

Graduate Students' Thesis Writing Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Support Needs for Policy Reform

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Abstract. This study examined the lived experiences of graduate students in thesis writing, focusing on their perceptions, strategies, and needs for institutional support. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with master's students. Findings revealed that thesis writing is a complex process influenced by challenges such as time management difficulties, limited resources, financial constraints, and emotional stress. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated resilience through adaptive strategies, including effective time management, building support networks, leveraging technological tools, and maintaining open communication with advisers. Participants emphasized the importance of institutional support, including structured research seminars, faculty mentorship, and access to academic resources, as well as psychosocial support, such as mental health initiatives and time management workshops. The study highlights the importance of a comprehensive educational environment that combines pedagogical, technological, and emotional support to enhance the thesis writing experience. Based on these findings, recommendations include faculty mentor training, targeted writing workshops, expanded research resources, and peer writing groups to improve thesis completion and academic writing proficiency.

Keywords: Academic challenges; Graduate students; Institutional support; Phenomenological study; Thesis writing

1.0 Introduction

Graduate education places great importance on academic writing, with the thesis serving as the final requirement that demonstrates scholarly ability and fosters critical thinking and research identity. More than a requirement for graduation, thesis writing is an important step that helps graduate students become contributors to knowledge. Across higher education systems worldwide, thesis writing is recognized as both a rewarding and highly challenging endeavor. Graduate students often face time constraints, financial pressures, and the challenge of balancing their studies with personal and professional responsibilities (Yunus & Bachtiar, 2025). While the process can help students gain confidence and resilience, it is also marked by high levels of stress and uncertainty.

To address these challenges, many higher education institutions have introduced different forms of academic support. These include writing centers, peer groups, mentoring programs, and thesis boot camps, which have been found to reduce writing anxiety and encourage collaboration (de Caux & Pretorius, 2024). More recent

studies also emphasize the importance of effective mentoring and guided coaching, particularly when they result in meaningful learning outcomes (Vican et al., 2020). These findings demonstrate that institutional support is not only essential for enhancing academic performance but also crucial for helping students maintain emotional well-being and persistence.

Despite these interventions, many students still struggle with thesis writing. Research indicates that graduate students frequently experience emotional exhaustion, struggle with time management, and face difficulties in organizing their literature reviews. These demands reduce writing motivation and increase anxiety, especially when students are balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities (Single and Reis, 2023; Jones-Mensah & Hilton, 2024). Thesis writing is often experienced as an isolating process, leading to self-doubt and a decline in confidence. Students employ various coping strategies, including self-directed time management, iterative writing, and breaking tasks into smaller steps. Mentoring relationships and peer collaboration also play important roles in sustaining motivation and reducing isolation (Alostath, 2021). These strategies reflect self-regulated learning where support from peers and mentors strengthens confidence and achievement.

However, personal strategies alone are often not enough. Studies indicate that institutional tools and resources, such as access to research databases, plagiarism detection software, and training in research methods, are essential; however, these are not equally available across institutions (Jones-Mensah & Hilton, 2024). Beyond technical resources, psychosocial support, including stress management programs, peer writing groups, and mental health services, is also important in reducing the burden of thesis writing (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Yunus & Bachtiar, 2025). At the same time, the role of advisers remains critical. Good mentorship does not only involve technical guidance but also emotional understanding and sensitivity. The quality of adviser-adviser relationships has a substantial impact on writing confidence and thesis completion rates (Opengart & Bierema, 2015; Oddone Paolucci et al., 2021).

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has introduced reforms, such as CHED Memorandum Order No. 15, s–2019, which promotes quality assurance and research productivity in graduate programs. However, students in public institutions, especially those located outside large cities, still face significant obstacles. These include limited access to academic resources, inconsistent advisement, and a lack of training in advanced research methods (Casanova, 2021). While many students exhibit a positive outlook toward research, they also report difficulties related to financial strain, selecting topics, and locating relevant literature.

These challenges are even more pressing in regional institutions. In Region XI, for example, graduate students in state colleges, such as those in Davao del Sur, often manage jobs, family roles, and studies simultaneously, while receiving only limited institutional support. Writing seminars and adviser consultations are occasionally offered, but they are irregular and insufficient to address the students' needs. Scholars argue that solutions tailored to the local context are necessary to enhance research culture and strengthen mentoring practices in these settings (Capulso et al., 2024; Aparecio & Reis, 2023).

Despite the increasing number of studies on thesis writing, gaps remain. Most research continues to focus on large and research-intensive universities, leaving smaller state colleges and regional institutions underrepresented. Moreover, much of the existing literature discusses institutional problems but does not sufficiently explore the voices of students themselves. As Jones-Mensah and Hilton (2024) explain, thesis writing is often emotionally demanding; yet, the perspectives of students from less privileged schools are rarely included in research and policy discussions. Without these voices, it is not easy to design programs that directly respond to students' real experiences and needs.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of graduate students enrolled in thesis writing courses in state colleges. Using a phenomenological approach, this study examines how students perceive their thesis writing journey, the coping strategies they employ, and the institutional and policy support they find most helpful. By centering the voices of graduate students in underserved contexts, this research provides local and evidence-based insights into the complex nature of thesis writing. Its findings aim to inform educational policy and practice by showing how institutional conditions, academic culture, and student efforts come together to shape persistence and success in graduate education.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to examine the lived experiences of graduate students enrolled in thesis writing courses. IPA was chosen because it focuses on how individuals make sense of their experiences in a specific context (Robinson & Williams, 2024). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to capture the essence of an experience, IPA emphasizes both participants' reflections and the researcher's interpretation of meaning. This approach suited the research objectives: (1) to explore how graduate students perceive and interpret their thesis writing journey, (2) to identify coping strategies used to address challenges, and (3) to determine institutional interventions and policies perceived as most effective in supporting academic success. IPA facilitated a deep and nuanced exploration of these themes by acknowledging that experiences are shaped by both personal meaning-making and interaction with academic structures (Oxley, 2016).

