



PhD Beyond Research: A Qualitative Review of the Doctoral Experience

¹Dr. Aadil Hussain Mir, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Guru Kashi University.

²Dr. Anmol Singh, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Guru Kashi University.

³Dr. Jahangeer Ahmad, Assistant Professor, Department of Political science, Guru Kashi University

⁴Mr. Dev Behal, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Applications, Guru Kashi University.

Corresponding author: adilhussainmir172060@gku.ac.in

Abstract

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is usually regarded as the highest academic qualification, with a focus on original research and advancing disciplinary knowledge. However, contemporary literature increasingly recognises that doctoral education is much more than just research preparation. The doctoral path entails intellectual development, emotional development, professional socialisation, and identity transformation. This qualitative analysis examines the multimodal nature of PhD education, drawing on material published between 2000 and 2025. Drawing on transformational learning, scholarly identity construction, hidden curriculum, emotional resilience, and transferable skill development theories, the study examines how PhD candidates develop into independent academics and professionals. The review shows that doctoral education is a comprehensive developmental process that moulds critical thinking, reflexivity, leadership, flexibility, and ethical awareness. It also demonstrates that problems like isolation, uncertainty, impostor syndrome, and job ambiguity have a substantial impact on human growth and resilience (Lovitts, 2001; Pyhältö et al., 2012). The study contends that the value of a PhD goes beyond research outputs and should be viewed as a transformative life experience that prepares students for leadership and creativity in both academic and non-academic settings. The study closes by emphasising the importance of universities implementing more student-centered and development-oriented approaches to PhD education.

Keywords: Doctoral education, transformative learning, doctoral identity, hidden curriculum, PhD experience, qualitative review

INTRODUCTION

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) holds a unique position in higher education as the most advanced level of formal academic status. Doctoral education has traditionally been associated with advanced research training, methodological expertise, and the creation of new knowledge through a dissertation (Park, 2005). This research-centered perspective has long dominated institutional policies, doctoral supervision methods, and evaluations of PhD achievement. While the development of new knowledge is central to doctorate education, current research suggests that this perspective only provides a partial picture of the doctoral experience (Gardner, 2008; Lee, 2010). Over the last two decades, academics have emphasised the multifaceted nature of PhD education. The doctoral journey entails not only gaining discipline knowledge but also major intellectual, emotional, social, and professional transformation (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Doctoral applicants must handle uncertainty, engage critically with knowledge, manage complicated research projects, and establish professional identities in academic communities. As a result, PhD education is a process of "becoming" rather than simply "doing research" (Lee, 2010).

The current state of higher education emphasises the need for a broader understanding of doctoral education. Globalisation, technological innovation, and changing labour market demands have increased the professional options for PhD graduates. Doctoral degree holders are increasingly working in industry, government, entrepreneurship, policy development, and civil society organisations, rather than just academics (OECD, 2021). As a result, PhD programs are supposed to produce a diverse set of transferable talents, including as leadership, communication, project management, and problem-solving ability. Furthermore, PhD education poses significant emotional and psychological challenges. Candidates typically experience solitude, worry, uncertainty, and self-doubt while working on long-term research

projects (Pyhältö et al., 2012). Although these challenges might have a detrimental impact on well-being, they also give possibilities for resilience and personal growth (Lovitts, 2001). As a result, understanding the PhD experience necessitates consideration of both intellectual and human aspects.

This paper tries to reframe PhD education as a whole developmental process. It investigates the intellectual, emotional, social, and professional characteristics of doctoral study through a qualitative evaluation of relevant research, as well as the implications for doctoral education policy and practice.

2. Conceptualizing the PhD Beyond Research

The traditional definition of the PhD places a strong emphasis on academic output and research productivity. In the past, traditions that emphasised critical thinking, intellectual inquiry, and the quest for knowledge gave rise to doctoral education (Green, 2005). Many academics contend that doctoral education should also be seen as a process of personal and professional development, even though modern PhD programs still place a high priority on research quality (Gardner, 2008). Throughout their studies, doctoral candidates experience substantial cognitive progress. They gain the ability to assess theories critically, question presumptions, and create new frameworks for knowledge. According to Kiley (2009), the PhD program fosters epistemic maturity by pushing applicants to interact with ambiguity and uncertainty. Advanced analytical reasoning and intellectual independence are fostered by such encounters.

