

## From Perception to Practice: Understanding Omani Undergraduate Journeys in Academic Research

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to explore undergraduate students' perceptions and actual experiences in completing their academic research or dissertation; To identify the main challenges faced by undergraduate students during their dissertation process, and to suggest ways to overcome the challenges and improve the undergraduate research experience.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study adopted a qualitative research design. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with undergraduates from Muscat. A set of ten open-ended questions guided the interviews, allowing flexibility for probing and clarification. A total of 24 participants from various colleges across Oman were interviewed—four from each of six academic programs: tourism, hospitality, marketing, business, finance, and human resource management.

**Findings:** The study revealed that the students faced difficulty in most of the areas of research, which included topic selection, searching literature review, compiling, and literature paraphrasing, data collection, data analysis using inferential statistics (and statistical software). Additionally, there were soft skill issues such as time management, keeping focus, communication with supervisors, and the inability to prevent challenges like personal issues and similar conflicts. It also emerged that the supervisor plays a pivotal role in helping the students not only to manage the academic side but also to mentor them to maintain their focus and be on track.

**Research Implications:** This study will provide a structured framework to support students in dissertation writing. It will offer targeted guidance in academic writing, time management, stress management, and the use of specialized research tools, thereby improving students' preparedness, efficiency, and confidence throughout the research process.

**Social Implications:** The findings will support initiatives such as showcasing exemplary dissertations from previous cohorts, ensuring transparency in grading criteria, plagiarism policies, and penalties. Regular supervisor-student meetings will also be encouraged to monitor progress, address challenges, and foster a supportive research culture.

**Originality / Value:** This research uniquely emphasizes enhancing academic excellence by bridging the gap between students' perceptions and actual experiences in academic research, offering practical strategies for improved dissertation outcomes.

**Keywords:** Dissertation challenges, Adult education, Continuous education, Critical Thinking, Academic Research.

JEL: I21, A22, I23, D83

### Introduction

Academic research is a vital component of higher education, fostering critical and analytical thinking while enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge to practical inquiry. For undergraduates, the dissertation or final-year project serves as a capstone experience, integrating skills and concepts gained throughout their studies. This process, however, is shaped by multiple factors, including the availability of effective supervision, relevance and feasibility of topic selection, access to scholarly resources, proficiency in research methods and data analysis tools, and the level of institutional support.

Students' perceptions play a crucial role in shaping their motivation, engagement, and persistence in completing the dissertation. Those who view research as a meaningful and enriching learning opportunity tend to approach the process with greater enthusiasm, resilience, and a positive attitude. Conversely, challenges such as heavy workloads from other courses, personal responsibilities, and limited access to guidance or resources can hinder progress and affect the overall research experience.

This paper not only strengthens subject-specific expertise but also promotes self-directed learning, independence, and intellectual maturity (Rowley & Slack, 2004). Moreover, enhancing the student research experience benefits both faculty—through active research collaboration—and institutions—by increasing academic reputation and research visibility (Petrella and Jung, 2008).

In light of these perspectives, the present study examines the perceptions, processes, and experiences of Omani undergraduate students in undertaking academic research. It further seeks to identify the challenges students encounter throughout the dissertation process and to propose actionable strategies to mitigate these challenges. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to enhancing institutional support, improving supervision practices, and fostering a more positive and impactful research culture among graduating students.

### Statement of the Problem

While undergraduate dissertation projects are intended to be a capstone learning experience, Omani students often approach them with apprehension, perceiving the process as difficult, stressful, and resource-intensive. Such perceptions, combined with challenges in topic selection, research design, methodological application, and access to scholarly resources, can reduce motivation and engagement.

Although supervisory support is generally available, institutional mechanisms to provide structured, consistent, and comprehensive research guidance remain limited. This gap contributes to inconsistent research quality, diminished student confidence, and underdeveloped research skills. Despite the recognized importance of undergraduate research in fostering critical thinking and independent learning, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring the specific perceptions, processes, and lived experiences of Omani undergraduate students during their dissertation journey.

This study addresses this gap by examining the factors influencing students' attitudes, the procedural steps they undertake, and the challenges they face, to propose targeted strategies to improve institutional support and the overall quality of the undergraduate research experience.