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which is appropriate for IPA as it targets individuals who can provide rich, first-hand accounts of the phenomenon. The study involved graduate students in education programs at a state college in Davao del Sur who were actively enrolled in thesis writing courses during the data collection period. This ensured contemporaneous experience of the phenomenon, which is critical for IPA (Eatough & Smith, 2015).

Inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) be officially enrolled in a graduate education program, (2) be currently taking or completing a thesis writing course, (3) have progressed beyond the proposal stage to ensure substantive experience, and (4) be willing to participate in in-depth interviews in English, Filipino, or Cebuano. Exclusion criteria eliminated students who (1) had already defended their thesis, (2) were enrolled in non-thesis tracks, or (3) were on academic leave during the study.

The final sample consisted of ten participants. This small number supported idiographic analysis of individual cases, while allowing for the identification of shared meanings, consistent with IPA's emphasis on depth over breadth. Participants represented a diverse range of demographic backgrounds, enriching the study with varied perspectives.

2.3 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed in alignment with the research objectives. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences in writing their thesis. Questions focused on four primary areas: (1) perceptions of the thesis writing process, (2) academic and emotional challenges encountered, (3) coping strategies and support systems utilized, and (4) recommendations for institutional and policy improvements. The open-ended format ensured flexibility, allowing participants to elaborate on personal meanings while keeping the discussion focused on the phenomenon of interest. Field experts reviewed the interview guide to ensure content validity and appropriateness for graduate-level participants.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures and asked to sign an informed consent form. Interviews were conducted in settings convenient to participants, either face-to-face or online. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher employed member checking, allowing participants to review their transcripts to confirm accuracy. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details, which helped in interpreting the meaning behind participants' narratives (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the systematic steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The interview transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which began with repeated readings and the coding of significant statements to identify patterns of meaning. Codes were then organized into categories and clustered into themes that reflected both individual and shared understandings of the thesis writing experience. To ensure consistency, responses initially expressed in Filipino or Cebuano were translated into English and verified for accuracy before coding. The double hermeneutic of IPA was observed, and

NVivo software was employed to systematically organize and document the analytic process, thereby enhancing rigor and credibility.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research guidelines to protect participants and maintain the integrity of the research. All participants were informed of the study’s purpose and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, with informed consent obtained before the interviews. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms replaced real names, and all identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Digital files, including audio recordings and transcripts, were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Reflexivity was maintained by keeping a reflexive journal to monitor potential biases and ensure that interpretations remained faithful to participants’ lived experiences (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). By upholding ethical standards and integrating reflexive practices, the study provided credible and respectful insights into the challenges and meaning-making processes of graduate students in thesis writing.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The process of writing a thesis emerged as a profoundly personal and multifaceted journey for graduate students, filled with both struggles and moments of growth. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, participants’ narratives revealed how academic, personal, and institutional contexts shaped their meaning-making of the thesis process. While challenges often dominated their accounts, the students also found strength in support networks and moments of accomplishment. The emergent themes are organized into two broad categories: Common Challenges in Thesis Writing and Positive Aspects, each with corresponding subthemes. Table 1 presents the emergent themes and sub-themes derived from the analysis of interview data, highlighting the specific challenges students face and the positive aspects that contribute to their resilience and motivation throughout the thesis journey.

Table 1. Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes on Graduate Students’ Thesis Writing Experiences		
Theme	Sub-Theme	Core Ideas
Common Challenges in Thesis Writing	Time Management Difficulties	Balancing responsibilities as students, professionals, and family members is a struggle.
	Financial Constraints	Financial difficulties due to limited resources for travel and research-related expenses.
	Data Gathering Difficulties	Issues with accessing resources, formatting, and conducting studies in different schools.
	Emotional Stress	The combined pressure of academic, financial, and personal obligations takes a toll.
	Support System	Guidance from advisers and institutional staff plays a crucial role in this process.
Positive aspects	Sense of Achievement	Sense of Achievement.

3.1 Common Challenges Encountered During the Thesis Journey

The experiences of participants in this study show that thesis writing is not only an academic requirement but also a profoundly personal journey shaped by multiple challenges. For many graduate students, the process was marked by struggles that extended beyond intellectual tasks into daily life. Their accounts illustrate that academic work was intertwined with family responsibilities, financial pressures, professional obligations, and emotional demands. These findings reveal that thesis writing is more than a technical undertaking. It is a lived experience where personal, social, and institutional realities converge. The primary difficulties identified in this study were related to time management, financial constraints, data collection, and emotional stress.

Time Management Difficulties

One of the most significant struggles described by participants was managing their time effectively. Many of them were simultaneously working professionals, parents, and graduate students. Balancing multiple roles created a persistent conflict between personal, professional, and academic responsibilities. As a result, thesis work often became secondary to more immediate duties, such as teaching, fulfilling household obligations, and fulfilling community roles.

