

Expectations and Satisfaction of Students towards Ph.D. Coursework

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Abstract:

Education is the key to unlock the hidden potential of man. It empowers people to grow, innovate, and contribute to society. A Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), is considered the highest academic degree because it signifies mastery of a specific field of study. Ph.D. coursework is made up of well-organized academic parts that are meant to help students acquire deeper understanding and research skills before they start working on their thesis. This study employs a Mixed-method data triangulation approach to investigate the expectations and satisfaction of Ph.D. coursework students in the Department of Education at the University of Lucknow. The study aims to assess the Degree of expectations and satisfaction levels, along with the correlation between them. 45 research scholars provided data via a rating scale and semi-structured focus group discussions. Data analysis of quantitative data using frequency, percentage, mean, and Spearman's rank correlation. We looked at the qualitative responses thematically. The findings indicated that both the expectation level (4.06) and satisfaction level (3.74) were comparatively elevated. There was also a moderate positive correlation (.478) between expectations and satisfaction, which means that what students thought would happen was pretty close to what actually happened. These findings enhance Ph.D. coursework by elucidating the factors that affect student satisfaction. In higher education, universities that offer courses should pay attention to what students want so that their efforts to teach and learn are more satisfying. The study recommends implementing targeted modifications in coursework to more effectively meet student needs.

Keywords: Expectations, Satisfaction, Ph. D. Students, Coursework

Introduction:

Education unlocks the latent capabilities within individuals, fostering personal growth, innovation, and societal progress. A Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), represents the pinnacle of academic achievement, embodying profound expertise in a specialized discipline. Ph.D. students conduct original research, pushing the boundaries of knowledge and demonstrating their expertise through a thesis. This rigorous process develops critical thinking, analytical skills, and the ability to solve complex problems, making Ph.D. students highly sought after in academia, research, and industry. Ph.D. coursework forms a foundational element of doctoral Education, serving as a preparatory stage that equip students with the necessary theoretical and methodological tools for conducting high-level research.

The coursework typically covers a broad range of subjects, from advanced research ethics to ICT fields to specialized research methodology classes. The University of Lucknow's coursework structure is a dynamic and forward-looking framework that integrates research methodology, ICT, and ethics to create a robust academic experience. By fostering critical inquiry, technological proficiency, and ethical awareness, the university prepares students to excel in their fields and contribute meaningfully to society. This holistic approach underscores its reputation as a leading institution in higher education. Considered quite a crucial stage, increasing attention is being paid to the extent to which the expectations that students bring into Ph.D. programs align with what they actually experience and how that shapes their overall satisfaction with coursework. Expectation and satisfaction constitute two essential attributes that strongly dictate a student's learning trajectory; if there exists a certain difference between what students actually hope for and what, in reality, confronts them, it invariably influences their progress in maturity and engenders issues like losing interest, dipping performance, and sometimes even dropout; on the other hand, when students encounter experiences at or eclipsing those expectations, they develop feelings of satisfaction, contentment, and encouragement, and usually, they succeed. To understand Ph.D. students' expectations and satisfaction relationship is a strategic tool for universities to enhance coursework quality and consequently boost adequate support and retention. Both institutional growth and student progression are dependent on expectations and satisfaction. Expectations may be regarded as coming into the minds of students before a particular phase of their learning experience. For

instance, the standard of the teaching, access to resources, or the social setting. Although the student may have held high expectations, their satisfaction, in contrast, remains a function of the extent to which these expectations are met and the general sense of contentment with their studies. According to several studies, student satisfaction is closely associated with retention and academic success. According to research, when expectations are not met, students are more likely to feel dissatisfied, lose motivation, and have higher dropout rates from their studies in undergraduate programs (Tinto, 1993; Yorke, 2000). Not many have, however, focused particularly on Ph.D. students, often confronted by very peculiar difficulties, like isolation, heavier academic pressure, and longer durations of study (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

In the context of Ph.D. programs, expectations often revolve around coursework structure, the supervision, peer relationships, and institutional support (Gardner, 2009). Understanding the gap between PhD students' expectations and their actual experiences is vital for improving student satisfaction and academic outcomes.

