limitations of coursework-based degrees in a long-run, they still opt for coursework due practical challenges they face in universities. The research concluded that research disengagement was not entirely due to weakness on part of scholars but a systemic problem. The findings suggest improved supervisory practices, efficient administrative processes, institutional reforms, and enhanced academic support to engage scholars in research activities rather than coursework completion of MPhil degrees in English*

Keywords: Research Disengagement, Coursework Culture in Post graduation, Supervision in Research, Institutional Support, MPhil English Research Scholars

Introduction

Research work is the connecting bridge between theory and practice which constitutes the core of postgraduate studies and higher education. According to Ernest L. Boyer (1990), higher education should move beyond traditional teaching models to embrace scholarship that integrates discovery, application, and teaching. In social sciences, students are expected to show transition from consumers of knowledge to producers of original scholarship through their research work. However, in MPhil English programs, especially in English Linguistics, an observable shift has emerged with a gradual

disengagement of scholars from research practices towards coursework based completion of their degrees. This “silent drift” raises important questions about the evolving nature of academic priorities, institutional structures, and students’ motivations within higher education (Ernest L. Boyer, 1990; Ronald Barnett, 2000). Traditionally, MPhil English programs have emphasized independent inquiry, critical analysis using literary and theoretical frameworks. However, increasing reliance on structured coursework and written examination-based evaluation appears more appealing to the scholars. While coursework can provide

foundational knowledge and skill development, its growing dominance may inadvertently affect the depth, originality, and intellectual autonomy that research. Previous studies indicate that the scholars' inclination towards research work is significantly influenced by the quality of supervision, institutional support, and clarity of research expectations (Vincent Tinto, 1997; Gina Wisker, 2005). Moreover, the increasing instrumentalization of higher education, where degrees are often pursued for employability rather than intellectual development, further complicates students' commitment to research work (David Harvey, 2005). Therefore it is important to investigate the underlying causes and motivation of research disengagement among MPhil English scholars by exploring their views and preferences. It investigates the underlying factors such as the scholars' own preference, motivation for coursework, institutional policies, supervisory practices, time constraints, academic writing proficiency, and students' own perceptions of research relevance and difficulty. Addressing research disengagement is essential not only for preserving the integrity of MPhil English programs but also for the promotion of research culture that values inquiry, innovation, and critical thinking especially in the field of English Literature and Linguistics.

Literature Review

Research has long been regarded as the cornerstone of postgraduate education, particularly within MPhil English programs, where students are expected to evolve from passive recipients of knowledge into active contributors to scholarly discourse. However, a growing body of literature suggests a gradual shift where as postgraduate programs increasingly prioritize structured coursework over independent research. Ronald Barnett (2000) argues that contemporary universities are undergoing epistemological changes that reshape academic identities and learning priorities, often diminishing the centrality of inquiry-based learning.

Historically, MPhil English courses have been characterized by the focus on critical thinking, theoretical activities, and the continuity of

independent research. However, the recent changes in the system of higher education show that there is a trend towards modularization, standardized testing, and curriculum based on courses. Stephen J. Ball (2003) challenges this tendency in his idea of a performativity in which academic performance is more and more judged by quantifiable products as opposed to intellectual richness. In the same manner, Bill Readings in *The University in Ruins* (1996) argues that universities have become more bureaucratically efficient and accountable, to the point that they have become devoid of significant intellectual engagement. Such an auditing culture has helped to redefine academic work, in which quantifiable results are more dominant than the more difficult, less immediate, processes of research and critical inquiry. This change is especially noticeable in student interest in research. Research has shown that institutional structures and pedagogical practices have a very strong impact on the commitment of postgraduate students to research.