The participants clearly articulated this struggle:

"Managing my time as a mother, teacher, and student was one of the obstacles." (PTW9)

"My experiences with thesis writing were very challenging for me because I do multitasking both from work and my schooling." (PTW4)

These reflections demonstrate that thesis writing often requires sacrifices in rest, leisure, and even family time. Students expressed how the lack of uninterrupted time disrupted their concentration, leading to delays and increased stress. For many, the constant shifting between roles left them feeling emotionally drained and unable to sustain effort in their research. The findings align with those of Saleem et al. (2022) and Pangket et al. (2023), who both emphasized that fragmented schedules negatively impact the quality of research output and prolong the completion of graduate programs. Yunus (2025) further argued that time management is not merely a matter of personal discipline but is also shaped by institutional structures such as workload distribution, academic policies, and program timelines. Similarly, Castulo et al. (2025) highlighted that in the Philippine context, graduate students who are also teachers experience greater difficulty with deadlines because their academic requirements coincide with professional duties such as class preparation, grading, and administrative reporting.

From an interpretive standpoint, participants' accounts reflect not only individual struggles but also the broader reality that thesis writing is embedded within competing social and institutional contexts. Their narratives reveal a recurring tension between personal ambition and external demands, suggesting that the challenge of time management is as much structural as it is personal. In conclusion, these insights demonstrate that institutions play a crucial role in enabling graduate students to manage their time effectively. Practical measures, such as more flexible deadlines, dedicated thesis-writing workshops, reduced teaching loads during research semesters, and academic calendars that align with professional obligations, could mitigate these challenges. By recognizing the interplay between institutional expectations and personal responsibilities, graduate programs can better empower students to complete their theses without compromising their well-being or professional duties.

Financial Constraints

Another recurring challenge identified in the participants' accounts was financial strain. While pursuing their graduate studies, many participants were simultaneously supporting families, often relying on limited teacher salaries. The costs associated with thesis work, such as transportation to research sites, reproduction of survey tools, printing and binding of manuscripts, and even access to academic resources, imposed a significant burden that extended beyond the usual expenses of daily living.

The participants gave clear voice to this concern:

"Budget has always been an issue because aside from supporting my family, I also need to spend on transportation, research tools, and getting permission to leave school duties." (PTW5)

"It is really challenging to balance everything because it drains you physically, mentally, and most of all financially, especially when you have to allocate funds for research and family needs." (PTW2)

These reflections highlight that the financial challenges experienced by graduate students were not incidental but deeply embedded in the very structure of thesis writing. Expenses were not limited to academic necessities but were also compounded by bureaucratic requirements, such as securing permits to leave teaching posts to conduct data gathering. This situation often delayed progress, caused frustration, and heightened emotional stress. This finding aligns with Feizi's (2024) observation that financial insecurity among graduate students is strongly correlated with delayed thesis completion, lower academic productivity, and increased risk of dropout. Castulo et al. (2025) further emphasized that in the Philippine context, financial constraints lead to what they termed "academic strain," a condition in which the student's intrinsic motivation to complete their studies is undermined by their inability to meet research-related expenses. This makes thesis writing not only an intellectual journey but also a financial test of endurance.

Viewed through an interpretative lens, the students' narratives reflect the intersection of academic aspiration and

socioeconomic realities. Thesis writing was experienced not merely as a scholarly endeavor but as an additional financial responsibility competing with family needs, daily survival, and professional obligations. The exhaustion described by participants was not only physical and mental but also symbolic of the cumulative weight of systemic inequities that made advanced education less accessible to those with limited means.

In light of these, institutions have an essential role in easing financial barriers. Support mechanisms, such as small research grants, subsidies for printing and transportation, and partnerships with schools or local agencies, could provide meaningful relief by reducing logistical costs. By addressing these barriers, graduate programs can ensure that thesis completion is determined by academic ability and perseverance rather than by economic capacity. Ultimately, reducing financial burdens can foster greater equity in higher education and strengthen students' resolve to complete their graduate studies successfully.

Data Gathering Difficulties

Participants identified data collection as one of the most complex and demanding parts of the thesis journey. Beyond the intellectual requirements of designing research instruments and understanding methodologies, students faced practical barriers that made the process stressful and exhausting. Many encountered difficulties obtaining relevant literature, securing institutional permits, and conducting research across multiple school sites. These challenges were compounded by the need to balance their roles as teachers and graduate students, making fieldwork particularly burdensome.

The participants shared these experiences in their own words:

"The most challenging part is the data gathering because it required me to travel to different schools, which was very time-consuming and exhausting." (PTW3)

"It was difficult to find related studies on my topic, and I had to spend long hours searching in libraries and online databases." (PTW7)

These reflections show that the data collection process was not only physically demanding but also intellectually challenging. Students often had to travel across different schools, which required time, effort, and financial resources. At the same time, they struggled to find relevant studies to frame their research. The difficulty was therefore twofold: overcoming external barriers, such as travel and institutional permits, and addressing internal challenges, including limited skills in reviewing and synthesizing literature. Scholars have noted similar patterns in graduate students' experiences. Afra et al. (2024) and Khozaei Ravari (2023) argued that inadequate training in research methods often leaves students unprepared for the complexities of fieldwork, particularly when handling large amounts of data or meeting institutional requirements. Rong'uno (2016) further highlighted that bureaucratic delays in schools and offices contribute to challenges in data collection, as students often have to wait long periods to secure approval to conduct surveys or interviews. In the Philippine context, where schools are already burdened with administrative tasks, graduate students are often made to compete for limited institutional attention, making the data-gathering phase even more difficult.

These findings reveal that the struggle with data collection is not merely a matter of individual shortcomings but reflects broader systemic and structural issues. Limited access to updated research databases, rigid bureaucratic procedures, and inadequate mentoring in the early stages of thesis preparation all serve to intensify the burden on students. The consequence is that many experience prolonged delays, reduced motivation, and increased stress during this phase. From an institutional perspective, these challenges suggest the importance of strengthening research support mechanisms within graduate programs. Targeted workshops on data gathering and analysis, expanded access to academic resources and digital libraries, and structured mentoring focused on fieldwork could significantly ease these burdens. Simplifying permission procedures within schools and partner institutions would also ensure that students can collect data without unnecessary bureaucratic delays. By addressing these barriers, graduate programs can help students navigate the complexities of research more effectively, enabling them to focus on the intellectual contributions of their work rather than being hindered by logistical and procedural obstacles.

