

## Exploring dissertation writing trends in doctoral education: Identifying gaps for academic support

Daga, Marife N. ✉

Leyte Normal University – Tacloban City, Philippines ([marifen.daga@lnu.edu.ph](mailto:marifen.daga@lnu.edu.ph))

Vivero, Perlita M.

Leyte Normal University – Tacloban City, Philippines ([pearl\\_67@lnu.edu.ph](mailto:pearl_67@lnu.edu.ph))



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### Abstract

Utilizing trend analysis of prevailing institutional data of Doctor of Education in Educational Administration (EdD EdAd) students enrolled in dissertation writing, this study has sought the doctorate students' dissertation writing trends in terms of enrolment status, enrolment gaps, transition from passing the comprehensive examination to Dissertation Writing 1; transition from Dissertation Writing 1 to Dissertation Writing 2; and based on the emerging trends, the other goal was to identify areas needing assistance, intervention or academic support. As to enrolment trend, findings revealed notable gaps, with 39% of students approaching the maximum duration permitted for their graduate studies. In terms of transitioning to dissertation writing, more than 50% have smoothly transitioned from their success in the comprehensive examinations to Dissertation Writing 1 but were found stagnating while writing their dissertation proposals. Some were found to have transitioned smoothly from Dissertation Writing 1 to Dissertation Writing 2 without a trace of enrolment gap in the entire scholastic journey but notably, a cluster of students have stopped for five consecutive terms in Dissertation Writing 2. The shaped scenario by the trend analysis has mainly pinned the phenomenon of stagnation which may lead to implications on institutional policy redirection in terms of dissertation writing and academic support in general. The findings of the study, particularly the dissertation writing trends are intended for utilization in the second phase which is on determining the realities behind dissertation writing stagnation and eventually propose an intervention scheme as a form of academic support.

**Keywords:** dissertation writing, exploration, doctoral education, trend analysis, academic support

## **Exploring dissertation writing trends in doctoral education: Identifying gaps for academic support**

### **1. Introduction**

Academic writing as attributed by researches is collectively defined as an organized and systematic scientific writing utilized for research writing in the higher education levels (Al-Mubarak, 2017). General agreement, though, has the stance that academic writing requires the use of formal language by researchers and students as they express novel thoughts, express their perspectives, and cite studies from scholarly works (Labaree, 2009 in Alostath, 2021). Recently, graduate students who demonstrate poor academic writing skills are increasing due to weak confidence; they fear negative feedback; others do not have access to quality research sources; some are indecisive on a research problem; and most students are generally unskilled in the written craft (Holmes et al., 2018; Collins, 2015).

From the above claimed nature of academic writing in higher education and the challenges that go with it, Leming (1977) in Alostath (2021) accentuated the importance of supporting graduate students' academic writing and prepare them for professional life with Alostath (2021) calling out for the design a specialized course to assist graduate students in the enhancement of their writing skills. Attributive to Akyürek and Afacan (2018), graduate education equates to an extensive learning process where students follow critical courses, conduct research and produce a dissertation. Completing a research study is perceived as a daunting task for students as they acquire in-depth knowledge in the related field and plan the study according to an appropriate research design (Qasem & Zayid, 2019).

Completion of a postgraduate dissertation is influenced by significant factors. These include ones that are related to the student (such as personal issues and level of academic competency) and the institution (Wanasinghe, 2020). The personal life of a postgraduate student has a strong impact on their ability to complete a dissertation successfully. Issues related to personal concerns, domestic responsibilities, financial state, employment, and health can have their substantial impact; moreover, dwindling interest in the selected research topic and shifts in career may also cause some effect (Wright, 2003.)

Within students' education program, they may also encounter academic issues such as intrusive supervisors, difficulty in determining a research problem and topic as well as difficulties in obtaining legal permission to conduct the study (Alam, 2013). Institutional factors that affect students' completion of their dissertation include the availability of concurrence, guidance, funds, and physical facilities for the students (Safari et al., 2015). Factors related to the research supervisor, representative of the institution, include the nature of the student-supervisor relationship, supervisor's knowledge and interest in the area of study, regular contact between student and supervisor as well as provision of timely feedback (Yousefi et al., 2015). Matin and Khan (2017) state that students not having adequate discussions with supervisors on a regular basis can affect their completion of postgraduate research. Apart from this, the research environment, peer support, and facilities available are some of the environmental factors that affect postgraduate students' completion of research studies.