Likewise, Vincent Tinto (1997) points out that academic integration and support in the university is connected to the level of engagement of students. Supervision is significant in the development of research experiences among the students in postgraduate research. Gina Wisker (2005) claims that effective guidance; positive feedback and supervisory relationships are the key to building confidence and research competence in students. The absence of these factors may cause uncertainty, lack of engagement, and choice of coursework. Moreover, socio-economic reasons have played their role in transforming the attitude towards research as well. The growing instrumentalization of higher education has changed the motivation and priorities of the students regarding the fast jobs. David Harvey (2005) attributes this to the neoliberal forces that have subjected education to a market-driven business that is oriented towards employability and efficiency. In such a setting, research, which seems to be both time consuming and conceptual, might not seem as immediately useful as course work that is more detailed and

has more definite results and evaluation standards. Moreover, time, as well as institutional pressures, influences the involvement of students into research. The growth in the number of coursework, coupled with a lack of time to study on their own frequently curtails intellectual exploration. This makes the students prone to superficial learning to satisfy the evaluation requirements instead of critical and original inquiry. Addressing this imbalance requires a re-evaluation of academic structures, supervisory practices, and the broader purpose of postgraduate education. Universities can restore an academic atmosphere conducive to inquiry, imagination and intellectual stimulation by placing research at the heart of MPhil courses again.

According to the recent research, supervisory practices, institutional structures, and personal constraints combine to influence the level of engagement of the students with the research. In a mixed-methods study, Zheng et al. (2024) conducted a study of 462 master students and 102 supervisors and discovered a significant difference between the perceptions of students and supervisors on engagement, with more variation in the cognitive and behavioral dimensions. Scholars always rated themselves as being more engaged than the supervisors thought they were. They are proposing a gap in communication that may have an impact on research development and motivation.

Equally, a massive Irish study conducted by McLoughlin et al. (2023) found that student-supervisor relationship is the most essential factor that affects research engagement, and lack of integration into departmental structures and supervisor interaction results in a decrease in participation and even lack of engagement. The research also noted that one of the biggest obstacles is the financial pressures because students who are compelled to work part-time are likely to dedicate less time to research and consequently undermine their academic participation.

More empirical data are provided by a cross-sectional study by Ma et al. (2023), which revealed that supervisory support (academic, emotional, and collaborative) has a positive and

significant impact on postgraduate research engagement. The research conceptualized engagement as a three-dimensional construct (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) and concluded that students with a strong mentorship experience and emotional support are more apt to spend time and effort on research activities .

Adding to this, a 2024 quantitative study by Liang et al. (2024) found that academic behaviors by supervisors such as guidance, feedback, and provision of resources play a significant role in improving the overall academic success of students by making them more engaged in tasks and motivated. The results highlight that with research tasks designed but challenging, students tend to grow to proactive and innovative research practices more often.

Conversely, qualitative evidence in Pakistan sheds light on the issues, which impede effective research engagement in the developing contexts. In a study of postgraduates at Islamabad, Khan et al. (2024) identified that postgraduate students tend to develop stress, isolation, and confusion during thesis writing when they have no understanding of their expectations, the inaccessibility of supervisors, or the excessive course work. Respondents noted that the isolation aspect of research, coupled with lack of institutional support, contributes to frustrations and disengagement that proves the thesis that structural factors are important in determining the research experience.

On the same note, a study on doctoral supervision and well-being by Pyhältö et al. (2024) found that high-quality supervision with the characteristics of timely feedback, emotional support, and the inclusion in research communities is positively linked to increased engagement and reduced burnout. In contrast, ineffective supervision is also a factor leading to dissatisfaction and disengagement in research activities .

Lastly, the evidence of innovative supervisory practices can be found in recent experimental studies by Caruana et al. (2025) that find that such practices may lead to a substantial

enhancement in engagement. Their longitudinal mixed-method research revealed that multimodal feedback systems (written feedback, audio feedback, and rubric-based feedback) improved understanding, motivation, and active engagement of students in the research. The research concludes that problems of disengagement can be addressed through effective and open feedback systems that can make the expectations of the research more visible and manageable among students. Collectively, these half a dozen empirical studies strongly suggest that research disengagement among postgraduate students is not a single problem but the outcome of interacting factors, such as the quality of supervision, institutional support, financial factors, and the practice of feedback.