Emotional Stress

The emotional dimension of thesis writing emerged as one of the most profound challenges described by

participants. Beyond the academic and technical demands, students shared how the process weighed heavily on their mental and emotional well-being. Many expressed feelings of anxiety, exhaustion, and self-doubt. For working graduate students who were simultaneously balancing family responsibilities and professional obligations, the pressure to complete a thesis was often overwhelming.

The participants described their experiences in their own words:

"The stress and anxiety I felt during thesis writing were very intense, because the pressure of meeting deadlines consumed much of my peace of mind." (PTW6)

"As someone who does not have much profound knowledge in thesis writing, the process was extremely challenging, making me question my capabilities many times." (PTW7)

These reflections illustrate that thesis writing is not only an intellectual endeavor but also an emotional journey. Students carried the weight of expectations while struggling with fear of failure and doubts about their competence. The long hours, competing responsibilities, and constant deadlines intensified feelings of fatigue and discouragement. Such emotional struggles often became invisible burdens, affecting their motivation and pace of progress. Scholars have noted the central role of emotional stress in graduate students' experiences. Badenhorst (2018) described this as the emotional labor of academic work, in which feelings of inadequacy, stress, and vulnerability are deeply intertwined with the process of producing scholarly writing. Similarly, Gopee and Deane (2013) emphasized that higher education institutions frequently overlook students' emotional well-being, even though it strongly influences the quality of their work and the likelihood of completing their thesis. More recent studies echo this concern, noting that unmanaged emotional stress often leads to burnout and, in some cases, attrition among graduate students (Feizi, 2024; Castulo et al., 2025).

The accounts in this study demonstrate that the emotional challenges of thesis writing cannot be dismissed as mere personal struggles; instead, they should be understood as integral to the academic process. The demands of research, when combined with external responsibilities and limited support systems, create an environment where stress becomes inevitable. Without adequate coping mechanisms and institutional support, students are left vulnerable to exhaustion and disengagement. These findings suggest that graduate programs should adopt a more holistic approach to thesis supervision and student support. Beyond academic guidance, there is a need for accessible counseling services, peer support groups, and faculty mentorship that acknowledge the emotional aspects of the research journey. Creating spaces where students can openly share their struggles without stigma can foster resilience and persistence. By recognizing and addressing the affective side of thesis writing, graduate schools can empower students not only to survive the process but to thrive in it.

3.2 Positive Aspects of the Thesis Experience

Despite the many challenges encountered during the thesis process, participants also reflected on meaningful and encouraging aspects of their journey. These positive experiences revealed how sources of support and a growing sense of academic and personal fulfillment contributed to their perseverance, ultimately leading to their success. Two core sub-themes emerged from their narratives: the Support System and the Sense of Achievement.

Support System

An essential facilitator in the thesis-writing journey was a dependable support system. Participants shared how the encouragement and expertise of thesis advisers, the cooperation of institutional staff, and the emotional reassurance from peers and loved ones made a significant difference in helping them stay on track despite difficulties.

Their voices reflect this reality:

"My adviser has been excellent in guiding me to improve my manuscript, patiently pointing out what needs revision and encouraging me to keep improving." (PTW1)

"My close friend encouraged me to keep going whenever I felt like giving up, always reminding me that God will provide in His time." (PTW10)

These statements affirm the importance of both social and academic encouragement in sustaining graduate

students' motivation. A supportive thesis adviser, in particular, was frequently cited as a pivotal figure who not only guided the academic process but also boosted morale during moments of doubt. Some participants even referred to their advisers and peers in familial terms, suggesting a sense of belonging and mentorship that transcended formal academic roles. This finding aligns with Bagaka et al. (2015), who argued that strong mentoring relationships function as protective factors that buffer students from stress while increasing their engagement in research. Similarly, Lee (2019) highlighted the value of "relational advising," where the advisory process integrates cognitive guidance with emotional support, thereby promoting holistic growth and development. More recent studies also confirm that structured mentoring and peer support networks are associated with higher completion rates and more positive student well-being (Sverdlik et al., 2020; De Clercq et al., 2022).

The implication here is that graduate programs must deliberately strengthen systems of support. Adviser training should emphasize relational competence, empathy, and accessibility, while institutions could also institutionalize peer mentoring systems, writing circles, or structured consultation schedules. Such initiatives formalize the support structures that help students navigate research difficulties with confidence and resilience.

Sense of Achievement

Despite the hardships, participants consistently expressed a deep sense of accomplishment upon completing their thesis. The successful culmination of their research journey fostered pride, self-efficacy, and enhanced professional confidence. For many, this achievement was not only academic but personal—a symbolic triumph over adversity.

Participants shared sentiments such as:

"Completing my thesis was a major accomplishment. It exhibits my ability to work independently..." (PTW5)

"The process of writing a thesis can also provide several benefits, including intellectual growth..." (PTW6)

These reflections highlight the transformative power of thesis writing. Many participants began to view themselves not only as educators but also as creators of knowledge. Contributing original insights to the field of educational management gave their work a renewed sense of meaning and value. Furthermore, the skills developed during the process—critical thinking, time management, and data analysis—were seen as essential tools that strengthened their professional competence. This sense of accomplishment is echoed in Arneback's (2017) research, which describes thesis writing as a "rite of passage" that solidifies both academic maturity and professional identity. Likewise, Kowalczyk-Wałędziak (2020) found that among Filipino graduate students, successfully defending a thesis fosters not only personal pride but also professional readiness, often opening opportunities for leadership roles in schools and education departments. More recent research highlights that completing a thesis enhances graduates' confidence in participating in policy dialogue, pursuing doctoral studies, and contributing to institutional innovation (Santos & Abao, 2023).

