# Challenges of Thesis Work: Towards Minimizing the Non-Completion Rate in the Postgraduate Degree Program

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**Abstract**

Although the students registering for postgraduate program are increasing in number in Sri Lanka, many postgraduate students dropped out or delayed their graduation because of the challenge of thesis completion. In Sri Lanka, it is frequently quoted that while students are able to complete their all course works in their postgraduate degree program, most of the students do not complete their degrees within the stipulated period. Although, non-completion has many negative consequences, the existing body of literature examining the non-completion at postgraduate level is quite small. Therefore, this study focused on research questions 'what do candidates of Sri Lankan University postgraduate program perceive as barriers to completion of the degree? And to what extent do PG students perceive these barriers responsible for delay in their thesis completion? Initially this study reviewed the literature to identify any factors which have been identified as hindrance for a thesis completion. Then, this study employed two types of analysis: Exploratory and descriptive. The former explore the situation by generating information from relevant respondent group and do content analysis for finding factors which influence completion of dissertation. The latter describe with frequencies and mean to describe and explain the real situation of the non-completion. The postgraduate students of national universities in Sri Lanka who did not complete their program within the given program duration constituted the population of the study. Exploratory study resulted with six factors, descriptive study suggest that although all of these factors influence thesis completion rate, student quality has significant influence in completing thesis. Personal situations and financial resources have also been identified as the next important factors in its significance. Implications of findings with recommendations to improve thesis completion also discussed.

**Keywords:** Non-completion, postgraduate, degree, thesis, challenges, Sri Lanka

## 1.  Introduction

Although research is an essential component for the postgraduate degree program, thesis completion remains a problem for many postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students dropped out or delayed their graduation because of thesis non-completion. The term "non-completion" means not completing within the maximum stipulated period and the cancellation of registration without completing the research. The crucial point at which many students drop out of the postgraduate program is at the dissertation stage. As dissertation is one of the pre-requisite for the postgraduate degree be awarded, thus very essential and most important aspect of postgraduate degree programs. Post graduate students generally complete all of the requirements for their postgraduate degree except the thesis. Postgraduate students are expected to begin their thesis after having fulfilled the requirements of successful completion of course work. In general two major objectives are expected to achieve by a thesis. First, the candidate obtain an intensive, highly professional training experience in addressing a significant intellectual problem. Second, findings of a thesis create an original contribution to the existing knowledge in the field.

Non-completion of postgraduate degree program such as MPhil, MBA and doctoral programs is an important issue for student and their image. Although, postgraduate students reflect an educational institution's scholarly nature, they consume more of its resources, such as faculty time, library facilities, and other services such as computer services. In general, this non-completion become as a waste of student energy, hope, and financial resources and the unproductive usage of faculty time and effort and it is viewed as a sign of waste and inefficiency (Slate, 1994; Berelson, 1960). As a result, individual faculty affected (Lunnebord & Lunnebord, 1973), department resources are wasted (Tucker, Gottlieb, & Pease, 1964), loss of productivity (Gillingham, Seneca, & Taussig, 1991). Rogers (1969), claimed that every student who leaves without completing a degree is a failure. Causes for non-completion rate of postgraduate degree program may be due to the weaknesses of the program or student and therefore, it should be carefully considered in order to correct. Student leaving during their dissertation stage is becoming a serious problem (Goulden, 1991). She also claimed that an extensive delay in completing the research is a personal tragedy for individual students, but it is also a wasteful, negative outcome for faculty and institutions. Likewise, students also face difficulties if the dissertation takes longer period of time (Pinson, 1997). Girves and Wemmerus (1986) argue that the reasons for the higher non-completion rate of postgraduate degree programs have not been systematically examined. Therefore, practitioners were interested in studying about the loss of resources by students, faculty, and institutions, resulting from non-completion of degree programs (Kluever, 1995). In addition to that for the individuals who commits so much time, energy, and money in an unsuccessful attempt to attain a postgraduate degree, there is

concern about the efficiency and effectiveness of a graduate education process that loses so many potentially productive resources including good researchers (Lawrence, 1999).

It is seen that over the past decade that students registering for postgraduate program are increasing in number in Sri Lanka. The universities in Sri Lanka have been conducting post graduate degree programs for many decades. In Sri Lanka, it is frequently quoted that although students are able to complete their all course works in their postgraduate degree program, most of the students do not complete their degrees within the regulated time or normal program duration, they may even stay up to stipulated period or even more than the stipulated period. Many students dropped out of their postgraduate studies after they have completed their course works while some finish their course works promptly and take years before completing their thesis. While some universities have only one stage of proposal presentation whereas others have several stages of proposal defending with many supervisory panels. At each of these stages students have to spend more time in preparation, refining and polishing of their research work. One of the striking cases is that of a student who started his PhD program in 2006, finished his all course work in the regular course duration and could not complete so far. This means that it is taking almost ten years to complete his thesis for three year program. This is a discouraging evident for future prospective students. At the same time it is a severe burden for the students as well as the faculties and management.