### Research Questions

1. What are undergraduate students' perceptions and actual experiences of the dissertation process?
2. What challenges do undergraduate students encounter while completing their dissertations?
3. What measures can help address the challenges and enhance the dissertation experience for undergraduate students?

### Research Objectives

1. To explore undergraduate students' perceptions and actual experiences in completing their academic research or dissertation.
2. To identify the main challenges faced by undergraduate students during their dissertation process.
3. To suggest ways to overcome the challenges and improve the undergraduate research experience.

### Review of Literature

The undergraduate dissertation is widely recognized as a vital component of final-year academic work, offering students the opportunity to consolidate and apply the knowledge and skills developed throughout their earlier studies. Rowley and Slack (2004) emphasized its significance as a platform for independent, self-directed learning that enhances intellectual growth. Similarly, Petrella and Jung (2008) highlighted that an enriching dissertation experience benefits both students and faculty—students gain meaningful learning outcomes, while faculty and institutions strengthen their research agendas and academic visibility.

Research has identified various factors that influence the quality and success of the dissertation process. Miranti et al. (2022) identified five critical elements affecting completion: the motivation to graduate on time,

writing proficiency, access to learning resources, quality of supervision, and support from peers. Complementing this, [Zapata et al. \(2023\)](#) found that university students engaged in e-learning demonstrated weaker competencies in problem formulation, setting objectives and hypotheses, and applying statistical analysis techniques.

Several studies have also highlighted the practical and technical challenges faced by students. [Hashmi \(2022\)](#) reported that topic selection, defining the scope of the study, locating reliable information sources, and developing skills in online searching, data analysis, and time management were particularly problematic. Difficulties in interpreting data, designing appropriate collection methods, and using inferential statistics were common, underscoring the need for targeted training in tools such as SPSS, questionnaire design, citation management, and literature search strategies. [Campillan \(2019\)](#) further noted that formulating research problems, conducting literature reviews, sampling participants, creating research instruments, and transcribing interviews—along with non-academic factors like personal commitments, time constraints, and lack of research partners—were major hurdles.

The role of supervisors in dissertation success has been consistently emphasized. [Todd et al. \(2004\)](#) found that supervisory support was a decisive factor in timely completion, though even with guidance, time management remained a persistent challenge. Limited opportunities to develop researchable questions early in the program were linked to student difficulties in framing objectives. [Azmat and Ahmad \(2022\)](#) reported that topic selection, data collection, and analysis were particularly difficult when supervisor support was lacking, leading to both physical and psychological stress. [Rohim et al. \(2023\)](#) supported these findings, noting that psychological stress stemmed from low motivation, insufficient understanding of research methods, and the need to adapt topics to contemporary contexts. They also highlighted sociocultural influences, including relationships with parents, friends, and supervisors.

Language proficiency has emerged as another significant factor influencing dissertation work. [Zunoomy & Shiby \(2021\)](#) observed that non-native Arabic speakers faced greater challenges in producing dissertations in Arabic, as compared to native speakers, due to limitations in effectively expressing ideas in a second language. Even with adequate data collection and analysis, linguistic barriers often hindered clear communication of findings. Similar challenges were reported among postgraduate students. [Man & Zhan \(2023\)](#) identified four main difficulties at the master's level: language barriers, topic selection, literature review writing, and discussion sections, alongside a heavy reliance on supervision. [Sitompul & Anditasari \(2022\)](#) found that despite prior exposure to research work, many postgraduate students still faced obstacles, particularly in linguistic competence. [Ebadi & Pourahmadi \(2019\)](#) added that limited knowledge of research design and data analysis software was a shared challenge for both supervisors and students.

Beyond academic skills, non-technical factors also impact dissertation outcomes. [Diocos \(2022\)](#) found that while students often possessed good problem-solving and information-seeking abilities, they lacked essential soft skills such as time management, commitment, and information technology proficiency. Financial constraints and non-cooperation from respondents were additional barriers. From an institutional perspective, [Ekpoh \(2016\)](#) emphasized the importance of structured research skills training, seminar exposure, internet accessibility, and effective progress-tracking mechanisms.