From a programmatic perspective, these findings suggest that thesis writing should not be regarded merely as a compliance requirement for graduation, but as a transformative educational experience. Institutions can amplify their positive impact by celebrating thesis milestones, publishing student work in institutional journals, and integrating post-thesis career advising that leverages students' research skills for professional advancement.

3.3 Coping Strategies for Overcoming Challenges and Complications in Thesis Writing

The findings reveal that graduate students employ a multifaceted set of strategies to navigate the complexities and demands inherent in the thesis writing process. These strategies reflect a blend of personal initiative, resourcefulness, and collaborative engagement, allowing students to cope with academic pressure, maintain progress, and manage various external responsibilities. Through strategic adaptation, students demonstrate resilience and agency as they overcome the challenges they face. Table 2 presents the emerging themes and sub-themes related to the strategies employed by graduate students, illustrating the various ways they respond to the demands of thesis writing, from time management and technological utilization to communication and support-building practices.

Table 2. *Thematic Matrix on the Coping Strategies for Overcoming Challenges and Complications in Thesis Writing*

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Core Ideas
Navigating Complexity Through Strategic Adaptation	Building a Support Network	Engaging mentors for guidance and motivation. Collaborating with peers for feedback and encouragement. Joining writing groups to foster accountability.
	Time Management Practices	Breaking down tasks into smaller, manageable parts. Setting realistic and achievable deadlines. Prioritizing tasks to maintain steady progress.
	Utilization of Technological Tools	Using mobile applications for scheduling and reminders. Employing writing and reference management software. Participating in online forums or groups for support and resource sharing.
	Communication	Regularly seeking feedback from advisers and peers. Maintaining open dialogue to clarify doubts and receive constructive criticism. Using communication to stay motivated and aligned with expectations.

Navigating Complexity Through Strategic Adaptation

Graduate students encountered multifaceted challenges throughout their thesis writing journey. In response, they adopted various proactive strategies that reflected not only their resilience but also their ability to adapt to problems. The theme “Navigating Complexity Through Strategic Adaptation” captures how students actively designed and implemented coping mechanisms to maintain academic momentum amidst competing demands of professional duties, family responsibilities, and personal limitations. This theme reveals that thesis writing was not experienced merely as an academic task but as a process of negotiation among multiple identities – those of a student, a professional, and, often, a caregiver. By engaging in strategies that enabled balance and continuity, participants redefined their struggles as manageable, reaffirming their sense of agency and determination. These adaptive strategies are discussed under four sub-themes: building a Support Network, Time Management Practices, utilizing technological tools, and Effective Communication. Each reflects not only practical adjustments but also deeper meaning-making processes through which graduate students sustained their motivation, reaffirmed their belonging in an academic community, and constructed pathways toward completion despite overwhelming complexities.

Building a Support Network. One of the most prominent strategies participants employed was intentionally creating a strong support system. Graduate students consistently emphasized that navigating the complexities of thesis writing becomes more manageable when they can rely on networks of mentors, peers, and structured writing communities. These networks provided not only academic guidance but also emotional reassurance, which proved critical in sustaining perseverance during moments of stress, self-doubt, and fatigue.

Participants reflected on these experiences:

“My adviser motivates me to keep writing despite delays. Without his constant reminders, I might have given up.” (PTW3)

“My classmates and I share our drafts. It helps to know I am not alone in this journey.” (PTW7)

“Joining a writing group kept me on track because they checked in on me regularly.” (PTW9)

These narratives demonstrate that students did not perceive support as a passive resource but rather as an interactive, reciprocal process. Advisers provided constructive feedback and consistent encouragement, while peers acted as both collaborators and companions in the journey. Writing groups, in particular, emerged as powerful accountability structures, transforming an otherwise solitary task into a collective endeavor. Through these social interactions, students created safe spaces to normalize setbacks, celebrate small progress, and find motivation to continue. This finding is consistent with the argument presented by Kumar and Johnson (2019), who observed that mentor-mentee relationships can serve as protective mechanisms against academic disengagement, fostering resilience by combining technical and emotional guidance. Similarly, Smith (2021) emphasized that participation in collaborative academic communities allows graduate students to reframe thesis writing from an

isolating burden into a shared experience, thereby increasing persistence and morale. The relational dynamics within these networks suggest that support in thesis writing goes beyond mere academic supervision – it becomes an emotional anchor that buffers stress and strengthens commitment.

Taking an interpretative stance, the implication is clear: institutions should intentionally facilitate structures that foster peer and mentor engagement. Graduate schools could design thesis circles, structured peer review sessions, or formalized writing workshops to help students harness the collective benefits of accountability, shared knowledge, and encouragement. Moreover, adviser training should emphasize not only technical expertise but also relational competence, ensuring that guidance integrates empathy with academic rigor. In doing so, institutions can create a supportive ecosystem where students are less likely to feel isolated, thereby enhancing both thesis completion rates and the overall quality of the graduate research experience.

Time Management Practices. Managing time effectively was not merely a matter of keeping schedules but a deliberate act of survival for graduate students balancing multiple roles. Participants described how they reorganized their days, redefined their priorities, and relied on structured habits to carve out moments for writing, despite their professional and personal obligations. Time management thus became an act of self-discipline and a strategy for reclaiming control amidst competing demands.

