

Experiencing thesis completion: A phenomenological exploration of timely graduates

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ABSTRACT

Research thesis is a written report that presents the results of original research conducted by a graduate student or researcher. It is typically required as part of a graduate degree program and is intended to demonstrate the student's mastery of a specific subject area and their ability to conduct independent research. Writing a thesis is a crucial step towards earning an academic degree. Furthermore, completing a Bachelor's degree within a specific time frame is a significant achievement that benefits the student, the hosting university, and the overall economy. Timely graduates requires that a student complete all the requirements of their degree which is research thesis, within 4 years of study or less.

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study was to examine the experiences and insight of timely graduates. Research questions focused on the lived experience of timely thesis completion, strategies for others and common challenges of timely graduated students. Purposeful sampling was used to identify 6 students who complete their thesis timely and graduated on-time at English Language Education Study Program of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan with the cohort of 2019. To be eligible for the study, participants had to have complete their thesis on time and completed their undergraduate degree in 4 years or less and graduated in 2023. Data collection included formal response questions and interviews. All data were analyzed through phenomenological reduction of bracketing, horizontalization, clustering into themes, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and textural-structural synthesis.

The findings reveal that intrinsic motivation, particularly the desire to graduate on time and pursue future career opportunities, served as a primary driving force. External encouragement from family, peers, and academic mentors played a crucial role in sustaining their commitment. Additionally, structured goal-setting, effective time management, and a strong support system contributed to their success. However, adaptability was equally important, allowing students to navigate unexpected research obstacles. The study highlights the importance of institutional support in fostering student success, suggesting that universities should enhance mentorship programs and provide structured guidance throughout the thesis-writing process. The essence of timely thesis completion lies in the interplay between motivation, discipline, and social support, reinforcing the idea that academic achievement is both an individual and collective effort.

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1. Introduction

Undergraduate students who have entered his final year in college will definitely meet many prerequisites that must be fulfilled in order to graduate. One of the prerequisites is writing a research thesis. Research thesis is a written report that presents the results of original research conducted by a graduate student or researcher. It is typically required as part of a graduate degree program and is intended to demonstrate the student's mastery of a specific subject area and their ability to conduct independent research. Writing a thesis is a crucial step towards earning an academic degree. The thesis is usually written under the guidance of a thesis advisor and is subject to review by a committee of experts in the relevant field. In many cases, students have their own experience in writing a research thesis, some compile their thesis on time, while others face delays due to several constraints. Writing a thesis necessitates students to navigate a series of stages during their academic journey, and the challenges encountered along the way can either impede or inspire them in the pursuit of their specific research objectives (Benavente, et. al., 2022). Hence, there is a widely held belief that research is considered essential in providing substantial avenues for university students to gain knowledge and enhance their skills as they engage in the practice of research writing (Sitompul & Anditasari, 2022). Nonetheless, the thesis presents a demanding undertaking that demands skills, capability, and unwavering determination for achieving successful and timely completion (Nouri et al., 2019).

Furthermore, completing a Bachelor's degree within a specific time frame is a significant achievement that benefits the student, the hosting university, and the overall economy. As stated by Sharp (1963), bachelor's degree is a recognized professional degree that offers entry into a specific career or field. However, achieving bachelor's degree within the stipulated duration depends on a multitude of interrelated factors. Every student who is carrying out his studies must want to have a faster study period. Usually, timely completion is defined as graduating within either 3.5 years or less than 4 years. However, a fast or slow study period is definitely influenced by various factors.

Writing undergraduate thesis can be a daunting challenge for students (Cahyadi et al., 2021). During the research thesis writing, students might face challenges such as lack of availability of the references and resources related to the students' thesis topic, lack of students' skills in research methodology, as well as lack of students' knowledge related to the guidelines for writing scientific papers. Moreover, the challenges that the students encountered were divided into two affecting factors, namely internal factor and external factor. The internal factors of the students' challenges are the students' academic skill related to research methodology and guidelines for writing scientific papers; and the students' self-confidence. Whereas, the external factors that influence the students' challenges are, personal problems, the availability of the research references, research supervisor, as well as respondents.