The literature reflects the change of focus on defining supervision as a determining factor to the examination of the more sophisticated aspects like feedback involvement, affective support, and innovative practices. In spite of these developments, systemic issues, especially those related to resources, keep hindering the full participation of students in the research process, which only supports the necessity of systematic changes in the postgraduate education.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design. The aim is to identify the key factors influencing students' shift from research-based study to coursework-oriented programs. Therefore for data collection, an online questionnaire was administered to 15 purposively sampled scholars of MS/MPhil English for systematic analysis of their perceptions, experiences, and academic preferences. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire comprising close-ended questions. The questionnaire focused on key variables such as supervision quality, time constraints, institutional support, research skills, and students' motivations. The participants included both students who initially opted for research and those who transitioned to coursework during their program. The data was manually analyzed, including frequency counts

and percentages. The results were presented through pie charts for clarity and interpretation. This approach enabled the researcher to identify dominant trends and patterns related to research disengagement. Moreover ethical considerations were strictly observed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their responses were kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.

Data Analysis and Discussion

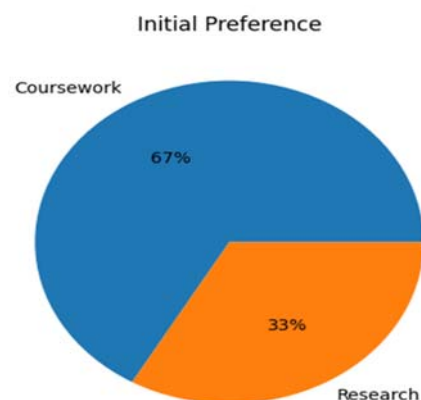
This section of the paper presents findings based on the responses of MPhil English Scholars in who opted for coursework rather than research and discusses them in the light of published literature on the topic.

Demography of the Scholars

It is important to mention that 4 out of 15 scholars were male and 11 were female from 4 who were enrolled in HEC recognized public and private sector universities of Pakistan. Among these scholars, 14 of them completed their degrees in 2024 and 2 will complete in 2026. Moreover, 14 scholars who opted for coursework were specializing in Linguistics, while 1 scholar was specializing in English Literature. In other words, 93% of the total participants were from MPhil Linguistics background and 7% from MPhil English Literature. The ratio of coursework in Literature was far more less as compared to Linguistics.

Initial Academic Preference

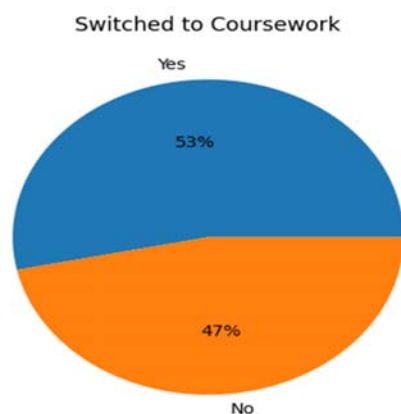
This section reports and discusses the initial academic preference of MPhil scholars who opted for coursework. Students' own preference and motivation is important in their postgraduate academic journey.



Students in first place were supposed to show their initial academic preference. They were asked: *At the start of your MPhil English program, which track did you initially choose, coursework or research?* The above pie chart shows that 67% of MPhil scholars' initially opted coursework because they were offered enrollment in coursework based degree by the university, while 33% opted for research at the beginning of the program but later on switched to coursework. Coursework is often perceived as less demanding and more manageable compared to research, which requires independent inquiry and intellectual effort. The scholars' subscription to coursework mode shows their priorities toward stability and completion rather than meaningful contribution to inquiry and research. This finding supports the argument of Ernest L. Boyer (1990), who emphasized the declining focus on inquiry-based learning in modern higher education. It also aligns with recent empirical studies suggesting that students prefer assessment-driven systems due to institutional pressures and time constraints.

Switching from Research to Coursework

This section reports and discusses whether the scholars were enrolled in coursework mood from the very start, or some situation made them switch to coursework later on the course. This is important as most of them decided to switch later.

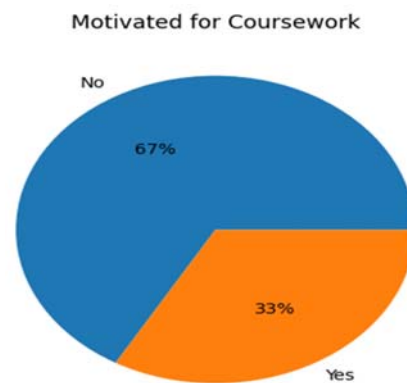


The pie chart indicates that 53% of students switched from research to coursework, while 47% remained in their original track. This shift reflects a gradual disengagement from research rather than an initial lack of interest. Students

begin with research intentions but move away due to challenges encountered during the program. This phenomenon can be described as a “silent drift” influenced by institutional barriers, lack of supervisor’s support, and scholar’s struggle with finding a research gap. This finding is consistent with the cited studies on research disengagement, which suggest that prolonged exposure to academic difficulties such as supervision issues and delays leads students to abandon research pathways.