Significance of Exploring Expectations and Satisfaction in Ph.D. Coursework:

The doctoral level presents unique challenges that distinguish it from other forms of higher education. Ph.D. students often face greater academic pressure, isolation, and a more prolonged period of study, all of which can influence their expectations and satisfaction. Most Ph.D. students get admission in Ph.D. program with ideas about coursework, supervisor guidance, peer interaction, institutional support, and study life balance. These expectations are shaped by factors like prior learning experiences, career goals, and socio-cultural pressures. Having an understanding of change in expectations and whether they are met over time could assist institutions in working towards ameliorating the whole Ph.D. experience. On the converse side, student satisfaction is usually sufficient on academic and social experience factors throughout a program. It comprises aspects like coursework quality, supervisor and co-supervisor support and guidance, availability of research facilities, and the identification of academic community. Higher satisfaction is a measure that can uplift the student's performance and likelihood of continuing in the program, thereby making it an area worthy of interest by the institutions.

Academic and social integration play a critical impact in student retention and happiness. These elements are important for PhD students' satisfaction since they frequently face social a

nd intellectual isolation and have higher expectations for peer connection and institutional support (Tinto's Model of Student Attrition, 1993).

Factors that lead to motivation (Herzberg's TwoFactor Theory, 1959) and factors that lead to discontent (hygiene factors).In the case of PhD students, motivators may include the intellectual challenge of coursework and research opportunities, while hygiene elements could include administrative support, sufficient financing, and resource accessibility.This theory helps explain why some expectations, including the requirement for institutional or financial support, may have a different impact on happiness than expectations related to intellectual fulfillment.

The experiences of PhD students findsout that those who did not receive the academic support and supervision are expected more likely to leave their programs

In order to properly manage expectations, Lovitt underlined the significance of open communication between students and their supervisors.

Among unhappy students, poor communication and a lack of direction were common themes (Lovitt, 2001).

Study of the relationship between PhD students' satisfaction with their academic work and their mental well-being found that PhD students who had clear expectations about their work and a supportive academic environment reported higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of stress. This aligns with earlier findings that unmet expectations are closely linked to dissatisfaction and mental health issues among PhD students (Stubb et al., (2012)).

The causes of stress in PhD students, emphasizing the role of unmet expectations as a significant stressor. Their research pointed to a gap between students' expectations of independence in research and the reality of needing substantial guidance, which often led to frustration and dissatisfaction. This gap was particularly visible in the first few years of PhD coursework, where students often struggled with the transition from structured learning to independent research. (Jairam and Kahl, 2012).

A meta-synthesis of doctoral student attrition and found that dissatisfaction was often linked to a mismatch between students' expectations and the actual structure of PhD programs. Students who expected more collaborative environments were particularly dissatisfied when faced with the isolated nature of doctoral research (Bair and Haworth, 2004).

These studies highlight those expectations regarding supervision, peer interaction, and research autonomy are central to PhD students' satisfaction. Furthermore, they reveal that unmet expectations can lead to stress, failure, and, ultimately, attrition. Most of the studies are limited to specific geographic regions or disciplines, leaving gaps in understanding how these problems can be studied in different contexts.

Research Problem and Rationale:

With the growing emphasis on learner-centered education, it is important to examine how effectively Ph.D. coursework meets students' expectations and the factors that influence their satisfaction. A deeper look into these aspects can guide institutions in enhancing their programs, ultimately improving student retention and success. This study specifically investigates the relationship between expectations and satisfaction among Ph.D. coursework students. While previous researches worked on these topics individually, there is limited comprehensive studies exploring how students' expectations align with their actual satisfaction, highlighting the need for the present research.

Objectives:

1. To find out the Ph.D. coursework students' degree of expectations regarding their coursework.
2. To find out the degree of satisfaction of Ph.D. coursework students regarding their coursework.
3. To examine the significant relationship between the degree of expectations and satisfaction of Ph.D. students regarding their coursework.
4. To identify the factors that influence Ph.D. coursework students' satisfaction.
5. To provide suggestions for improving coursework design support for Ph.D. coursework students to enhance their academic performance.

Research Design:

In order to explore the expectations and satisfaction of PhD students, this study uses a data triangulation approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative tools.

Because it enables a thorough study of both quantitative data from surveys and in-depth insights from interviews, the data triangulation design is used for this study and contributes to a more complete knowledge of the phenomenon being studied.

Quantitative techniques will be useful in determining important factors (such as peer interaction, supervision quality, and institutional support) and gauging the general degree of satisfaction of PhD students enrolled in coursework.

In the meanwhile, semistructured interviews using qualitative approaches will provide in-depth accounts of students' experiences and their assessments of how effectively their expectations have been fulfilled.

The study focused on Ph.D. students enrolled in the 2023–2024 courses of the Education Department at the University of Lucknow. Participants will be chosen through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. To provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis, the study will involve 10 participants in qualitative focus group discussions and 45 participants in the quantitative survey. Participants were invited through personal contacts in campus. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality, will be carefully followed, ensuring that all participant information stays private and is used only for research purposes.