Soe previous study related to this research. The first research conducted by Vermaaten (2013) examined "Finishing on-time: A qualitative examination of contributors to timely undergraduate degree completion". The research aimed to determine the most significant factors that contributed to on-time undergraduate degree completion. The second research conducted by Ermiati et al. (2021) examined "Student Experience in Completing Thesis and its Implications for International Students in Indonesia". The research aimed to explore student experiences in completing thesis courses and analyze the implications of these courses for international students. While, the third research conducted by Azmat & Mater (2022) examined "Students Experience in Completing Thesis at Undergraduate Level". The research aimed to investigate students' experiences in completing a thesis and the problems they faced during the process of completing their research. According to the research, this study has practical value for both supervisors and students, as it allows them to better understand each other's challenges and work together to find solutions.

However, after conducting an observation to several student's class of 2019 in the English Education Study Program, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, the researcher found that 62 students have written and completed their thesis on time. Furthermore, the earliest students from the class of 2019 completed his thesis with a study period within 3,8 – 4 years. Therefore, this research will explore the thesis completion experiences within phenomenologically with the focus on factors and experiences that contribute to the timely completion of a thesis and also challenges and obstacles that graduate students encounter during their thesis work. It is important to know the factors that influence other students who experienced many challenges in writing their thesis and giving insight to study programs so that they can improve their curriculum and support for students.

2. Method

This research is qualitative research with phenomenology approach design. This type of research, like other qualitative research, uses many methods including interviews, observations, and analysis of the text. The emphasis is on gaining a deeper comprehension of the phenomena that are ingrained in research participants' viewpoints. This research was conducted at the English Language Education Program Study, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Yogyakarta. The participants in this research are six graduated students from the cohort of 2019 of the English Language Education Program Study, whose total number of subjects is 6, 1 male and 5 female. The researcher utilized the following techniques to collect the data: 1) The researcher created an interview guidelines for the semi-structured interview; 2) The researcher contacted the students to be willing as participants; 3) The researcher conducted an epoche or bracketing any opinions or hypothesis; 4) The researcher interviewed the students; 5) The researcher transcribed the responses; 6) The researcher clustering the themes based on the questions; and 6) The researcher analyzed the data through textural and structural analysis; 7) The researcher provide descriptions or essence and reached a conclusion. In this research, we used a formal responses and interviews. The researcher used a few specific methods for doing data analysis in her study. For the interview, the researcher used steps according to Husserl's (1930) phenomenological reduction. Husserl analyzed the data in six steps: bracketing the topics (epoche), horizontalization, clustering themes, textural descriptions, structural descriptions and textural-structural synthesis (essence).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Themes and Sub-themes Emerging from the Data

The following themes and sub-themes emerged from data concerning the research questions. Participant quotes are used to solidify the sub-themes and provide an answer to research questions.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Motivation and Psychological Well-being	Internal Motivation
	Psychological Stress and Personal Issues
Support Systems	External Support
	Importance of Support Systems
	Supervisor Availability and Support
Planning and Process Management	Structured Planning and Time Management
	Consistency and Adaptability

The research question examined the perceptions and experiences of graduate students and how these insights inform strategies to support timely thesis completion for others. Participants reported (a) internal motivation, (b) external support, (c) structured planning and time management, (d) importance of support systems and (e) consistency and adaptability throughout the thesis process.

a. Internal Motivation

Participants in this study reported their personal motivation was the primary factor contributing to their thesis writing. Furthermore, participants mentioned the desire to complete the thesis on time because the thesis is their responsibility as a student.

LA mentioned, *"The most important thing is to graduate on time"*. LA also mentioned that the thesis is the last responsibility, *"It's like if the thesis is our last responsibility as a student"*.

PN explained,

"Okay, the main motivation is to finish the thesis on time, the desire to graduate on time too, according to the schedule according to my plan". PN too more purposely to start her career. She mentioned "start a career in the future, right".