Motivation for Coursework

This section reports and discusses the scholars’ motivation behind opting for coursework despite knowing its potential limitations and discouragement from academia and research community.

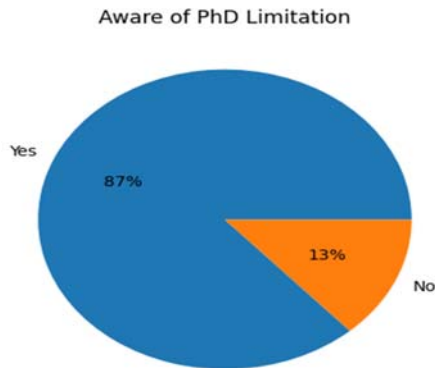


Motivation is very important in academic work to ensure originality and authenticity, and above all, for the energy to complete the work with responsibility (Murray, 2011). In order to explore the scholars’ motivation behind coursework, 67% of them reported they were not genuinely motivated for coursework, while only 33% were motivated to go with coursework option. This indicates that students’ decisions are largely compelled rather than voluntary. Coursework is chosen not because it is preferred, but because it is perceived as more feasible under existing conditions. Most importantly, some of them reported that the university advertised MPhil English Programs in which only a few scholars were enrolled in research, whereas majority of them were placed on coursework track. This supports findings from recent empirical studies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2024)

that reports that student choices are shaped by external constraints rather than intrinsic motivation. It also reflects the growing instrumental nature of higher education.

Awareness of PhD Limitations

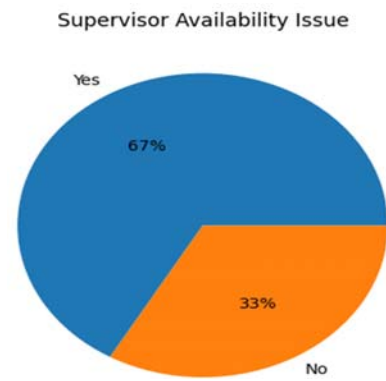
Coming towards the most serious sorrow that a coursework degree breeds for scholars is depriving them of enrollment into PhD which is subject to publication of article(s) before enrollment, specifically in Pakistan and some South Asian countries.



Exploring this, the above pie chart shows that 87% scholars were aware that coursework based degrees may limit PhD opportunities, while 13% were unaware. Despite this awareness, students still opted for coursework. This contradiction suggests that short-term academic survival outweighs long-term academic planning. This finding aligns with David Harvey (2005), who argues that higher education has become increasingly driven by market, where students prioritize completion and employability over intellectual development.

Supervisor Availability

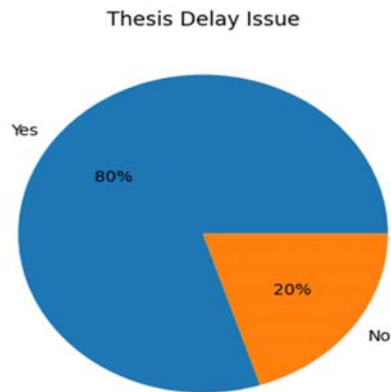
This is another possible key indicator behind the scholars' decision to opt for coursework because of either lack of supervisor, or because of bureaucratic supervision.



Availability of adequate number of HEC approved supervisors, especially in private sector universities, and even in some public sector universities compels students for coursework. Moreover, Supervisory practices in Pakistan often lack proper mentoring and support which leads to dissatisfaction among research scholars (Ali, Ullah, & Sanauddin 2019). Analysis, according to the pie chart, shows that around 67% of respondents reported lack of supervisor availability, while 33% did not consider it a problem. If we see, 67% shows supervision as a major structural issue. The absence of accessible and supportive supervisors discourages students from continuing research and pushes them toward coursework. This strongly supports empirical findings (e.g., Ma et al., 2023) which identify supervision as the most critical factor in postgraduate research. Poor supervision directly leads to disengagement.