A survey questionnaire was administered to all participants to determine their expectations and satisfaction with their PhD coursework. The survey consists of Likert-scale questions, allowing students to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with various statements. To enrich the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 selected Ph.D. students to gain an in-depth knowledge of their expectations and satisfaction Degree. The gathered data was then appropriately analysed.

The data collected from 10 selected Ph.D. students about their expectations and satisfaction levels. Measures such as the mean, frequency, and Spearman's rank correlation was used to quantify overall satisfaction with the Ph.D. coursework. Meanwhile, qualitative interview data was analysed through thematic analysis, which involves systematically identifying recurring themes or patterns within the responses.

Results and Discussion:

Degree of Expectation of Ph.D. students towards their Coursework

Table 1. Degree of expectation of Ph.D. students towards their coursework

Dimension	Mean	Description
Academic Rigour	4.17	High
Relevance	4.27	High
Support	4.01	High
Collaboration	4.00	High
Skill Development	4.10	High
Academic Workload	3.69	High
Flexibility	3.75	High
Integration of Theory and Practice	4.24	High
Feedback	3.86	High
Preparation for Research	4.54	Very High
Average Degree of Expectation	4.06	<i>High</i>

Source: Created by author

Table 1 indicates that Ph.D. coursework students hold high expectations. They especially expect the coursework to prepare them well for research and also value aspects like academic rigor, relevance, support, collaboration, skill development, balanced workload, flexibility, practical application of theory, and useful feedback. In short, students hope their coursework will be meaningful, intellectually engaging, and closely connected to their research goals. Students seek clear guidance, collaborative opportunities, skill-building experiences, and constructive feedback that can help them to achieve their goals throughout their research journey.

The Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) explains that people feel satisfied when their experiences meet or exceed their expectations, and disappointed when they fall short (Baillie, 2015). In the context of higher education, this implies that universities need to recognize and take into account students' expectations to ensure that coursework effectively promotes learning and delivers a rewarding academic experience.

Degree of satisfaction of Ph.D. students towards Coursework:

Table 2. Degree of satisfaction of Ph.D. students towards Coursework

Dimension	Mean	Description
Academic Rigour	3.82	High
Relevance	3.66	High
Support	3.74	High
Collaboration	3.58	High
Skill Development	3.92	High
Academic Workload	3.56	High
Flexibility	3.61	High
Integration of Theory and Practice	3.76	High
Feedback	3.91	High
Preparation for Research	3.85	High
<i>Average Degree of Satisfaction</i>	3.74	High

Source: Created by author

Table 2 shows that Ph.D. coursework students report a high Degree of satisfaction (3.74) across various aspects of their program. They are satisfied with the academic quality, relevance, available support, teamwork, skill development, workload management, flexibility, integration of theory and practice, and feedback. The findings implies that students perceive the coursework as both challenging and valuable, aligning closely with their research objectives. They feel that the teaching methods provide a building block for future research and appreciate the guidance and support they receive. Additionally, students are pleased with opportunities for collaboration, the balance of academic responsibilities, and the program's flexibility. They appreciate receiving constructive feedback and feel that the coursework prepares them well for research. Additionally, factors such as instructor quality, course design, timely feedback, and clear expectations positively influence their performance (Gopal et al., 2021).

Relationship between students' expectation and satisfaction towards coursework

Table 3. Relationship between respondents' expectation and satisfaction towards coursework

Variable	Correlation coefficient	Description
Correlation of expectation with satisfaction	.478	Moderate positive correlation

Source: Created by author

Expectations and satisfaction have a moderately positive relationship (.478), according to the Spearman correlation result in Table 3. Ph.D. students who hold higher expectations generally report a moderate level of satisfaction with their coursework. This finding aligns with the research of Umbit and Taat (2016), who also identified a positive correlation between students' expectations and their overall satisfaction. Students are more satisfied when their expectations are fulfilled. However, failure to meet expectations can lead to a poorer learning experience and decreased satisfaction (Golap et al., 2021).