Furthermore, many scholars observed that, the problem of drop-out in postgraduate degree program is widely recognized and has been subject to consideration and investigation. The drop-out rate is a critical issue and it has been given much importance among researchers, studies were conducted in the context of distance mode postgraduate program (Reckkadal, 1983) offered by open university of Sri Lanka. Non-completion rate ranges from 43% to 51% among various universities in Sri Lanka. Although the drop-out rates for distance education courses are higher than those for comparable on-campus courses (Zoysa, 2009) it is a common problem for on-campus courses as well. The non-completion has never been documented or studied much. This appears to be the case not only in Sri Lankan universities but at most foreign universities as well (eg. Golde, 1995). In the Sri Lankan context, although few studies focused on undergraduate studies, studies examining non-completion of postgraduate program are seems to be sparse as far as the published literature is concern. Even the systematic data on non-completion also not accurately available. Lack of systematic data maintenance or failing to update information timely are being mentioned as the reasons for this absence of data. As conducting research has been identified as an important symbol of an excellent academic institution, academic quality and a source of recognition, and prestige, addressing this issue of high rate of non-completion is very important. Therefore, this study address the research question "what do candidates of Sri Lankan university postgraduate program perceive as barriers to completion of the degree? And to what extent do postgraduate students perceive these barriers responsible for delay in their thesis completion?"

## 2. Review of Literature

Generally postgraduate degree programs with research component goes through five stages (1) course work (2) finding a dissertation topic and writing a research proposal (3) assigning a supervisor (4) Doing research (5) Report writing. Many students move through each stage smoothly but some students experience a serious interruption in their progress. For the majority of students this takes place after course work in stage two. Finding a thesis topic and completion of a thesis involve tremendous work. Writing more than 100 pages is a painful task. Writing the dissertation is generally affected by various factors. One key factor in completing a postgraduate degree is persistence. Girves and Wemmerus (1988) developed a model of graduate student persistence that includes the degree of involvement in one's graduate program and the relationship with the faculty advisor, the quality of the relationship between the advisor and student, and the departmental characteristics.

Miller (1995) describes the student persistence with three types of graduate students, the "direct current," the "alternating current," and the "weak battery." Miller portrays the direct current graduate student as one who maintains a constant level of effort throughout the dissertation process, lead to rapid degree completion. This student seeks immediate help when any problem arises. Miller's (1995) alternating current graduate student, begins the dissertation process with a high degree of effort and then fluctuates between high and low activity. Much motivation is not necessary for this type of student. Although these students start their dissertation work strongly, however, experience delay during the research process. This type of students begin their research topic with high confident and face ups and down in the study process. However, during the dissertation process, short or long delays interrupt the student's progress. Although this student generally sets no specific completion date but has a general idea of a completion time. The weak battery type of graduate student, start their work strong, but gradually reducing in their effort towards completion. They need outside intervention or reinforcement to get a jump start. Such a student's "battery" is, at times, strong, and he progresses toward completion of the dissertation, at other times, the "battery" is weak and requires assistance from an external source. The "battery" may even die, and the candidate may leave the program altogether if their battery is not re-charged.

Beyond student persistence certain individual variables may determine the completion ability of the candidate that can predict the probability of the completion. This is measured at the selection process. In Sri Lanka the basic requirement for admitting the candidate for the postgraduate degree programs are, required minimum qualifications and experience, required marks obtain from the admission test, ability to pay financial requirement of the program and successfully facing the personal interview. Although, these variables may have impact on completion, Cook and Swanson (1978) say that student evaluation at selection have not been useful for predicting non-completion, however, program variables may be more useful.

Successful completion of thesis work is also heavily depending on the skills of supervisors. Effective supervision is very crucial for a good contribution by the student. Lategan (2009) stated that postgraduate supervision is the active engagement by the supervisor through the research process to guide the student to solve a research problem. Identifying a suitable supervisor who can assist the student to identify the research problem, apply correct methodologies to address the research problem and find appropriate solutions to the stated problem is highly emphasized. Supervisor-supervisee working relationship could result in delay in thesis completion. Unclear motives and purposes of supervision (Wallace, 2003), supervisors' preference of some supervisory roles over other roles (Vilkinas, 2002), and lack of research training among supervisors were also identified as major hindrances to thesis completion. Some supervisors are not trained on the newest research methods that could help them in guiding their students in the postgraduate which results in their inability to apply and transfer the appropriate skills and research expertise to their supervisees. Some institutional factors such as inadequate preparation for dissertation work (Bassett, 1979), problems with the supervisory committee, or lack of proper guidance from the senior supervisor also have been identified major hindrance to thesis completion (Schultz, 1983). Bassett (1979) emphasized the proper training on research methodology should be given for postgraduate students and poorly prepared for research prior to embarking on their thesis, may require considerable amounts of assistance for their research.