Delayed Thesis Process on Part of University

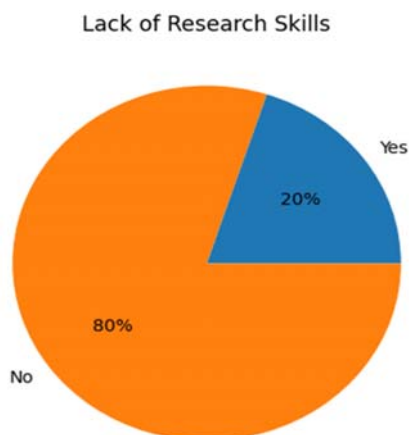
This is a possible and important institutional indicator that might discourage scholars going for research. This is perhaps a widely acknowledged (mis)conception that universities normally delay theses processing and correspondence with the external evaluators. Delayed thesis processing and external evaluation reports submissions is the most common problem reported by research scholars globally.



Investigating it as a major barrier, 80% of the scholars on pie chart reported delays in thesis processing, while only 20% did not experience such delays. This is one of the strongest factors contributing to disengagement. Delays create uncertainty, frustration, and time pressure, making research appear inefficient and risky. These findings are consistent with Lovitts (2001) who identified bureaucratic hurdles and delays as part of structural challenges in postgraduate study where institutional inefficiencies and administrative delays are key barriers to research completion and student engagement.

Research Skills and Ability

One of the possible reasons behind disengagement from research work might be the poor academic and technical writing proficiency on part of research scholars. Research and academic writing is most often found challenging by research scholars especially when it comes to structuring arguments and finding a research gap (Swales & Feak, 2012).

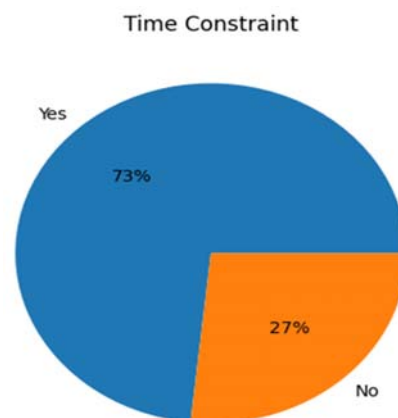


To investigate if this widely prevalent cause be

the factor behind MPhil English scholars' disengagement from research, 20% scholars reported lack of research skills, while 80% believed they were capable. This result challenges the common assumption that students avoid research due to lack of ability. Instead, it confirms that students are academically capable but institutionally constrained.

Time Constraints

Time constraint is one of the issues that scholars mostly complain of. Gardner (2009) further explains that doctoral and postgraduate students often struggle to balance coursework, research, and personal commitments, which negatively affects their academic progress.



In response to time constraints and meeting strict deadlines, from above pie chart, it can be noted that 73% of the scholars identified time constraints as a major factor, while 27% did not. It is an undeniable fact that time pressure followed by extra semester fee charges is a critical issue. Therefore scholars struggle to balance coursework, research, and personal responsibilities so that the degree could be completed within timeframe. Also coursework to them appear more manageable due to its structured nature.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the above findings and discussion, across all the figures, a clear and consistent pattern emerges, which shows that the shift from research to coursework among MPhil English scholars is shaped more by institutional and structural factors rather than individual limitations. The most vivid contributors are issues related to supervision and delays in thesis

processing, both of which create uncertainty and discourage a sustained engagement with research. In addition, time constraints function as a major practical barrier, as students struggle to balance academic responsibilities with personal and institutional demands which make coursework a more manageable alternative. Importantly, the data demonstrates that research ability is not a significant concern, as the majority of students consider themselves capable of conducting research. Instead, their shift toward coursework shows constrained decision-making, where choices are driven by necessity rather than genuine academic preference. These findings collectively confirm that research disengagement is a systemic issue rooted within institutional practices and academic supervision. Furthermore, the results suggest that students are not inherently disinterested in research; rather, they remain willing but insufficiently supported. Consequently, improving supervisory practices, reducing administrative delays, and strengthening institutional support systems have the potential to reverse disengagement and re-establish research practice which keeps the discipline evolving, applied, and critically engaging with meaningful contribution to the existent literature on the subject.

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