LI, firmly conveyed, *"Then internal motivation from within myself so it's like yes, if for example we go to college, why take so long if we can finish it quickly"*.

Furthermore, AW explained her motivation based on herself. She said: *"Because of myself, yes, I don't want to graduate in more than 4 years because the main target is indeed a maximum of 4 years so the target."*

HL thought completing thesis on time is a must,

"Well, in my opinion writing or completing thesis on time is a must as a college student, because if we are not completing the thesis on time, we are wasting our time, if we do nothing. In our first year when we became a college student of course, our goal is graduate from the study program. Of course we need to complete our thesis".

Lastly, SF attributed his motivation to her principle of avoiding procrastination. *"Because in my opinion, something that can be done but if we procrastinate, it's not good. In essence, if it can be done quickly, why not?"*.

b. External Support

This sub-theme emerged as participants discussed the significant role of external support in their journey to complete their theses on time. They highlighted the encouragement and assistance received from family, friends, and academic mentors, which played a crucial part in maintaining their focus and motivation.

HL expressed the importance of completing her thesis early to pursue her goals: *"After I graduate, of course, I want to join PPG. And then before I join PPG, I need to complete my thesis earlier."*

PN emphasized the multifaceted support system that aided her progress: *"Then besides that, there is also support from family and friends, and there is also encouragement from what is called supervisor/DPS, and because it is additional to be focused and disciplined as well."*

LI discussed the dual role of internal motivation and external obligations:

"Then it can be like saying it's like completing our obligations to our parents. If you can hurry up, why not? So, at that time, in my opinion, the two that played the biggest role were the two internal motivations from within myself wanting to graduate quickly and those related to earlier, maybe it was external, yes, related to scholarships, but inevitably that factor too."

LA found motivation in the achievements of her peers: *"Maybe because I saw other friends so I was like, oh, the others can be maximized."*

AW highlighted the influence of her peer group and family:

"Because I was motivated by my friends who were in the same mentorship group, so my friends who were in the same mentorship group were already in the trial. So, I was also motivated, so one guidance was mostly on time so friends were the main motivation. Then the second is because my parents keep asking me, 'When did you graduate?'"

The narratives of these participants underscore the critical role that external support plays in facilitating the timely completion of their theses. Through a combination of encouragement from family, inspiration from peers, and the guidance of academic mentors, they were able to stay focused and disciplined in their efforts to meet their graduation goals.

c. Structured Planning and Time Management

Participants noted the importance of planning and setting personal targets for timely thesis completion.

AW explained,

"So finally, I've made a timeline, oh because I want to graduate in July. I have to have a trial in June and I have to finish when and so on." He emphasized, *"I think it's important that we have our own targets."*

LA mentioned, *"Actually, for my own timeline, I have already planned it."*

SF highlighted a different approach, stating, *"I'm not planning that far just for the near future. Because yes, we plan, sometimes we can change in the field."*

d. Importance of Support Systems

Participants highlighted the crucial role of support systems in thesis completion.

HL stressed,

"We need to have a support system. Ya, you need to find your support system by your friends or maybe your boyfriend, your supervisor, or maybe your family." She reaffirmed, "So, to be able to ask opinions, to be able to chat to exchange ideas, so if you're alone it's really tiring, because you're thinking alone, looking for answers alone. You can't get advice or additions from other people. So, my suggestion is to write your thesis with your friend."

SF appreciated her parents' support: *"Yes, for support, like my parents always ask how I'm doing, and of course it can't be separated from the prayers of my parents."*

PN added,

"Then besides that, there is also support from family and friends and there is also encouragement from what is called, supervisor and because of the addition of being focused and disciplined in completing the thesis case, so that motivated me to do it on time."

LI mentioned parental support:

"Then it can be like saying it's like completing our obligations to our parents quickly, why not." She added, "The second is support from parents, even though parents are honest, my parents don't restrict it, don't require me to graduate this month, graduate this month or not, just because of what they are, yes, they will definitely pray for their children. all parents will definitely pray for their children."