According to Morton and Worthley (1995) personal concepts such as job, family, insufficient training of students and problem with the supervisor and the administrative bureaucracy involved affect the thesis completion. Green and Powell (2005) identified individual factors such as gender, age, ethnicity and social background, structural factors such as levels of and a perfectionist tendency contribute to the delay in completing thesis. Some of these researchers (eg., Jinarek, 2010; Myres, 1999; Olorunnisola, 2011) highlighted that many post graduate students are being faced with non-completion due to the challenges in completion of thesis work such as funding, academic (previous experience and the type of research being undertaken) and environmental (supervision, mentoring, progress review and academic culture) factors as major reasons for thesis completion delay. Further, student's age and nationality were also reported to predict delay in the thesis completion (Barber, Kogenko, Park, Roche, & Stogner, 2003). This fact is supported by the fact that the older students do not defer because of intrinsic reasons they have for attending universities and thus complete their thesis earlier. Some other researchers found certain human activities eg; recreational activities, life events, family, children, friends, pregnancy, giving birth and caring for a baby could also lead to delay in thesis completion (Ho, Wong, & Wong, 2010). They have also highlighted some other factors such as poor knowledge of data related processes, lack of understanding of the thesis writing process, and student- supervisor personal qualities as major hindrances to thesis completion.

In addition to that some factors directly related to the students, have been reported to be as hindrance to complete the dissertations. Many evidence can be found in support of this argument. Student factors students' skill in conducting research, students' lack of capacity, lack of preparedness for research and postgraduate study, the post graduate student's emotional and psychological problems (Zuber-Skerritt, 1987), social and intellectual isolation (Conrad & Phillips, 1995), students' personal difficulties (e.g. financing, family issues) (Buttery, Richter, & Filho, 2005), sexual harassment and gender issues in supervision (Lee, 1998), and organizational factors (e.g. work space, facilities) have also been identified as major hindrances. Moreover, students' personal qualities such as lack of knowledge, frustration, loss of interest negative feedback and insecurity from the supervisor, lack of dependence related to mastery of research skills could also be as hindrance to complete. Morton and Worthley (1995) highlighted that student's ability in balancing between personal and academic lives can be an important factor to complete thesis work. Students' insufficient research knowledge or insufficient training in research methodology may be another reason for the non-completion.

Furthermore, Myers (1999) found that family or other personal obligations like paid jobs or professional responsibilities took time away from working on their dissertation. Myers (1999) also found that lack of understanding of the thesis writing process, frustration and/or loss of interest are the biggest barriers in thesis completion. The frustration, negative feedback, difficult relationship with the supervisor, or a change of interest were the reasons frequently highlighted by the students for the losing the initial enthusiasm student had for the thesis. Further Green and Powell argue that the nature of work commitment also influence the thesis completion. Generally part time students have more commitment than the full time students, therefore, full time students are able to complete early than part time students.

Postgraduate students need a conducive environment where they can freely concentrate in their studies and research work. Some other studies found various reasons for the non-completion. They are (eg., Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992; Jacks, Chubin, Porter, and Connoly, 1983) financial difficulties, poor working relationship with advisor and/or committee, substantive problems with the dissertation research, personal or emotional problems, receipt of an attractive job offer, interference of paid work with dissertation work, family demands, lack of peer support, and loss of interest in earning a Ph.D. Heiss (1970) found that many students dropped out of graduate school because of academic problems. This study has cited many reasons such as lost interest in the field, disillusioned with graduate work, poor relationship with their advisor, tired of studying, and lack of faculty interest in students. Further, some other authors Bowen and Rudenstine (1993) found four factors, selection of an appropriate dissertation topic, and extensive fieldwork during the data-gathering. Difference in expectations between the advisor and student, and feeling of isolation.