Perceptions of the dissertation process also shape student engagement. [Cetinkaya & Yilmaz \(2017\)](#) found that undergraduate students in the arts reported challenges with language, writing style, research methodology, and topic selection, as well as personal issues. Nevertheless, [Todd et al. \(2004\)](#) observed that social science undergraduates valued the dissertation experience for enhancing subject knowledge, developing independence, and fostering a sense of ownership over their work. [Lin et al. \(2022\)](#) identified lack of time, insufficient research knowledge, and limited guidance as key barriers to research participation. They further noted that institutional support programs and faculty mentorship significantly enriched student research experiences.

Additional studies have examined how students choose their dissertation topics. [Winder \(2023\)](#) found that decisions were shaped largely by interest in the topic and preferred research approach, with learning development initiatives improving confidence and engagement among less experienced students. [Bowyer & Akpınar \(2022\)](#) pointed out that research-based learning (RBL) can be demanding for undergraduates, making the supervisor's role crucial in navigating its complexities.

### Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore undergraduate students’ perceptions, experiences, and challenges in completing academic research. Qualitative methods were deemed suitable as they enable an in-depth understanding of participants’ views within their social and academic contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2017; O’Gorman & MacIntosh, 2015). The thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns, similarities, and differences across participant responses (Terry et al., 2017). Given the exploratory nature of the research, purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich, relevant insights (Robinson, 2014).

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with undergraduates from Muscat. Each session lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. A set of ten open-ended questions guided the interviews, allowing flexibility for probing and clarification. Field notes were taken during and after each interview to ensure accuracy and completeness.

A minimum sample size of five to twenty-five is required for the semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). Although the initial plan was to include five participants per program, availability constraints reduced the final number. A total of 24 participants were interviewed—four from each of six academic programs: tourism, hospitality, marketing, business, finance, and human resource management. Participants represented various colleges across Oman, with most graduating in 2024 and a few in 2023.

To maintain secrecy, each participant received a pseudonym used in the data analysis (Malhotra et al., 2013), and to maintain consistency, the same questions were posed to all participants, and interviews were conducted in a controlled environment to minimize bias. Transcripts were anonymized using pseudonyms and numeric codes (e.g., Graduate-Tourism) to protect identities. The data were reviewed multiple times, coded, and organized into descriptive and analytical themes for interpretation. Participation was voluntary, with no financial or academic incentives provided. All the interviews were conducted in Muscat, the capital city of the Sultanate of Oman. All participants were graduates from various colleges in Oman, and many of them graduated in 2024, while a few graduated in 2023. Data were collected from four participants in each program, and a total of six programs were covered.

### Findings

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	11	45.8
	Female	13	54.2
Status	student	24	100.0
Major	Hospitality	4	16.6
	Marketing	4	16.6
	Business	4	16.6
	Human Resources	4	16.7
	Finance	4	16.6
	Tourism	4	16.7

Table 2 shows the themes drawn from the literature, and ten questions were identified from each theme. Each theme/question was discussed and identified in the form of participant statements that were used as evidence to support our findings that have been drawn.

Table 2. Interview Questions

No	Questions
1	Is your dissertation/project/thesis your first research activity?
2	How important is a dissertation/project/thesis in your academic and professional career?
3	How did you choose your dissert/project/thesis topic?
4	What helped you write your dissertation/project/thesis successfully?

5	Which parts/sections of the dissertation/project/thesis did you enjoy?
6	What challenges have you faced during your dissertation, project, or thesis?
7	What was your perception of the dissertation/project/thesis before starting it?
8	What was your experience in comparison with your perception of the dissertation/project/thesis?
9	What would you recommend to colleges for an effective dissertation/project/thesis?
10	What advice would you give to new students to make their dissertations/ projects/thesis more enjoyable and less stressful?