Doctoral education not only fosters intellectual development but also plays a significant role in identity formation. Candidates progressively go from being knowledge consumers to knowledge creators. Adopting the norms, attitudes, and practices of academic societies is part of this shift (Weidman et al., 2001). Doctorate students gain a sense of legitimacy and belonging in their fields through interactions with peers, supervisors, and professional networks (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Furthermore, doctorate education is important outside of the classroom. The advanced talents acquired during PhD training are becoming more and more valued by companies in modern information economy. Critical thinking, innovation, communication, leadership, and evidence-based decision-making are some of them (OECD, 2021). As a result, the PhD should be viewed as a multifaceted educational program that equips students for a variety of social and professional tasks.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) approach to explore the broader dimensions of doctoral education beyond research productivity. Relevant literature published between 2000 and 2025 was collected from databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, SpringerLink, and JSTOR using keywords including *doctoral education*, *PhD experience*, *doctoral identity*, *transformative learning*, *hidden curriculum*, and *doctoral student development*. The review followed the general principles of the PRISMA framework for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and scholarly reports published in English were included, while duplicate and irrelevant sources were excluded. The selected literature was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved coding, categorising, and interpreting recurring patterns across studies. The analysis generated key themes related to transformative learning, scholarly identity formation, emotional and psychological experiences, hidden curriculum, and transferable skill development. The findings were interpreted through established theoretical perspectives, including Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Scholarly Identity Formation (Gardner, 2008), to provide a comprehensive understanding of the doctoral experience. Since the study relied exclusively on published literature, no ethical approval was required.

4. Doctoral Education as a Transformative Process

Transformative learning theory provides a useful framework for studying doctorate education. Mezirow (1991) contends that transformative learning occurs when people question their preconceptions and develop new ways of perceiving themselves and the world. This shift is especially noticeable in PhD education. Doctoral candidates typically meet situations that call into question their existing views and viewpoints. Working with complicated theoretical discussions, methodological ambiguities, and scholarly critiques necessitates ongoing contemplation and change. These experiences frequently result in profound intellectual and personal development (Wisker, 2012).

The doctorate journey also includes identity reconstruction. Mowbray and Halse (2010) argue that PhD candidates are constantly negotiating their identities as researchers, professionals, and members of academic societies. This method

helps them gain confidence, autonomy, and a clearer sense of intellectual purpose. Transformative learning in doctorate education goes beyond academic progress. It shapes candidates' values, professional goals, and self-perceptions. As a result, the PhD is an effective means of promoting lifelong learning and personal development.

5. The Hidden Curriculum of Doctoral Studies

The hidden curriculum is a significant but frequently disregarded component of PhD education. The hidden curriculum is made up of unwritten rules, informal practices, and implicit expectations that influence doctorate experiences, in contrast to formal curricula that outline learning objectives and evaluation requirements (Margolis, 2001). A large portion of doctoral candidates' professional knowledge is obtained through casual encounters with peers, supervisors, and academic communities. Attending conferences, research groups, seminars, and cooperative projects offers the chance to learn about publication procedures, networking tactics, academic etiquette, and disciplinary conventions (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). The construction of intellectual identities is significantly influenced by the hidden curriculum. Candidates get insight into the thought processes, communication styles, and professional community interactions of accomplished scholars through participation and observation. Their sense of belonging and professional growth are greatly enhanced by these experiences. However, not everyone has equal access to resources for the concealed curriculum. Accessing informal networks and tacit knowledge may be difficult for first-generation students, international students, and academics from under-represented backgrounds (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). In order to create inclusive doctoral environments, these disparities must be addressed.

6. Emotional and Psychological Dimensions of the PhD

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on the emotional aspects of PhD education. Because of the rigorous nature of research and academic expectations, doctoral candidates frequently experience stress, loneliness, anxiety, and impostor syndrome (Pyö et al., 2012). In contrast to undergraduate and graduate programs, PhD education necessitates long stretches of individual labour. Feelings of vulnerability and self-doubt might be brought on by unclear procedures and frequent confusion about research results (Lovitts, 2001). Psychological discomfort may also be exacerbated by supervisory relationships, financial worries, publication pressures, and career uncertainty. Despite these obstacles, emotional problems can promote human development. Candidates can build resilience, perseverance, and emotional intelligence by effectively negotiating uncertainty, criticism, and disappointments (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). These attributes are becoming more widely acknowledged as crucial elements of PhD accomplishment. Therefore, in order to guarantee excellent PhD experiences, universities must offer sufficient mental health support, mentorship opportunities, and wellbeing activities.