Some students are willing to take a break between the completions of course works and the commencement of the dissertation. Depending on the research title students have to go outside for extensive fieldwork during the data-gathering phase of the dissertation process. This situation creates the students take longer period to complete, sometime non-completion. Bowen and Rudenstine (1993) cited another factor, which may impede the completion of dissertation is supervising. Problems may arise including difference in expectations between the supervisor and student, unavailability of the supervisor, and lack of regular contact between the student and the supervisor. Pinson (1997) found four predictors of incompletion of dissertation: (1) failure to set a writing schedule, (2) inadequate computer skills, (3) the candidate's job demands, and (4) committee membership changes. Powell and Dean (1986) state that one of the major reasons for some students fail to finish their dissertation is the level of stress involved. Sorenson and Kagan (1987) cited that the personality of the student and the supervisor must match on the levels of (a) dependence versus independence, (b) nurturance versus distance, and (c) epistemological preference. Cheatham et al. (1982) stated that non-completion is possible because of lack of quality interaction between student and their supervisors. Further, Bowen and Rudenstine (1993) claimed that the dissertation writing phase is not collaborative, and during this time students are often off campus, some students experience a feeling of isolation. A study conducted by Katz and Hartnett (1976) found nine problem associated with non-completion such as, insufficient information provided to students, feeling of isolation, no opportunity for lively interaction with fellow graduate students, limited access of professors, engagement of studies which does not enhance the capabilities of the student etc. Postgraduate students spend long hours in the libraries, reading materials, searching source, and repeated writing the dissertation draft separate them from spending time with their family and friends, experience lonely and isolation. In support of this argument, Kiely (1982) claimed that during the dissertation development stage postgraduate candidates may find themselves disconnected from institutional support systems in the form of classes, and structured faculty student interaction; finding themselves alone, a sense of anomie may develop. The anomie may intensify when it is recognized that previous course work has not prepared the candidate to conduct a dissertation (Kiely, 1982).

A study conducted by Hommadai (1990) on higher education in the third world countries and found, the absence of an adequate policy and the programming of research work in the universities, the reluctance to allocate funds for research, inadequate resources, the failure to allocate staff time for research, the lack of commitment and the inadequate competence of supervisors as major impediments to research. Ismail (1997) have identified three major types of theoretical models related to drop-outs, i.e., the student institutional fit model which stresses that institutional variables are more influential on drop–outs decisions, the student environmental fit model which stresses that home and environment variables are more influential on drop–out decisions and individual–congruence model where drop–out and the participation depend on how individual variables interact with environmental and institutional variables. Ismail (1997) identified economic background variables, the demographic variables, the variables related to student behavior of the student support system and the variables related to distance from the home to the institution were more significantly influential on drop –outs, and strong relationship found of drop –out and quality of the support system and the student satisfaction with the support system provided by the institution. Another study by Wanasinghe (1989) on drop –outs of Open University of Sri Lanka, classified factors which cause students' drop–out under two major categories; student based and course based. This study revealed that the major factors responsible for the drop-outs are mainly student based. Personal, social and economic reasons appear to have influenced the drop–out too.

While Cheatham, Edwards, and Erickson, (1982) argue stress of writing a dissertation does not cause for non-completion of dissertation, some other authors (Moore, 1985; Powell & Dean, 1986) argue that pressure extensively cause for delay. Powell and Dean (1986) state that engaging in dissertation may be the cause for stress in two ways: stress in the social sense and stress in the task sense: stress in the social sense is generated when the student is unable to socialize and relax with family, friends, and significant others without feeling guilty that time is being wasted that could be spent working on the dissertation, stress in the task sense is generated because the amount of time spent working on the dissertation makes the researcher feel negligent in

terms of time away from family, friends and significant others.

## 3. Research Methodology

As the objective of this study is to identify the factors that hinder the completion of postgraduate degrees and to suggest appropriate measure which may reduce the non-completion rate, initially this study review the literature to identify any factors which have been identified as hindrance for a thesis completion by previous research. Then, this study employs two types of analysis: exploratory and descriptive. The former explore the situation by generating information from relevant respondent group and do content analysis for finding factors which influence completion of dissertation. The latter describe with frequencies and mean to describe and explain the real situation of the non-completion. The postgraduate students of national universities in Sri Lanka who did not complete their program within the given program duration constituted the population of the study.

## 4. Exploratory Study

Initially, to identify the factors to complete dissertation, first literature was reviewed and a thematic survey of qualitative descriptive studies was applied to identify potential factors for completion of postgraduate degree program. Gathering descriptions from respondents and then classifying them into a number of categories by content analysis was employed. Participants were then asked to provide six factors they experience as contributing factor for the delay in thesis completion. This type of study fit the needs of the researcher to explore for information related to thesis non-completion experience, and permitted the participants to tell their stories and allowed the participants to provide a fresh comments about the delay. The sample of twenty postgraduate students who are already delay in thesis completion generated 120 items. The exploratory study employ convenient sampling, thereby subjects are selected on an ad hoc basis. Next, the author classified the items into (n) categories based on the similarity of item content. Author categorized all the items into a small number of mutually exclusive categories. Table 1 presents a description of the six categories and the frequency of distribution of the 120 items. To reduce the number of categories to a more manageable number, conceptually similar categories were grouped into broader, more abstract factors, then categories were combined into broader, conceptually meaningful factors. Six major factors were identified from the original items generated by the respondents. In order to ensure internal validity, these six factors are compared with the factors found from the literature to refine to ensure the match between factors found from the literature and participant reality. Based on this, the researcher extrapolated the factors which influence the non-completion of postgraduate thesis.