Their reflections capture this adaptive approach:

“I set daily goals like finishing a paragraph or checking references before sleeping.” (PTW2)

“I used my lunch break at work to edit parts of my thesis – I could not waste any spare time.” (PTW7)

“Weekends became my non-negotiable writing days. My family supported me by adjusting our plans.” (PTW10)

These voices reveal that rather than waiting for large blocks of uninterrupted time, students maximized small windows of productivity. Their strategies align with the micro-tasking approach discussed by Ng and Chua (2020), who argued that segmenting thesis work into manageable tasks helps sustain momentum under high workload conditions. Similarly, Soriano and Dizon (2021) emphasized that consistent, incremental progress helps mitigate procrastination and supports long-term perseverance.

From an institutional perspective, these findings highlight the importance of structured interventions. Productivity workshops, the provision of thesis planners, and the integration of time management modules in research courses could help normalize these practices. Ultimately, effective time management among graduate students should not be seen as an individual struggle alone, but as a shared responsibility between learners and institutions to ensure that academic success remains achievable despite competing demands.

Utilization of Technological Tools. For many students, technology served as both a companion and a catalyst in the thesis journey. Beyond convenience, digital tools provided confidence, enabling participants to streamline technical processes and focus their energy on critical thinking and writing. The embrace of technology was not simply about efficiency – it symbolized adaptation to modern scholarly practices.

Participants illustrated how these tools shaped their workflow:

“I downloaded an app that reminded me to write something every day. It helped build momentum.” (PTW5)

“Using online tools like citation generators and grammar checkers saved me so much time.” (PTW8)

“Cloud storage made my work accessible anywhere, so I did not worry about losing my files.” (PTW10)

These insights suggest that students relied on technology for more than mechanical support. They used it to reduce anxiety about errors, gain mobility through cloud-based storage, and sustain writing habits with digital reminders. Strobl et al. (2019) observed that writing software and collaborative platforms not only enhance efficiency but also ease the emotional pressures of graduate research. Likewise, Yunus (2025) highlighted that strong digital literacy equips students with resilience, particularly in balancing academic demands with external

responsibilities.

The implication is clear that institutions must view digital literacy as an integral part of graduate training. Offering orientations on citation managers, plagiarism detection tools, grammar software, and collaborative platforms would formalize these supports. In conclusion, technology did not replace the human effort in thesis writing—it amplified it, offering both reassurance and efficiency that helped students navigate the rigors of academic production.

Communication. While thesis writing is often imagined as a solitary pursuit, participants consistently emphasized that clear and consistent communication was vital to their progress. Dialogue—whether with advisers, peers, or panelists—served as a mechanism for feedback, encouragement, and accountability. Effective communication reduced uncertainty, clarified expectations, and provided students with a sense of stability during moments of self-doubt.

Their testimonies underscore this dynamic:

“After each revision, I would message my adviser and ask for clarifications. That way, I did not repeat errors.” (PTW3)

“Open communication helped me not lose track. I always updated my panelist on my progress.” (PTW9)

“My group chat with classmates was a lifeline—we reminded each other of deadlines and shared advice.” (PTW6)

These accounts reflect that communication fulfilled multiple roles—technical, motivational, and relational. Alvarez and Fernandez (2024) affirmed that structured adviser-student communication is strongly correlated with the timely completion of graduate theses. Likewise, Stapleton Harris (2021) argued that consistent dialogue fosters trust and reduces misalignment between expectations and outcomes.

The broader implication is that communication in graduate education should be systematized rather than left to individual initiative. Adviser-student agreements on meeting schedules, expected response times, and feedback protocols could provide structure. Moreover, peer channels such as thesis circles or collaborative online spaces can institutionalize the benefits of student-to-student communication. Ultimately, communication is not peripheral but central to thesis success, transforming an isolating task into a shared academic dialogue.

3.4 Institutional and Policy Support Recommended by Graduate Students to Improve Their Academic Success

The lived experiences of graduate students revealed that academic success in thesis writing is not solely determined by individual perseverance, but is profoundly shaped by the institutional and policy environment in which they are situated. While personal strategies such as time management, persistence, and self-discipline were essential, participants consistently emphasized that supportive structures within their institutions often determined whether they advanced or stagnated in their research journey. They identified critical gaps in current systems and articulated concrete measures that could better support their capacity to meet thesis requirements. Emerging from their narratives is a clear call for institutions to assume a more proactive role in enabling academic success, particularly through enhanced institutional support mechanisms, improved access to resources, and strengthened psychosocial support.

These three areas underscore the need for a holistic approach—one that not only develops research competencies and ensures access to academic resources, but also fosters students' well-being as they navigate the multiple pressures of graduate study. Table 3 presents a thematic analysis matrix that synthesizes these insights, summarizes the major themes, subthemes, and core ideas derived from student reflections, and offers a roadmap for higher education institutions to design responsive policies and programs aligned with the expressed needs of graduate learners.

Table 3. *Thematic Analysis Matrix on Institutional and Policy Recommendations to Improve Graduate Students' Academic Success*

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Core Idea
Institutional Support Mechanisms	Research Seminars and Workshops	Offering formal, credit-bearing thesis writing and academic writing courses to strengthen research skills.
	Enhanced Faculty Mentorship	Strengthening thesis advisement by training mentors in coaching, feedback, and emotional support.
Resource Accessibility	Access to Academic Tools	Providing full-text access to academic journals, plagiarism checkers, and statistical software.
Psychosocial Support	Time Management and Mental Health Workshops	Offering sessions on managing stress, timelines, and balancing life with writing commitments.
	Peer Support and Writing Groups	Encouraging the formation of writing support groups or a peer review team.