7. Development of Transferable Skills

Doctoral education has a significant impact on the development of transferable abilities. While research competency is important, PhD study also develops skills that may be applied in a variety of professional settings (Walker et al., 2008). Candidates gain advanced problem-solving, project management, and analytical abilities by creating and carrying out their own research projects. They learn how to express difficult concepts through writing, presentations, teaching, and public participation. Many doctorate candidates learn leadership skills through mentoring, collaboration, and academic service activities. According to the OECD (2021), these skills enable PhD graduates to make meaningful contributions to industry, government, policymaking, and entrepreneurship. As labour markets evolve, transferable skills become increasingly essential predictors of doctorate success.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this qualitative review lend substantial support to the argument that doctoral education should be viewed as a dynamic and transforming process rather than merely a vehicle for obtaining research results. Throughout the literature, the PhD is portrayed as a developmental journey that shapes intellectual ability, emotional resilience, professional competence, and scholarly identity. While traditional definitions of doctoral education focus on dissertation completion and knowledge production (Park, 2005), the reviewed studies show that the doctoral experience comprises a considerably larger set of learning objectives that go beyond disciplinary expertise. The transforming aspect of doctorate education is one of the most important discoveries. Doctoral candidates participate in ongoing introspection and critical

analysis of presumptions, beliefs, and knowledge systems in accordance with Mezirow's (1991) notion of transformative learning. Candidates gain advanced cognitive skills like analytical reasoning, critical thinking, epistemological awareness, and intellectual independence through interaction with challenging research topics, theoretical discussions, and methodological difficulties (Kiley, 2009). Doctorate students are able to transition from knowledge consumption to active knowledge generation and academic leadership thanks to these intellectual changes. As a result, doctoral education serves as both a training process and a profound intellectual metamorphosis that alters people's perceptions of society, knowledge, and themselves.

The review emphasises the significance of doctoral identity building. Becoming a scholar is not a natural result of finishing a dissertation, but rather a continuing socialisation process that occurs through contact with supervisors, peers, disciplinary communities, and institutional cultures (Gardner, 2008; Lee, 2010). Doctoral candidates gradually internalise their academic communities' norms, attitudes, and practices via attending conferences, seminars, research collaborations, and intellectual conversations. This approach promotes confidence, intellectual validity, and professional identity. The literature implies that successful PhD education entails assisting candidates in transitioning from dependent learners to independent researchers capable of making important contributions to their disciplines (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). The importance of the hidden curriculum in doctorate education is another significant subject that emerged from the review. Much of what candidates learn happens outside of official curricula, despite the fact that PhD programs usually concentrate on formal learning objectives (Margolis, 2001). Tacit information about networking, publishing, collaboration, academic etiquette, and professional conduct can be acquired through casual contacts with peers, mentors, and supervisors (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). These encounters frequently have an equal impact on PhD success as formal education. However, not everyone has equal access to resources for the concealed curriculum. Accessing unofficial academic networks and career prospects may be more difficult for students from under-represented, first-generation, or foreign backgrounds (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013). This result emphasises how important it is for organisations to make implicit expectations more inclusive and transparent.

A key component of the PhD experience has also been identified as the emotional and psychological aspects of doctoral study. High levels of stress, loneliness, anxiety, self-doubt, and impostor syndrome are frequently reported in the literature among doctorate applicants (Pyö et al., 2012). Students frequently experience severe emotional strain due to the protracted and unpredictable nature of PhD research. However, these difficulties shouldn't be seen only as barriers. According to the review, resilience, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation are greatly enhanced by navigating ambiguity, handling criticism, overcoming obstacles, and maintaining long-term commitment (Lovitts, 2001). In this way, emotional difficulties can serve as stimulants for both professional and personal development. The findings further showed that PhD education is important for building transferable skills that go beyond academia. Research project management, communication, leadership, cooperation, critical analysis, and problem-solving abilities are developed throughout the PhD program (Walker et al. 2008). These skills are increasingly appreciated in today's labour markets, where PhD graduates work in industry, government, entrepreneurship, policymaking, and the nonprofit sector (OECD, 2021). As a result, judging doctoral achievement exclusively in terms of publications and thesis completion misses the larger benefits of PhD education to workforce development and social innovation.

The review also emphasises the changing nature of PhD education in the twenty-first century. As higher education systems become more global and interdisciplinary, PhD candidates must interact with multiple knowledge systems, collaborate across academic boundaries, and address difficult societal concerns (Waghid & Smeyers, 2011). This shifting context necessitates that PhD programs evolve beyond restricted research training paradigms and adopt more holistic approaches that combine academic brilliance with professional development, well-being, and social responsibility. Furthermore, the examined literature indicates that competent doctoral supervision remains one of the most important elements influencing PhD results. Supervisors are responsible not only for guiding research, but also for mentoring, encouraging, and supporting candidates throughout their careers (Lee, 2008; Halse & Malfroy, 2010). Positive supervisory interactions lead to increased satisfaction, productivity, and completion, but inadequate supervision is frequently related with attrition and psychological discomfort (Golde, 2005). As a result, institutions should engage in supervisor development programs that prioritise mentoring, communication, and emotional support alongside research expertise. Overall, the findings call into question standard doctorate education paradigms based on production. The research suggests that doctoral achievement should be defined more widely, including academic transformation, identity development, emotional well-being, professional readiness, and society contributions. Such a perspective acknowledges

the complexity of doctoral learning and aligns more closely with the realities of contemporary higher education and employment contexts.