Table 1 depicts the most important factors in not completing the degree, as listed by the candidates. Student qualities was the factor listed most commonly, with 35 % of the candidates offering this response. Sixteen percent of the candidates identified "personal situations," making this the second most commonly cited factor, and 15 % identified "financial resources" to make this the third most commonly cited factor. Only 13% of the respondents identified "research facilities" and 12% identified "supervisory "as the important factor and making these factors next important factor respectively.

Table 1: Factors influencing thesis completion

| Factors generated by Participants | Frequency | Emerging Factors | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Work hard | 08 | Student qualities | 35% |
| Active Engagement | 07 | | |
| Commitment | 07 | | |
| Motivation | 05 | | |
| Skills | 04 | | |
| Reading habit | 04 | | |
| Ability to work independently | 03 | | |
| Writing ability | 03 | | |
| Professional obligations | 07 | Personal situation | 16% |
| Family difficulty | 07 | | |
| Financial limitation | 05 | | |
| Company sponsorship | 06 | Financial resources | 15% |
| Access to research grant | 06 | | |
| Sufficient fund | 05 | | |
| Access to data bases | 06 | Research facilities | 13% |
| Access to good libraries | 05 | | |
| Guidance from experts | 04 | | |
| Relationship with the supervisor | 04 | Supervisory | 12% |
| Systematic supervisory system | 03 | | |
| Frequent interaction with the supervisor | 02 | | |
| Accessibility of supervisor | 02 | | |
| Helpful supervisor | 02 | | |
| Good thesis committee | 01 | | |
| Prompt supervisor feedback | 01 | | |
| Conflicting feedback | 01 | | |
| Sufficient training for research | 03 | Contextual factors | 09% |
| Administrative bureaucracy | 03 | | |
| Difficulties in data gathering | 02 | | |
| Guidelines for dissertation | 02 | | |
| Departmental politics among faculty members | 01 | | |
| Lengthy maximum time limit | 01 | | |
| Total | 120 | | 100% |

Source: Survey data

Examples of items that suggested that 'student quality' was a factor that impeded thesis completion: I did not work hard towards completing my thesis work". Examples of item made by the respondents that suggested that 'personal situations' impeded completion: My professional obligations did not allow me to find time in completing my thesis" "my family commitments made me difficult to find time to devote in thesis work". Examples of items that suggested that 'financial resource' was a factor that impeded thesis completion: "I was having a hard time financially", "I could not receive any grant for my research". Examples of comments made by respondents that suggested 'research facility' had an effect on thesis completion: "I did not have access to good data bases for a good search". Examples of items that suggested that 'supervisory' was a factor that impeded thesis completion: "I t was very difficult to obtain an appointment to meet my supervisor". Examples of items that suggested that 'contextual factors' was a factor that impeded thesis completion: "training on research methods is not sufficient"

## 5. Descriptive Study

To measure each of the six factors found in the exploratory study, three to eight items were developed from the original items generated by the respondents. These items were developed in such a way as to represent all other items based on the frequencies of initial categories for incidents, which resulted in 31 items. All items were originally developed in English and translated into Sinhala and Tamil via a double blind back-translation technique (Brislin, 1980). First the new scale was administered to 30 postgraduate students who have not completed their thesis within the stipulated period, to screen validity and reliability. Minor modifications were made in the scale after the initial administration of the test. For making the meaning of words and items more clear five items were reworded. Editing was done on the items to prevent double-barreled questions, and to avoid vague questions or phrases. And due to hesitation of the majority of the respondents to mention the name of the

university, that information was removed from the final version of the questionnaire. The scale was checked to confirm normal distribution.

The questionnaire comprised two sections: Section A comprised the demographic characteristics of the participants; Section B has six sub-sections which are: student qualities, personal situation, financial resources, research facilities and scholarly environment, supervisory and other contextual factors. The items in section B were scored based on five-point rating scale ranging from SD = Strongly Disagree to SA = Strongly Agree. In order to validate the interview questions, the researcher tested the initial drafts of the instruments. This test identified problems or weaknesses in wording or construction and was conducted among a sample of ten participants from similar group of students and modification was made. Reliability Cronbach alpha coefficients was 0.77 for section one, 0.74 for sub-section two, 0.82 for sub-section three, 0.76 for subsection four, 0.84 for sub-section five and 0.78 for section six.

The descriptive study using a survey method apply snowball sampling design as the proper record of delayed students are not possible to obtain. For this purpose the researcher solicit help from one delayed student students in identifying the names of other students experiencing delay in completing their research. The main objective of this descriptive study was to confirm how extent each factor influence the thesis completion. As such this study answer the research question "To what extent do postgraduate students perceive factors: student qualities, personal situation, financial resources, research facilities, supervisory, and contextual factors as responsible for delay in their thesis completion?"