Utilizing the prevailing data from the Information Technology Support (ITS) office of all Doctor of Education in Educational Administration (EdD EdAd) students enrolled in dissertation writing for academic year 2023-2024 and summer term of 2024, this study was guided by the following interrogatives: 1. What are the dissertation writing trends in terms of the following? 1.1 enrolment status; 1.2 enrolment gaps; 1.3 transition from passing the comprehensive exam to Dissertation Writing 1; 1.4 transition from DW 1 to DW2; 2. Based on the trends, what inputs to student academic support can be identified? Having found these have aided in determining the critical factors to address in the subsequent phase of this study.

## 2. Review of Literature

Claimed by Akyürek and Afacan (2018) in Wanasinghe, (2020), graduate education requires an extensive learning process where learners follow cerebral courses, conduct research and write a dissertation. Conducting a research study is a daunting work in which students bring with them an in-depth knowledge in the related field and plan the study according to a relevant research method and design (Qasem & Zayid, 2019). The final output of the research study is expected to reflect originality, critical and independent thinking, and integrates rigorous and robust documentation through a well-prepared structure (Matin & Khan, 2017). Completion of a postgraduate dissertation is influenced by different factors which include those related to the student (such as personal issues and level of academic competency) and those of the institution. For teachers, obtaining a bachelor's degree represents an important turning point in their academic careers and is unquestionably a positive step forward. Even while earning a bachelor's degree is an impressive accomplishment, it frequently is not enough to make the most impact on student's lives. Thus, upgrading themselves through enrollment in graduate programs equips them with an advanced technical understanding of their subject matter (Patulin, 2023).

## 3. Methodology

Trend analysis was applied as a method of collecting data wherein it utilizes historical data as well as current data sets (<https://www.quantilope.com/1/29/24>) to determine how the research subjects behave and how institutions react. Trend analysis focuses on institutional trends over a period of time and can be used as an ongoing resource to keep ahead of curriculum changes. To determine the trend of the current enrollees in Dissertation Writing, data were taken from the enrolment record of the identified subjects from having passed the comprehensive examination to their entry enrolment in Dissertation Writing 1 onwards up to their eventual completion of the degree. In terms of identifying who will be included in the study, the EdD-EdAd students who are enrolled in Dissertation Writing 1 and Dissertation Writing 2 for the first, second and summer terms of the school year 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study, particularly on the dissertation writing trends concerning students enrolled in Dissertation Writing 1 and Dissertation Writing 2.

***Dissertation Writing Trends*** - The dissertation writing trends are based on the enrolment records of the EdD-EdAd students in Dissertation Writing 1 (DW 1) and Dissertation Writing 2 (DW 2) from the time they enrolled in these subjects up to the current enrolment while the study was conducted, that is Summer Term of SY 2022-2023. Dissertation writing trends discusses the enrolment status, enrolment gaps, transition from passing the comprehensive examinations to dissertation writing 1, and transition from DW 1 to DW 2.

***Enrolment Status*** - There are fifteen (15) EdD-EdAd students traced as actively enrolled in dissertation writing for the last two school years, including summer of SY 2023-24 when the study was conducted. Thirteen (13) of these students are on their Dissertation Writing 1 while two (2) of them are already enrolled in Dissertation Writing 2. Meaning, these students enrolled in DW2 have already gone through proposal hearing and final writing of the revised proposal based on the suggestions of the panel members and got the go signal for the collection of data. From the thirteen students identified as having Dissertation Writing 1, three of them are currently enrolled in summer for SY 2023-2024 while the other 12 have stopped enrolling DW 1 in the previous 2<sup>nd</sup> semester or in the first semester of SY 2023-2024. Meanwhile, the two identified DW 2 students did not enrol in summer of SY 2023-2024. The specific data on enrolment status are provided in Table 1.

***Enrolment Gaps*** - Based on the discussion about the enrolment status of the EdD-EdAd students, it could be said that there are enrolment gaps identified among those taking DW 1 and DW 2 subjects. In Table 2, it is specifically shown that out of the 13 students taking DW1, eight (8) of them have enrolled the subject within the range of 1 to 5 academic terms, none was found as having enrolled within the range of 6 to 10 academic terms,

one (1) enrolled for 15 academic terms, three (3) have enrolled for number of academic terms within the range of 16-20, and one of them have enrolled for 21 academic terms.

**Table 1***Enrolment Distribution of the EdD-EdAd DW Students*

Dissertation Writing Subjects	Number of Enrolees	Percentage Distribution
Dissertation Writing 1	13	86.67 %
Dissertation Writing 2	2	13.33 %
Total	15	100%

The status of students found to have been enrolled in DW1 for already 5 to 21 academic terms is deemed alarming. This results need validation and be considered a priority in terms of conducting further studies to find out the reasons why these students are stagnating in dissertation writing by answering the questions: What are holding them to successfully write their dissertation proposals? What academic support do they need to continue and complete their dissertation proposals?