CLOSING

9. Conclusion

This qualitative review sought to investigate PhD education outside its traditional relationship with research production and academic accomplishment. The data show that the PhD is primarily a transforming educational experience that transforms people academically, emotionally, socially, and professionally. Rather than being just a mechanism for doing original research, PhD education is a developmental process in which candidates cultivate critical thinking, academic identity, resilience, leadership, and lifelong learning skills. The review emphasises that PhD candidates undergo considerable intellectual transformations throughout their studies. They develop sophisticated analytical skills and epistemological understanding by engaging with advanced theoretical frameworks, methodological obstacles, and autonomous research (Mezirow, 1991; Kiley, 2009). This intellectual development helps candidates to progress beyond information acquisition and become self-sufficient knowledge producers capable of tackling difficult problems in both academic and non-academic settings.

Doctoral education also has a significant impact on professional and scholarly identities. Becoming a scholar entails participating in academic communities, engaging with disciplinary cultures, and interacting with supervisors and peers (Gardner, 2008; Lee, 2010). These experiences teach PhD candidates not only technical skills, but also the values, norms, and professional dispositions associated with academic practice. Identity development is thus a key outcome of doctorate education and contributes greatly to long-term career success. The review emphasises how emotional and psychological experiences are inextricably linked to doctorate learning. Uncertainty, isolation, self-doubt, and worry are all prevalent experiences during the PhD process (Pyhältö et al., 2012). However, these challenges offer opportunity to improve resilience, tenacity, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness (Lovitts, 2001). Recognising the emotional aspects of PhD studies is critical for developing supportive institutional settings that promote well-being and prevent attrition.

Another significant conclusion is the importance of the hidden curriculum and informal learning processes. Much of doctorate learning takes place outside of traditional classroom, through mentorship, networking, peer cooperation, and engagement in scholarly communities (McAlpine & Amundsen 2018). These experiences have a substantial impact on professional socialisation and skill development, emphasising the need of institutions providing inclusive opportunities that allow equitable access to informal learning resources. The review also shows that PhD education helps significantly to the development of transferable abilities. Communication, leadership, project management, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving skills developed during PhD studies are highly regarded in a variety of professional fields (OECD, 2021; Walker et al., 2008). As a result, the PhD's significance extends well beyond academia and is critical in promoting innovation, economic development, and evidence-based decision-making in society.

From a policy standpoint, the findings call for a rethinking of PhD programs. Universities should move beyond narrow performance indicators like publication counts and completion rates and instead prioritise human growth, wellbeing, career preparedness, and social involvement. Doctoral supervision should be seen as an academic and developmental practice, with institutional support mechanisms addressing doctoral applicants' intellectual, emotional, and professional requirements. Finally, the PhD should be viewed not only as a research qualification, but also as a life-changing event. It signifies a journey of academic discovery, personal growth, professional development, and social responsibility. By adopting a comprehensive view of doctoral education, institutions can better educate graduates to be innovative scholars, reflective practitioners, responsible leaders, and active participants in an increasingly complicated and interconnected world.

10. Conclusion

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The significance of informal learning processes and the hidden curriculum is another important result. A significant portion of PhD learning takes place outside of the classroom through peer cooperation, networking, mentoring, and involvement in academic communities (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). These encounters play a major role in professional socialisation and skill development, underscoring the necessity for institutions to establish inclusive possibilities that guarantee fair access to resources for informal learning. The review also shows that the development of transferable abilities is significantly aided by PhD education. Many different professional fields place a high value on the communication, leadership, project management, teamwork, flexibility, and problem-solving skills developed during PhD education (OECD, 2021; Walker et al., 2008). As a result, the PhD's worth goes well beyond academics and is crucial for fostering economic growth, innovation, and evidence-based decision-making in society.

The results demand a rethinking of PhD education from a policy standpoint. Universities should embrace more all-encompassing strategies that put an emphasis on social engagement, career preparedness, welfare, and personal growth in place of more limited performance metrics like publication counts and completion rates. While institutional support systems should attend to the intellectual, emotional, and professional requirements of PhD applicants, doctoral supervision should be acknowledged as an academic and developmental practice. In conclusion, the PhD should be understood not simply as a research qualification but as a transformative life experience. It represents a journey of intellectual discovery, personal growth, professional formation, and social contribution. By embracing a holistic understanding of doctoral education, institutions can better prepare graduates to become innovative scholars, reflective practitioners, responsible leaders, and active contributors to an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

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