Mean and standard deviation were used for answering the research questions. Sample size of 80 students who did not complete their postgraduate degrees from various faculties in three national universities were selected for this study. Response rate was only 68% and 7% were unable to contact. The respondents of this study were adult learners and the majority (65%) of them were married. A descriptive analysis of responses was done on the basis of the frequencies of the responses. Important variables were cross–tabulated with a number of other variables, to pay more attention to specific issues related to each section.

Table 2 shows the most of the items fall above 2.50. Thus, the items do contribute to delay in thesis completion. Especially, working hard, commitment, interest in research and reading habit contribute to delay in thesis completion. Mean of item 7 (*M= 2.48, SD= 1.08*), preference to working independently falls below 2.5 implies that this item did not significantly contribute to delay in thesis completion. Further, from the exploratory study it is found that 35% of the respondents felt the factor 'student quality' as a hindrance to the thesis completion. However, according to exploratory study inability to write did not show more frequently cited reason.

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation of 'Student qualities' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---------|------|------|-----|
| 1 | I did not work hard towards completion of my dissertation | 2.92 | 1.01 |
| 2 | I did not get interested in engaging research | 2.73 | 1.22 |
| 3 | I am not committed for the research | 2.81 | 1.25 |
| 4 | I am not motivated to complete the research | 2.65 | 0.97 |
| 5 | I have not sufficient research skills | 2.64 | 1.18 |
| 6 | I do not have a habit of reading | 2.73 | 1.14 |
| 7 | I do not prefer independence in the research work | 2.48 | 1.08 |
| 8 | I do not have good writing ability | 2.57 | 1.10 |

Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation of personal situation items. Mean value of all items falls above 2.5, implies that the personal situations, professional obligations and family commitment contribute to delay in thesis completion to a considerable extent.

Table 3: Mean and Standard deviation of 'Personal situation' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---------|------|------|-----|
| 1 | My professional obligations do not permit to spend time on research | 2.89 | 1.24 |
| 2 | I have difficulty in my family | 2.78 | 1.21 |
| 3 | I have a problem of financial limitation | 2.52 | 1.11 |

From the exploratory study it is found that 15% of the respondents felt the financial resources factor as a hindrance to the thesis completion. They might be experiencing financial difficulties as they do not possess a sound economic back ground. This situation may have had influenced on their research studies. Further six percent of them responded that inadequate financial aid from their institutions in the form of research grants. This is consistent with Hommadai (1990) who had highlighted that inadequate allocation of funds for research work in the third world countries has become an obstacle.

Table 4 shows that mean results of items 1 and item 2 are above 2.5, thus these items were factor of delay in thesis completion. However, the item 3 falls below 2.5 implies this item have not been much contributed to delay in thesis completion as far as the students responses. However, the standard deviation for item 2 and

item 3 falls above 1, which imply the deviation from mean value for these two item are little high among various respondents. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the financial availability or access to financial resource have been identified one of the important factor among Sri Lankan postgraduate students who did not complete their thesis work within the time specified.

Table 4: Mean and Standard deviation of 'financial resources' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | My company does not sponsor my study program | 2.87 | 0.97 |
| 2 | I have not access to research grant | 2.92 | 1.20 |
| 3 | I have not enough fund for the research | 2.41 | 1.03 |

Table 5: Mean and Standard deviation of 'Research facilities' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I do  not have access to research data base sources | 3.49 | 0.96 |
| 2 | I do not have access to good libraries | 2.98 | 1.26 |
| 3 | I do not have access to guidance from experts | 2.21 | 1.03 |

The study found out that access to research data base sources as an important factor in thesis completion to a great extent (*M*= 3.49, *SD*= 0.96). Further access to good libraries as an important factor in thesis completion to a great extent (*M=2.98, SD=1.26*). The standard deviation indicated that the responses were not necessarily clustered around the mean but were dispersed. Access to guidance from experts affect only to a small extent (*M=2.21, SD=1.03)*. Thus, results reveal that to a high extent unavailability of databases and not having access to good libraries can delay thesis completion. Item 3 is below 2.5 mean level which imply that students delay in thesis completion is not seriously caused by this factor. However, standard deviation is high in terms of item 3 and item 2. In overall access to research facilities would have been cause for delayed thesis completion.