Factors Influencing Expectation and Satisfaction in PhD Coursework:

Several key themes which we get from one-to-one interaction with students through a semi structured interview:

- Guidance: The supervisor's role is a key factor influencing Ph.D. student satisfaction. Research shows that students who receive consistent and constructive feedback from their supervisors tend to be more satisfied with their progress and have a lower risk of leaving their programs (Gurr, 2001). In contrast, students who anticipated more guidance than they actually received often experienced dissatisfaction, accompanied by frustration and uncertainty.
- Institutional Support: Access to institutional resources—like libraries, research materials, and funding opportunities—greatly impacts PhD students' satisfaction. Research indicates that students who view their institutions as supportive are more likely to feel satisfied with their programs and achieve their academic objectives. (Golde ,2005).
- Peer Interaction and Social Integration: A strong feeling of belongingness and support from peers within a PhD program plays a major role in shaping student satisfaction.

Students who expected to form close working relationships with peers but encountered a more competitive or isolating environment often reported dissatisfaction.

- **Work-Life Balance:** PhD students frequently enter their programs with expectations about how they will manage the demands of coursework, research, and personal life. When these expectations are unrealistic, students often experience stress and dissatisfaction. A Research indicates that students who can maintain a balance between their academic and personal lives tend to be more satisfied with their programs (Pyhältö et.al, 2009).
- **Career Preparation:** PhD students frequently anticipate that their programs will equip them for both academic and non-academic career paths. When these expectations are not met—such as when students feel their coursework is overly theoretical and lacks practical application—they tend to report lower satisfaction levels. Ph.D. students who felt that their programs were effectively preparing them for their future careers reported much higher satisfaction in contrast to those who did not (A survey by the Council of Graduate Schools, 2015).

Suggestions for improving coursework design:

1. Align with Clear Learning Objectives:

Using a backward-planning method, teachers can create clear, measurable goals for what students should learn, based on a system like Bloom's Taxonomy to make sure the goals challenge students' thinking. Begin by identifying the knowledge and skills students should acquire or can capable to demonstrate by the end of the coursework. Every activity, test, and material should work together to help students reach these goals. For example, in a history class, a goal could be: "Students will study original documents to understand important events." Assignments, like writing essays about those documents, should support this goal, making the learning experience focused and meaningful.

2. Incorporate Active Learning Strategies:

One way to make learning more interesting and effective is to move away from traditional lectures where students just sit and listen. Instead, teachers can use active learning methods like solving real-life problems, discussing case studies, working in groups, or using the flipped classroom model. In this approach, students are given some reading materials or videos to go

through before class. Then, during class time, they work together to solve problems, discuss ideas, or even have debates. For example, in a science class, instead of just explaining a concept, the teacher can give students a set of data to analyse in groups. This not only helps them understand the topic better but also builds teamwork and critical thinking skills.

3. Promote Universal Design for Learning (UDL):

To support all types of learners in the classroom, it's important to design lessons that give students different ways to learn and show what they know. Not everyone learns the same way—some students prefer reading, others learn better by watching videos or listening to audio. Similarly, students may feel more comfortable expressing their understanding through writing, speaking, or creating visuals. Teachers can help by offering choices, like letting students read a text or watch a video, and allowing them to complete assignments in different formats, such as writing an essay, making a presentation, or designing a poster or infographic. This makes learning more inclusive and helps every student succeed in their own way.

4. Integrate Technology Thoughtfully:

Using digital tools can make learning more fun, engaging, and effective for students. Teachers can use platforms like Canvas or Moodle to share lessons, collect assignments, and give feedback all in one place. Interactive platforms such as Kahoot allow teachers to design engaging quizzes that both entertain students and assess their comprehension. For subjects that need hands-on practice, like science or math, virtual labs and apps like GeoGebra can help students explore and understand difficult concepts in an interactive way. These tools not only make learning easier but also help teachers give personalized support based on each student's progress.

5. Scaffold Learning for Mastery:

When students are given big or difficult tasks, it can feel overwhelming. A good way to help is by breaking the task into smaller, manageable steps and giving support at each stage. For example, if students have to write a research paper, the teacher can guide them through each part—first choosing a topic, then finding sources, making an outline, writing a draft, and finally submitting the final paper. Along the way, the teacher can give feedback and use tools like rubrics or templates to show what is expected. In a writing class, students might be given

sentence starters or an outline format to help organize their thoughts. This step-by-step approach makes big tasks less scary and helps students build confidence and do better work.

Conclusion:

The literature on student expectation and satisfaction reveals that unmet expectations are a significant source of dissatisfaction among PhD students, with implications for both student well-being and institutional retention rates. Key factors influencing satisfaction include supervision quality, institutional support, peer interaction, work-life balance, and career preparation. However, there are notable gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the expectation and satisfaction of PhD students outside of Western contexts and limited longitudinal, cross-disciplinary studies.

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