As regards to the number of academic terms that DW 1 students were noted to have stopped enrolling the subject, the data presented in Table 2, reveal that there are nine (9) of them who stopped enrolling DW1 ranging from 1-5 academic terms and 2 fall under the range 6-10. Meaning, they have stopped dissertation writing for certain number of academic terms. The most striking among the results is the prevalence of a DW1 student who stopped enrolling the subject for 31 academic terms already. The scholastic journey of these students, particularly in dissertation writing is worth reviewing so that they can be helped or appropriate academic support can be provided to them. Studying further this situation of Dissertation Writing 1 students will help findings ways such that their experiences will not happen or will be avoided to happen among next set of DW1 students.

**Table 2***Enrolment Gaps among EdD-EdAd DW1 Students*

Dissertation Writing 1 Students (DW1S)	Actual Number of Terms Not Enrolled before DW1	Number of Terms Taken for DW1	Number of Terms Not Enrolled/Stopped Enrolling in DW1 (Enrolment Gaps)
DWS-1	0	3	2
DWS-2	0	21	3
DWS-3	0	15	3
DWS-4	25	2	0
DWS-5	1	18	6
DWS-6	1	5	31
DWS-7	0	16	4
DWS-8	1	3	5
DWS-9	0	1	1
DWS-10	0	3	1
DWS-11	20	2	9
DWS-12	0	3	1
DWS-13	0	19	5

As regards to the two identified students enrolled in Dissertation Writing 2, both are found to have enrolled in the subject for three academic terms already and one of them stopped enrolling the subject for five academic terms, as reflected in Table 3. Enrolment in Dissertation Writing 2 for 3 academic terms is also something that need attention because a particular student can possibly finish Dissertation Writing 2 within a semester, so the question is still on the reasons why the range of time spent to complete the dissertation is lengthened and why these students stopped dissertation writing for a while as could be gleaned from their enrolment data in Table 3.

**Table 3***Enrolment Gaps among EdD-EdAd DW2 Students*

Dissertation Writing 2 Students (DW1S)	Actual Number of Terms Not Enrolled before DW2	Number of Terms Taken for DW2	Number of Terms Not Enrolled/Stopped Enrolling in DW2 (Enrolment Gaps)
DWS-1	0	3	1
DWS-2	1	3	5

## 5. Transition from Passing the Comprehensive Examinations to Dissertation Writing 1

This section discusses the enrolment status of the dissertation writing students, particularly after they have passed the comprehensive examinations up to the time they enrolled in Dissertation Writing 1. In this study, it is considered as the transition period from passing the Comprehensive Examinations to Dissertation Writing 1. Based on the data provided in Tables 2, it can be discussed that there are 61.54% or 8 out of 13 EdD-EdAd DW1 students who transitioned to DW1 immediately after passing the comprehensive examinations. Meaning, there was no enrolment gap found in the transition period among these students. Meanwhile, there were three (3) among them who stopped first for one academic term before enrolling in Dissertation Writing 1.

**Transition from DW 1 to DW2** - In terms of transition from DW1 to DW2, this section highlights the discussion on the status of the dissertation writing students, particularly on their enrolment transition. One of the two students on DW2 immediately enrolled in the subject after finishing DW1 which is indicated by the successful proposal hearing with a rating of 75% and above, including the submission of the revised dissertation proposal based on the suggestions of the panel of examiners. The other one stopped first for one (1) academic term before proceeding or enrolling in DW2. There is the possibility that this happened because this student extended time in revising one's dissertation proposal after the proposal hearing. However, this is just a theory that needs validation as to the truth behind the delayed transition from DW1 to DW2. Hence, the need to conduct further investigation on this concern which again may turn into student's need for academic support in order to comply with academic requirements particularly, the revised dissertation proposal on time.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

More than fifty percent of the dissertation writing students were found to have transitioned immediately from passing their comprehensive examinations to DW1 but were found stagnating while they are already writing their dissertation proposals. Hence, the recommendation to conduct further study to look into the reasons why they stagnate in order to identify and provide them the most suitable academic support. Fifty percent of the DW2 students were found to have transitioned immediately from DW1 without a trace of stopping one's scholastic journey, particularly in dissertation writing. However, fifty percent was found to have stopped for 5 consecutive academic terms in DW2. Hence, the recommendation to conduct a follow-up study to find out the reasons behind this finding with the end-in-view of providing the most needed academic support.

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