Institutional Support Mechanisms

Institutional support emerged as a central concern and a key recommendation among participants. While personal diligence and perseverance remain vital, graduate students emphasized that their success in thesis writing is powerfully shaped by the systems, structures, and academic culture within their institutions. They consistently noted that accessible, practical, and sustained support mechanisms not only enhance their writing skills but also ease the psychological burden of research. This theme underscores the necessity for institutions to develop interventions that bridge skill gaps, foster meaningful mentoring relationships, and establish more equitable and practical pathways to thesis completion. Two specific sub-themes were identified: Research Seminars and Workshops and Enhanced Faculty Mentorship.

Research Seminars and Workshops. Although most graduate students had prior exposure to academic writing courses, many expressed that these were often limited in scope and highly theoretical. They stressed that the actual process of writing a thesis requires continuous guidance and more applied opportunities to practice. Several participants admitted feeling overwhelmed when moving from abstract concepts to producing chapters.

Thesis writers reflected:

"Seminars and workshops related to thesis writing would really help us understand the whole process step by step. We get lost when it comes to writing chapters." (PTW3)

"Sometimes I do not know how to start or organize my ideas. Workshops that focus on writing would make this clearer." (PTW4)

These voices reveal a strong call for learning spaces that go beyond the confines of traditional coursework. Unlike formal methods classes that emphasize frameworks and principles, research seminars and workshops enable students to immerse themselves in the practice of writing—drafting, revising, and receiving real-time feedback. Literature supports this, with Sidky (2019) underscoring the value of structured workshops as a means to help students transform their theoretical understanding into effective writing performance. Similarly, Jusslin and Widlund (2024) affirmed that such interventions strengthen confidence and demystify complex tasks, thereby reducing the sense of isolation that often accompanies thesis writing. In this light, institutions could enhance academic writing competency by embedding practical, skill-focused seminars and workshops as ongoing support throughout the research journey. These initiatives would serve as “bridges” between theoretical knowledge and applied writing, allowing students to progress systematically in developing their theses.

Enhanced Faculty Mentorship. Another dominant recommendation centered on the quality and nature of faculty mentorship. While students acknowledged that their advisers often provided technical corrections, they emphasized that mentorship in thesis writing should extend beyond pointing out deficiencies. They called for mentors who are accessible, responsive, and able to offer both intellectual and emotional support. Participants explained:

"Some of our thesis panel members need more training in how to support us beyond just pointing out what is wrong."

(PTW7)

"Sometimes, it took us so long to process the manuscript due to the unavailability and conflicting schedules of our thesis committee." (PTW10)

These accounts highlight the frustration that arises when mentorship is reduced to technical evaluation without sufficient guidance or relational engagement. Graduate students seek mentors who strike a balance between rigor and encouragement, providing constructive feedback while also acknowledging the emotional challenges of academic writing. Research corroborates these perspectives, emphasizing that effective mentorship requires both scholarly competence and relational sensitivity. Crumpton (2015) and Stapleton (2021) argued that intellectual mentoring must be paired with emotional intelligence to nurture student growth. Similarly, Li and Fernandez (2024) emphasized that mentorship effectiveness improves when advisers are consistent and empathetic.

For institutions, these findings suggest the importance of rethinking faculty development. Training programs should not only strengthen advisers' technical expertise but also prepare them to support students holistically. Modules on coaching, emotional encouragement, communication strategies, and time coordination could help faculty create a mentoring culture that is both rigorous and supportive. By cultivating such an environment, graduate schools can foster more productive student-mentor relationships, reduce attrition, and increase research output.

Resource Accessibility

Resource accessibility emerged as a critical dimension of institutional support, reflecting the practical realities graduate students face during the thesis-writing process. While intellectual readiness and motivation drive students' progress, their capacity to complete research is significantly shaped by the availability of reliable tools and scholarly resources. Many participants emphasized that limited access to academic journals, plagiarism-detection systems, and statistical applications often hinders both the pace and the quality of their work. This theme highlights the importance of creating an enabling research environment where resources are not a privilege, but a standard provision for all graduate students. Addressing these gaps through institutional policy ensures equitable opportunities for academic success and minimizes barriers that disproportionately affect students with fewer external resources. The sub-theme under this category is Access to Academic Tools.

Access to Academic Tools. Participants stressed that reliable access to essential academic resources is not merely supportive but also foundational to the thesis-writing process. While research coursework introduces methods and theories, the actual execution of research requires access to full-text databases, plagiarism prevention tools, and user-friendly statistical programs. Without these, students often experience delays, frustration, and compromised output.

Two participants shared their experiences:

"Sometimes it is hard to finish the review of related literature because we cannot access full journal articles." (P6)

"We need access to plagiarism checkers and user-friendly statistical tools. Not everyone is good with SPSS or coding." (PTW10)

These insights reveal that inadequate access to tools directly undermines research efficiency and academic integrity. Students often struggle with incomplete literature reviews, difficulties in data analysis, and heightened anxiety over meeting academic standards. Such gaps reflect a systemic issue where institutional infrastructure lags behind the evolving demands of graduate-level scholarship. Recent scholarship supports this observation. Edward et al. (2021) emphasized that institutions that invest in comprehensive digital libraries, plagiarism-detection software, and accessible statistical platforms enhance students' ability to produce original, credible research. Similarly, Chigbu (2021) noted that when students have access to academic technologies, they are better able to engage in rigorous inquiry and build confidence in their scholarly capabilities. Beyond immediate academic outcomes, access to these tools cultivates long-term research competence, preparing graduates for future academic and professional pursuits.

In light of these findings, institutions should treat the provision of academic tools not as an optional benefit but

as a standard element of graduate education. Subscription to scholarly databases, provision of intuitive and ethical writing tools, and training in user-friendly statistical software must be prioritized as part of institutional policy. Such measures would not only ensure research quality and equity but also strengthen the academic reputation of graduate programs.