Table 6: Mean and Standard deviation of 'Supervisory' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | I do not have a good relationship with the supervisor | 2.25 | 1.12 |
| 2 | I do not have a structured supervisory system (such as a written task specification, regular deadlines, regular monitoring, and regular feedback) | 3.24 | 0.95 |
| 3 | I do not interact with the supervisor more frequently | 2.87 | 0.98 |
| 4 | My supervisor is not always accessible | 2.64 | 0.93 |
| 5 | My supervisor is not very helpful | 2.30 | 0.85 |
| 6 | I have problems within the thesis committee | 2.01 | 1.02 |
| 7 | I get lack of prompt feedback | 2.51 | 0.84 |
| 8 | I get conflicting and inconsistent feedback | 2.45 | 0.93 |

The Table 5 presents the mean and standard deviation of supervisory items. Respondents are of the opinion that not having a structured supervisory system such as written task specification, regular deadlines, regular monitoring and regular feedback contribute to delay in thesis completion. The study established that non availability of structured supervisory system cause for delay in thesis completion to a great extent (*M*= 3.24, *SD*= 0.95) However, mean of item 1, 5, 6, and 8 falls below 2.5. This implies that although in overall supervisory contribute to delay in thesis completion, relationship between supervisor and supervisee, helpfulness of supervisor, problem with thesis committee and conflicting feedback did not contribute to delay to a great extent. Overall supervisory is seen as a factor in completion of thesis. However, there were variations in the responses as evidenced by the standard deviations shown alongside. Further based on the exploratory study 12% of the responses stressed that the supervisory factor contribute to the delay in thesis completion. As per the descriptive study data collected through the questionnaire, in general respondents had positive attitudes towards their supervisors and fairly satisfied in terms of good relationship, helpfulness, consistent feedback. However, some dropout students have mentioned lack of supervisory support as the main reason for their failure.

Table 7: Mean and Standard deviation of 'other contextual factors' items

| Item No | Item | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | My study program has insufficient training for research | 2.62 | 1.23 |
| 2 | More administrative bureaucracy and complexity of the process in our study program | 2.48 | 0.96 |
| 3 | I have difficulties in data gathering | 2.83 | 1.22 |
| 4 | We do not have clear guidelines for dissertation | 2.45 | 0.93 |
| 5 | There are departmental politics and personality conflicts between faculty members | 2.25 | 1.01 |
| 6 | Maximum time limit set for our program is too lengthy | 2.30 | 0.84 |

The result of the study as shown in Table 7, the post graduate students in items 1, 3 are above the 2.50

mean level. As such according to the perceptions of students in terms of complexity of administrative bureaucracy, lack of proper guidelines, departmental politics and the time limit for the program were not seriously affected their thesis completion. However, insufficient training for research and difficulties in gathering data were reported to be hindrance for delay in thesis completion.

## 6.        Discussion and Conclusions

Further the information also gathered from another 20 successful candidates who could successfully completed their research within the stipulated period. It is interesting to note that 70 percent of the successful candidates are university employees and 80 percent of the respondents are academics who directly involve in academic activities. Successful completion of these candidates might have been caused by two main reasons. Firstly, completion of postgraduate degrees with research component is an essential criterion for the confirmation and future career development for university academics. Secondly, 90 percent of them were granted leave for their postgraduate studies. These two collectively might have been a major motivating factor to do research. From the responses by the candidates who successfully completed, it is also observed that they had spent an average time period of more than thirty hours per week on their research activities.

Based on the findings of this study, few recommendations could be made for higher educational institutions which offers postgraduate degree programs. Students' selection criteria at the admission should be redesigned such a way to measure the students' ability, hardworking nature and their interest towards completion of the program with high commitment. Secondly, the candidates should be properly trained on the research methods which will pave the way to the students to work independently. Postgraduate degree program providers can try as much as possible to make available research support services as well as continuous training of the students and the supervisors. Definitely this process will reduce the inefficiency on the part of the supervisees and the supervisors

Further summarizing the responses obtained from some open ended questions are also felt necessary at this point. Some students have mentioned their heavy professional commitment made them to not to devote time for research activities. Successful research completion require continuous involvement. They might have faced difficulties in conducting research work while holding career responsibilities. In addition to this, professionals from some type of organizations generally do not enjoy leave benefits for their higher studies like candidates from educational institutions. Therefore, they found it difficult to devote time for studies continuously. Allocating few hours for research work is insufficient to achieve a satisfactory progress. Therefore, insufficient allocation of time for research might have been the cause for delay in thesis completion. Therefore, organizations in which candidates are attached for work should consider granting leave for their research work.

According to the exploratory study the factor 'student quality' which consists hardworking, commitment, active engagement and motivation have influenced the thesis delay. Therefore, students should work hard with high commitment and motivation in order to complete their thesis successfully. Another factor that influenced their thesis delay was the insufficient writing ability and the language barrier. Postgraduate candidates should write their thesis in English language which is not their mother tongue. Therefore, inability to write in English also affected their thesis completion. The result of this study also indicated that student quality and personal situation contribute to delay in thesis completion to a great extent.