**Table 3. Summary of the Interviews and Responses**

Questions	Responses
1. Is your dissertation/project/thesis your first research activity?	Most respondents stated that the dissertation or project was their first major research activity. Some mentioned that they had experience in smaller research projects in earlier years. In general, most agreed they were excited to undertake the intensive research module in spite of the stress they had anticipated.
2. How important is a dissertation/ project/ thesis in your academic and professional career?	There was consensus that the dissertation was very important for their academic and professional advancement. The reasons varied from improving their critical thinking to research skills, academic writing, and data analysis skills. Some of them specifically mentioned enhancement in skills in specific areas, such as Excel and research methodology. Few did consider it less critical, though acknowledging the learning through literature reviews.
3. How did you choose your dissert/project/thesis topic?	Everyone agreed that the part of topic selection was often challenging. Most based their selection on personal interest or alignment with their degree specialization. They agreed to depend on the assistance from teachers, friends, family, and an internship. Some found it helpful to review existing research articles to frame their topics, while others relied heavily on external support to narrow down their focus.
4. What helped you write your dissertation/project/thesis successfully?	All of them pointed to academic modules related to research writing, data analysis, and their specific major as the modules that helped them write their dissertation project. Most of them mentioned workshops and dissertation sessions provided by the supervisors for guidance, while regular feedback and meetings as most crucial for maintaining the quality and progress of their dissertations. Some of them also mentioned recorded workshop sessions and experienced supervisors as helpful factors.
5. Which parts/sections of the dissertation/project/thesis did you enjoy?	Most of the respondents said that they enjoyed analysing the primary data collected the most. But most of the students found discussing the findings, connecting them with the literature review, and giving recommendations was something that they enjoyed the most and even

	found it relaxing, as it was the final part of their dissertation.
6. What challenges have you faced during your dissertation, project, or thesis?	<p>All of them agreed that the most challenging parts were the Literature review, Data collection, and data analysis. They felt that the Literature review was tough due to the vast amount of information available.</p> <p>Data collection was made tough due to the lack of seriousness of the respondents in completing the survey.</p> <p>The interviewees sometimes did not focus on the questions. Data analysis was tough due to the nature of the subject.</p> <p>Some mentioned that studying other modules while doing a dissertation also led to time management issues and stress.</p>
7. What was your perception of the dissertation/project/thesis before starting it?	<p>Before starting, most of the respondents perceived the dissertation as overwhelming, stressful, and demanding significant dedication.</p> <p>The majority had heard from seniors was mostly negative, and there was anxiety about the amount of work and fear of failure.</p> <p>Some expected that staying focused and working steadily would make the process manageable, while others felt pressure due to it being a final and long-term project.</p> <p>Some also added that there was a fear of failure due to difficulty in understanding the requirements and meeting the standards.</p>
8. What was your experience in comparison with your perception of the dissertation/project/thesis?	<p>All of them agreed that their experience matched the feedback received from the seniors, with regard to stress, meeting the required standards, and deadlines.</p> <p>But a few added that the learning curve from the experience has made it worthwhile.</p>
9. What would you recommend to colleges for an effective dissertation/project/thesis?	<p>The majority of the students suggested that the college can improve in many areas, such as having more workshops on research writing and data analysis. This can be done at an earlier stage, like in year 3 of the graduation.</p> <p>Some felt that the students should be encouraged to start researching areas of their interest to help them come up with a research topic early.</p> <p>A few of them commented that the librarians should be more proactive by helping/guiding while searching for academic resources, while some others suggested that senior students can be part of the mentors for students during the students' first phase of dissertation.</p>

<p>10. What advice would you give to new students to make their dissertations/ projects/thesis more enjoyable and less stressful?</p>	<p>The majority advised that the students should not take long breaks and work during the break to ease the pressure, at least for the collection of data. Additionally, they felt that the students should be free and open with their supervisor and discuss their problems or challenges and request support without hesitation.</p> <p>A few of the respondents said that there should be continuous communication between the supervisors and the students, as this will help students not only stay on track but also meet the standards required.</p>
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### Discussion

The findings of this study align closely with existing literature, which consistently indicates that undergraduate students encounter challenges at nearly every stage of the dissertation process. Similar to previous research, participants in this study reported difficulties with topic selection, conducting and paraphrasing literature reviews, collecting data, and performing data analysis—particularly when using inferential statistics and specialized software. In addition to these technical challenges, students faced difficulties with soft skills such as time management, sustaining focus, and maintaining effective communication with supervisors, while also managing personal responsibilities and other academic commitments.