AW said, *"Then the second thing is to remember what our family remembers, right, meaning that our parents facilitate us to go to college, the hope is that we can graduate on time."*

e. Consistency and Adaptability throughout the Thesis Process

Participants discussed the importance of consistency and adaptability in thesis work.

SF shared his strategy: *"I make a timeline when it's close, for example, I'm researching now, for example on May 1, I'm researching, so I just target my research to be completed in one week."*

PN set incremental goals:

"Then also set targets for the plan, for example, next week if you can, you have to add one sentence or one paragraph like that. Anyway, there must be progress every day. Yes. Well, usually this comes when I see that my friends have already started the trial like that, so I get motivated. I don't think I can just relax for a long time."

LA focused on personal targets:

"A lot, especially when many of my classmates were already in trial. Then at that time I really wanted to get graduation in July, right. And at that time, it was already rumored that if you want to graduate in July, the maximum graduation is in June. So, I was already chasing, from the beginning of 2023 around February-March I had set a target from there. So, we can set our own time, for example, my thesis is like this, the topic theme is like this, the research will be like this, I think I can, I want to set a target time eee finish it within 3 months. but if for example I think it's important we have to have our own personal targets but if for example eee all students, for example, are given a target of 1 and all of them have to meet the same target, I think that's what's missing because each research, in my opinion, has a different struggle and cannot be compared."

AW added,

"Because yes, myself, right. because I don't want to graduate in more than 4 years right because the main target is indeed a maximum of 4 years so the target is then the parents who motivate ..." She also mentioned peer motivation: "The motivation is yes, briefly because in the past, if I'm honest, honestly it was because I was motivated by my friends in guidance so my friends who were in guidance were like they were already in trial."

3.1.2. Textural description

a. Internal Motivation

Participants in this study consistently emphasized internal motivation as the driving force behind their efforts to complete their theses on time. Their desire to graduate as scheduled was not merely an academic obligation but a personal commitment. LA succinctly expressed this sentiment: *"The most important thing is to graduate on time."* She further explained that the thesis symbolized the final milestone in her academic journey: *"It's like if the thesis is our last responsibility as a student."* This notion of responsibility resonated with PN, who elaborated on her structured approach: *"Okay, the main motivation is to finish the thesis on time, the desire to graduate on time too, according to the schedule according to my plan."* She further connected this goal to her career aspirations, emphasizing her need to *"start a career in the future."*

Similarly, LI underscored the importance of efficiency in academic pursuits, stating, *"If we go to college, why take so long if we can finish it quickly?"* This pragmatic perspective was shared by AW, who set a definitive target for graduation: *"I don't want to graduate in more than four years because the main target is indeed a maximum of four years."* HL echoed this viewpoint, reinforcing the idea that timely thesis completion is an essential academic duty: *"In my opinion, writing or completing a thesis on time is a must as a college student. If we do not complete the thesis on time, we are wasting our time."* Finally, SF associated his motivation with his principle of avoiding procrastination, stating, *"Something that can be done but is delayed is not good. If it can be done quickly, why not?"*

b. External Support

While internal motivation was crucial, participants also highlighted the indispensable role of external support. Encouragement from family, friends, and academic mentors significantly influenced their progress. HL saw early thesis completion as a stepping stone for her future endeavors, stating, *"After I graduate, of course, I want to join PPG. And then before I join PPG, I need to complete my thesis earlier."* PN emphasized the multiple sources of support she received, noting, *"Besides that, there is also support from family and friends, and encouragement from my supervisor, which helped me stay focused and disciplined."*

LI viewed thesis completion as fulfilling an obligation to her parents, explaining, *"Completing our obligations to our parents is important. If you can hurry up, why not?"* She also acknowledged external financial incentives such as scholarships, which further motivated her. LA, on the other hand, found inspiration in her peers: *"Maybe because I saw other friends, I was like, oh, the others can do it, so I should maximize my efforts too."* AW similarly credited her peer group and family as primary motivators: *"My friends who were in the same mentorship group were already in the trial. That motivated me. Then my parents kept asking, 'When did you graduate?'"* These narratives underscore the essential role of external encouragement in sustaining students' focus and determination.