Psychosocial Support

Participants in this study strongly recommended integrating psychosocial support into institutional policy to better support graduate students on their thesis-writing journey. While academic skills are essential, many students reported struggling with emotional fatigue, stress, and time constraints, which directly affected their writing progress and overall well-being. These concerns underscore the need for institutional programs that extend beyond academic instruction to encompass comprehensive support systems for mental health and to foster sustainable writing habits. As such, the theme Psychosocial Support underscores the importance of creating structured initiatives that address the emotional and social dimensions of thesis writing. The key sub-themes identified under this policy area are time management, mental health workshops, peer support, and Writing Groups.

Time Management and Mental Health Workshops. The accounts of participants revealed that the demands of thesis writing extended far beyond intellectual effort, permeating their sense of balance, confidence, and well-being. Many students described moments when stress and burnout left them immobilized, and time management struggles became not just organizational problems but deeply personal challenges that threatened their motivation and progress. For these students, the difficulty of balancing professional, family, and academic roles was experienced as an exhausting cycle that eroded both focus and emotional stability.

Participants echoed:

"There were times I felt overwhelmed and paralyzed with deadlines. A workshop on how to manage time and stress would really help." (PTW2)

"Balancing work, family, and thesis writing is exhausting. It affects your focus and motivation." (PTW9)

These reflections highlight that for students, emotional well-being was inseparable from their capacity to write and complete their thesis. The inability to regulate stress or manage time effectively was not perceived merely as inefficiency but as a threat to their confidence and academic identity. This finding aligns with Eisenberg et al. (2019), who discovered that graduate-focused mental health interventions enhance resilience, alleviate academic anxiety, and foster motivation. Similarly, Yunus and Bachtar (2021) observed that structured time management programs provide consistency in writing and help mitigate burnout. In this light, students' appeals for psychosocial support reflect more than a desire for skill-building workshops; they signify a need for institutions to acknowledge the emotional labor embedded in research. Graduate programs can therefore respond by integrating tailored mental health and productivity workshops into their curricula, creating spaces where students are equipped not only with technical competencies but also with strategies for emotional regulation and sustainable scholarly practice.

Peer Support and Writing Groups. Participants' experiences revealed that thesis writing was often marked by feelings of isolation and self-doubt, which intensified when feedback or guidance was lacking. In these moments, the presence of peers who were navigating similar struggles became a vital source of affirmation, accountability, and encouragement. For many, discussing their work with fellow thesis writers not only provided academic input but also created a sense of belonging that countered the loneliness often associated with solitary work. Sharing drafts, exchanging insights, and witnessing each other's progress transformed what could have been an isolating endeavor into a collaborative and sustaining journey.

Participants explained:

"Talking to fellow thesis writers helps ease the pressure. We remind each other that we are not alone." (PTW1)

"We learn by reading each other's work. Peer reviews give us fresh ideas and help us see what we missed." (PTW7)

These reflections demonstrate that peer support functioned on both practical and emotional levels, sharpening writing skills while simultaneously nurturing confidence and resilience. Students' emphasis on mutual accountability highlights how meaning was constructed not only through adviser feedback but also through peer dialogue, where they recognized themselves as part of a shared academic struggle. This resonates with Oddone et al. (2021) and Benvenuti (2017), who affirmed that writing groups build confidence, critical thinking, and a sense of belonging. Similarly, Durante (2022) emphasized that peer-based writing communities foster supportive academic cultures that meet both intellectual and emotional needs. For these participants, therefore, writing groups were not simply optional add-ons but essential lifelines. Institutions can draw on this insight by creating structured peer-review teams or supporting informal writing circles, ensuring that students' experiences of community are embedded in the graduate journey.

4.0 Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to understanding how graduate students in state colleges navigate the complex, emotionally charged process of writing a thesis. By adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, it uncovers the deeper meanings students attach to their struggles and adaptive strategies, revealing that thesis writing is not merely an academic task but a transformative experience that reshapes identity, resilience, and scholarly agency. The voices of these students foreground the need to reframe thesis completion as both an intellectual and human journey, one that intersects with broader social, economic, and institutional realities.

The implications of these findings are manifold. For practice, the study emphasizes the importance of developing mentorship as a relational and developmental process, rather than a purely technical one. Advisers must be supported to cultivate environments of encouragement, clarity, and responsiveness, recognizing their dual role as academic guides and emotional anchors. For policy, institutions should invest in research support infrastructures such as accessible databases, writing laboratories, and structured thesis workshops, while also embedding psychosocial wellness interventions into graduate education. For education, the findings highlight the need to integrate research training earlier and more progressively into graduate curricula, thereby reducing the overwhelming nature of thesis writing at the culminating stage.

In terms of research, the study opens avenues for comparative inquiries across disciplines and institutional types, where diverse academic cultures and resource contexts may yield varied meaning-making processes. Future studies might also explore longitudinal perspectives, tracing how students' sense of scholarly identity evolves from coursework through post-thesis professional practice. Additionally, examining advisers' lived experiences would provide a more holistic picture of the ecology of thesis writing.

Overall, this research contributes by illuminating the thesis journey as a site of struggle, growth, and transformation. By centering students' lived realities, it challenges institutions to design more humane and holistic systems of support. Moving forward, supporting graduate thesis writing must be recognized not as the responsibility of individual students alone but as a collective institutional commitment that bridges academic rigor with empathy, policy with practice, and personal perseverance with systemic care.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, proposal writing, data gathering, and data analysis.

Author 2: Methodology, data analysis, supervision, review, and editing.

Author 3: Methodology, data analysis, supervision, review & editing.

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