The pivotal role of supervisors was highlighted across both the literature and the current findings. Students emphasized that supervisors not only guide the academic process but also serve as mentors who help them maintain focus, motivation, and direction. A recurring reason for the challenges faced was that the dissertation was the students' first substantial independent research project. While they had completed assignments before, these were generally shorter, involved fewer resources, and were often group-based. Feedback from peers and seniors also contributed to heightened anxiety, as students were warned about the heavy workload and high standards required, which in some cases led to a lack of confidence and mental blocks.

Another finding was the misalignment between the skills and knowledge gained in earlier semesters and the demands of the dissertation. Many students felt underprepared for independent research, which was compounded by a lack of early awareness of the dissertation's value. As a result, the process often began with confusion and stress, overshadowing the potential excitement of conducting original research. For students in the Middle East, an additional challenge was the fact that English is not their first language, despite it being the medium of instruction.

Despite these obstacles, students recognized the dissertation as a valuable learning experience. They reported gains in subject knowledge, critical thinking, academic writing, and research skills, as well as improvements in data collection, presentation, and interpretation using specialized applications. Notably, many students enjoyed analyzing primary data, discussing findings, connecting them to the literature, and formulating recommendations—skills that the dissertation is designed to develop.

However, independent learning remained a gap, with heavy reliance on peers, family, and supervisors throughout the process. There was a unanimous call for greater institutional support, including targeted workshops, enhanced supervisor engagement, and assistance from librarians and experienced students.

Participants also offered recommendations for future students: avoid long breaks in research work, utilize holidays for tasks such as data collection, maintain open communication with supervisors, and seek support proactively. Continuous engagement with supervisors was seen as key to staying on track and meeting academic standards.

## Conclusion

The dissertation project serves as a pivotal component of undergraduate education, fostering independent learning and enhancing students' research competencies. Beyond improving their ability to conduct scholarly investigations, it nurtures critical thinking skills through the practical application of theoretical concepts. By engaging with relevant data and conducting detailed analyses, students acquire essential competencies that are integral to adult education and lifelong learning.

This study has revealed that Omani undergraduate students encounter a range of challenges throughout their dissertation journey, from inception to completion. However, despite initial apprehension and stress, students recognized the significance of the learning outcomes associated with the process. Many derived satisfaction and a sense of achievement upon completing their final chapters, indicating a positive shift in perception. The findings also underscore the critical role of dissertation supervisors, the value of preparatory workshops, and the influence of prior academic modules in shaping students' research experiences.

For the dissertation to continue contributing meaningfully to the development of graduate attributes and the overall value of undergraduate programs, the following recommendations are proposed.

## Recommendations

1. **Early Skill-Building Workshops:** Conduct targeted workshops on research writing, data analysis, and the use of analytical software well before students commence their dissertation projects to ensure they are adequately prepared.
2. **Holistic Student Support:** Offer structured assistance in areas such as academic writing, time management, stress management, and specialized research tools to enhance student readiness and confidence.
3. **Peer Knowledge Exchange:** Facilitate interactions between students from different institutions to exchange ideas and experiences, counter misinformation, and foster mutual encouragement and collaboration.
4. **Showcase Exemplary Work:** Organize sessions to present high-quality dissertations from previous cohorts, enabling current students to recognize the standards and impact of well-executed research.
5. **Enhanced Library Integration:** Ensure the library is actively involved in supporting research by providing updated resources (both online and offline) and offering guidance on effective research strategies.
6. **Topic Selection Guidance:** Allow students to choose research topics aligned with their interests, coupled with open discussions on the feasibility, advantages, and limitations of their chosen themes.
7. **Mentorship Programs:** Establish a network of senior student mentors who can guide junior peers in navigating early research challenges and uncertainties.
8. **Transparent Assessment Processes:** Maintain clarity in grading criteria, plagiarism policies, and penalty systems, complemented by frequent supervisor-student meetings to track progress and address concerns.
9. **Alternative Project Formats:** Consider introducing group research projects in certain academic disciplines to increase the practical relevance and collaborative nature of the research experience.
10. **Recognition and Publication:** Publish outstanding dissertations to motivate future students and emphasize the real-world and academic value of high-quality research.
11. **Future Research on Emerging Tools:** Investigate the impact of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence tools, on students' research practices, focusing on strategies to enhance their curiosity and commitment to continuous learning.

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