c. Structured Planning and Time Management

Participants recognized structured planning and time management as crucial elements in timely thesis completion. AW described his proactive approach: *"I've made a timeline. I want to graduate in July, so I need to have my trial in June. Setting a personal target is important."* LA also affirmed the significance of scheduling, stating, *"Actually, for my own timeline, I have already planned it."* While SF acknowledged the necessity of planning, he preferred a more flexible approach: *"I'm not planning that far ahead, just for the near future. Because*

yes, we plan, but sometimes things change in the field." This balance between structured planning and adaptability played a key role in participants' strategies.

d. Importance of Support Systems

Beyond personal motivation and structured planning, participants emphasized the vital role of a strong support system. HL advocated for finding a reliable network: *"You need to find your support system—whether it's your friends, your boyfriend, your supervisor, or your family."* She elaborated on the benefits of collective thesis writing, explaining, *"To be able to exchange ideas, get opinions, and receive advice is invaluable. If you're alone, it's really tiring because you're thinking alone and looking for answers alone."*

SF appreciated the emotional and moral support provided by her parents, stating, *"My parents always ask how I'm doing, and their prayers have been a huge support."* PN similarly acknowledged the encouragement of family, friends, and supervisors: *"Support from family, friends, and supervisors kept me focused and disciplined in completing my thesis."* LI reflected on the indirect yet powerful support from her parents, noting, *"Even though my parents don't set a strict deadline, they always pray for me, and that itself is a strong motivation."* AW echoed this sentiment, emphasizing parental sacrifices: *"Our parents facilitate us to go to college with the hope that we can graduate on time."*

e. Consistency and Adaptability Throughout the Thesis Process

Participants also discussed the importance of maintaining consistency while adapting to unexpected challenges. SF adopted a short-term goal-setting approach: *"I make a timeline when it's close. For example, if I'm researching now, I target my research to be completed in one week."* PN, on the other hand, set incremental goals, explaining, *"I set weekly targets, like adding one sentence or one paragraph at a time. There must be progress every day."* She found motivation in observing her peers' progress, stating, *"When I see that my friends have already started their trials, I feel motivated. I can't afford to relax for too long."*

LA demonstrated a strong commitment to personal target-setting: *"When many of my classmates were already in trial, I was determined to graduate in July. I started setting targets as early as February or March, ensuring that my research would be completed within three months."* She acknowledged, however, that each research journey is unique: *"I think it's important that we have personal targets, but if all students are given the same deadline, it's unrealistic because every research has different struggles."*

AW reinforced the importance of both self-discipline and peer motivation: *"I don't want to graduate in more than four years. My parents motivated me, but seeing my friends in the same mentorship group already in trial pushed me even more."* The collective experiences of these participants highlight the delicate balance between maintaining consistency and remaining adaptable throughout the thesis-writing journey.

f. Composite Description: The Essence of the Experience

The experience of completing a thesis on time is deeply intertwined with both internal and external motivators, requiring a structured yet flexible approach. Students perceive their thesis as not just an academic requirement but a personal and professional milestone. Their narratives reveal a spectrum of perspectives, from the deeply ingrained personal responsibility to external influences that shape their determination. For some, the motivation stems from a sense of obligation—to themselves, their families, and their future careers. The commitment to avoid delays is not merely about efficiency but also about honoring the expectations placed upon them. This responsibility is amplified by external encouragement from peers, family members, and academic mentors, demonstrating that timely thesis completion is a collective effort rather than an isolated struggle.