The study also revealed that absence of systematic supervisory system cause thesis delay. According to some respondents some supervisors are not frequently available, thus difficult to interact frequently. Some respondents have emphasized that although they had submitted certain part of thesis, it take long time to obtain feedback from their supervisors. Therefore, a systematic supervising schedule should be prepared and it should be strictly followed by both parties. Some respondents have mentioned that their supervisors are flooded with much workload with lot of professional obligations and much supervisees. Therefore, supervisor's current workload must also be considered before assigning further supervisory responsibilities. The result further shows that poor skill in conducting research could delay thesis completion. This infer that research student must develop their skills in writing, analyze and interpret results.

Further, it is also noted that insufficient training in the research method have also been mainly blamed by the respondents who were already delayed in thesis completion. Therefore, extending the time for research methods, conducting seminars and workshops in research methodology should be incorporated in the structure of postgraduate degree programs. Research students can also be motivated to participate in research sessions and research conference or symposium conducted at universities or in other educational institutions.

Participants from other organizations other than universities have made a comment of inadequate relevant material and unavailability of access to good data bases. Some participants blame the administrative bureaucracy of their university. Although majority of students were satisfied with the administrative procedures, some participants stated that it take lengthy time period for the administrative procedures such as, various panel presentations, necessary approval for proposal, the time gap between the submission of the thesis and the viva and the gap between the viva and obtaining the certificate. Since completing a degree with a research component

is a painful task with much devotion and commitment, unnecessary delay for administrative procedures must be minimized and necessary actions should be implemented in order to expedite the routine administrative procedures. A systematic time frame must be developed for every activity after the submission of the thesis.

As the majority of research students were of the opinion about financial problem, organizations should consider about providing research grant or some soft loan facilities. In order to improve the writing skills of the research the program can have certain component which may improve their writing skills. In order to improve or establish a good research culture among postgraduate students they should be motivated to engage in more research and publication in collaboration with their supervisors gradually before stepping into their major thesis work.

A good conducive research environment can be made available for the postgraduate students with necessary facilities such as internet facilities, e-resources. A separate research corner can be reserved for this purpose at the main library. The library should also be fully equipped with all necessary and new collection of books which are useful for research. It is also important to notice that some respondents have said that they are not provided a clear guideline to write a thesis. Therefore, issuing a guideline which provide information about thesis from initiate to final submission after viva with evaluation criteria is necessary (Rauf, 2014).

## 7. Implications

The findings of this study have many implications for various stakeholders such as supervisees, supervisors, postgraduate degree providers as well as policy makers. The study has revealed that major factors point to the fact that, student' quality is the most important factor to supervisees delay in thesis completion. This shows that the students with a standard pre-requisite entry behavior should be allowed admission into postgraduate study. This study clearly shows that the hardworking, active engagement and motivation of students is essential in the timely completion of thesis. The other factors are like the personal situations such as professional obligations, family commitment, and financial problem, supervisory are the other factors which hindered the thesis completion. This is highly informing in the area where there is increasing number of postgraduate student's enrolment rate in Sri Lanka, then there is need for systematic through the factors identified in this study and finding ways reducing or eliminating untimely completion of thesis.

By identifying and examining the factors which influence the non-completion rate at postgraduate level, this study have come to a conclusion on how non-completion evolve. This study give a picture of the candidates' mind and their perception about the courses of non-completion in Sri Lankan in-campus postgraduate degree programs, whereas previous studies have (Zoysa, 2009) focused on the distance mode postgraduate degree program specially offered by the open university in Sri Lanka. This study definitely give interest to students, faculty, and administrators who are concerned about non-completion and efficiency and effectiveness of the postgraduate degree programs in Sri Lanka. As such, this study examine the reasons that postgraduate candidates give as to why they did not complete the requirements for the postgraduate degree in Sri Lankan state universities and suggest appropriate measure which may reduce the non-completion rate. Findings of this study also provide helpful guidelines for postgraduate students and supervisors. The findings of this study give a better understanding of the causes for non-completion with useful information for the leadership of postgraduate programs for making future policies to address the high percentage of non-completion and to maintain a higher completion rate by identifying areas for reform.

The biggest limitation of this study is the sampling method. Due to the problem of the access to the delayed candidates' random sampling method was not employed. Therefore, the researcher had to go with convenient sampling and snowball sampling method. Therefore, the number of the participants in the study also reduced. This study examine the experiences of postgraduate students of only few universities in Sri Lanka between 2005 and 2015. By limiting the study to those who obtained candidacy during this period, confidence has been reduced in generalizing the findings to postgraduate students from other years and other settings. This study is limited in its application due to the fact that only candidates who attended to these few universities and agreed to participate in this study were interviewed. Further, the study could not be extended to other universities due to the challenges incorporated with the time and data gathering.

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