Furthermore, the interplay between structured planning and adaptability plays a pivotal role in the students' journeys. While meticulous timelines help maintain progress, flexibility is equally crucial to navigating the uncertainties inherent in research. The essence of their experience, therefore, lies in the confluence of motivation, support systems, and disciplined execution—each element reinforcing the other to ensure successful and timely thesis completion.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing theories on academic motivation and self-regulated learning. Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a relevant framework for understanding the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in thesis completion. According to SDT, motivation exists on a continuum from intrinsic motivation—where individuals engage in an activity for inherent satisfaction—to extrinsic motivation, where actions are driven by external rewards or pressures. Participants in this study demonstrated a blend of these motivational types, with strong internal motivation supplemented by external reinforcement from peers, family, and academic mentors.

The emphasis on self-regulation and goal-setting in participants' narratives also resonates with Zimmerman's (2002) Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) theory, which posits that successful learners actively plan, monitor, and adapt their strategies to achieve academic goals. Many participants displayed a high level of self-regulation by setting personal deadlines, maintaining structured schedules, and adjusting their plans as needed. This aligns with Zimmerman's (2002) assertion that self-regulated learners exhibit goal-directed behavior and persist despite challenges. The findings suggest that fostering SRL skills among students may enhance their ability to complete long-term academic projects such as theses.

Furthermore, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory underscores the importance of social interactions in learning and cognitive development. The support systems described by participants—whether in the form of peer collaboration, supervisor guidance, or family encouragement—reflect the social dimension of academic achievement. This aligns with the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which highlights the role of more knowledgeable others in facilitating learning. The participants' engagement with their academic and personal networks suggests that social support is not merely an adjunct to motivation but a fundamental component in sustaining academic persistence.

The role of structured planning and adaptability in thesis completion is also supported by research on time management and academic success. Britton and Tesser (1991) found that students with effective time management skills exhibit higher academic performance. The participants in this study demonstrated an awareness of time constraints and actively sought to organize their work schedules. However, their ability to remain flexible when facing unforeseen challenges suggests that a rigid approach to time management may not always be effective. Instead, a balanced strategy that incorporates both structure and adaptability appears to be most beneficial.

The concept of resilience also emerges as a key theme in the participants' experiences. Resilience, as defined by Masten (2001), is the capacity to recover from setbacks and maintain motivation despite difficulties. The participants' narratives revealed instances where they encountered obstacles, such as research complications or writer's block, yet persisted by adjusting their strategies and seeking support. This finding aligns with research suggesting that resilience is a critical factor in academic persistence and success (Martin & Marsh, 2006).

Moreover, the participants' emphasis on personal accountability and responsibility echoes Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of student development, which posits that successful academic and personal growth involves developing competence, managing emotions, and fostering autonomy. The students' reflections indicate that thesis completion was not merely an academic exercise but a transformative experience that reinforced their sense of responsibility and independence.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the broader understanding of academic motivation, self-regulated learning, and social support in higher education. They suggest that timely thesis completion is facilitated by an interplay of intrinsic drive, external encouragement, structured planning, adaptability, and resilience. Future research could further explore interventions that enhance these factors, such as mentorship programs, peer accountability groups, and training in self-regulation strategies. By integrating these insights, educational institutions can better support students in navigating the complex process of thesis writing and achieving their academic goals.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between internal motivation, external support, structured planning, and adaptability in achieving timely thesis completion. Participants consistently emphasized their intrinsic drive to graduate on time, which stemmed from personal responsibility, career aspirations, and a desire to honor their families' support. At the same time, encouragement from family, peers, and academic mentors played a crucial role in sustaining their motivation. The balance between structured goal-setting and the flexibility to adapt to challenges further reinforced their ability to stay on track. These factors collectively shaped the students' experiences, demonstrating that thesis completion is not merely an academic requirement but a deeply personal and multidimensional process.

Beyond individual efforts, the study underscores the significance of a strong support system and institutional mechanisms that facilitate student progress. Universities can enhance thesis completion rates by fostering mentorship programs, providing clear research timelines, and promoting collaborative learning environments. Additionally, recognizing the unique struggles of each research journey and offering tailored support can help students navigate challenges more effectively. Ultimately, the essence of timely thesis completion lies in the synergy between motivation, discipline, and social support, reinforcing the idea that academic success is both an individual and collective endeavor.

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