



Studying in a Distance Education Program: An Examination of Doctoral Students' 'Alternative' Sources of Learning

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Submitted 07.04.2026 Accepted 22.06.2026 Published 30.06.2026 Volume No. 13 Issue No. I ISSN (Online) 2414-8512 ISSN (Print) 2311-293X DOI: Keywords: Distance Learning, Doctoral Education, Alternative Resources, Off Campus Learning, Study Groups, Digital Discussion Forums, Peer Support.	<i>The aim of present study is the investigation of alternative learning resources being used by the students of distance doctoral programs in order to overcome the challenges in approaching the distance education and students' support system. It covers distance education program students and includes representation of diverse experience. Snowball sampling technique was utilized to collect data. It was done through semi structured interviews and focus groups discussion which engaged the students to exchange their strategies, preferences and the challenges they face while using online forums, personal networks, study groups and digital library resources as alternative sources of learning. Thematic analysis was employed in order to point out key patterns and effectiveness of these resources in the enhancement of learning experience in doctoral programs. Students in distance education rely heavily on online forums to get peer support. Also, formal university professors, colleagues and seniors are of crucial importance in personal guidance in such programs. Study groups whether online or one on one are also key elements in developing a collaborative learning environment and research-based education. In addition, digital discussion forums were also found to be strongly significant for the online doctoral students to have an easy access to current scholarly materials. The study concludes that alternative learning sources can support the online doctoral students in a variety of ways. They may provide flexibility, diverse perspectives and timely access to information along with mitigating the deficiency of physical classrooms. This study also gives strong indicators to public sector universities for a work on integration of these alternative resources with formal learning methods to make improvements in students' success and engagement in distance learning programs.</i>



Introduction

An easy access to digital tools owing to the advancements in information technology have revolutionized the scope of higher education. Though flexible but owing to the independent nature, doctoral distance learning programs cause a number of challenges. To meet these challenges, alternative resources are of crucial value for students' success in distance education. These resources include online libraries, open access journals, videos lectures, webinars and virtual conferences. Such resources are worthwhile and deliver guidance, views of professionals and tools for supporting the research process (Dombroski et al., 2018). Digital resources make doctoral students capable of heavy access to the updated advancements in their fields.

It is often expected by the doctoral students to conduct innovative research and make contribution to the existing literature. This goal can be achieved only if they have access to updated resources. These resources might not be readily available through traditional methods particularly in the case of distance learning environment (Muller et al., 2023). Additionally, the social isolation in distance learning setting needs peer interaction, membership and feedback (Ali & Leeds, 2020). Doctoral students must find out the effective alternative resources to achieve success in doctoral studies. The key strategies for this purpose involve the use of online data basis like JSTOR, to make an interaction with international research communities through virtual conferences and webinars. A supporting social network also plays an effective role in success of doctoral students. It helps doctoral students to exchange these experiences. Such a network contributes a lot in the guidance of doctoral students throughout their academic journey (Dombroski et al., 2018).

Emotional, financial and practical support from colleagues, friends and family is helpful in overcoming the challenges of doctoral study (Williams et al., 2019).

There is a strong influence of university linked networks on academic and intellectual growth but emotional support is often provided by personal networks outside the academic environment. Participation in conferences and involvement in academic learning groups can prove an extra source of support, motivation and professional development. These conferences provide a platform to students for sharing their research enabling them to build professional connections and gain insights from skilled academics (Williams et al., 2019).

University networks are particularly valuable for the improvement of technological command and intellectual development. University based educational conferences can provide extra motivation and guidance. These opportunities provide direct interaction with peers and faculty to enrich their experience (Lau, 2021).

A significant impact has been observed owing to advancement in technology on delivery of distance education, where learning management system (LMS) plays a pivotal role. LMS has transformed educational system entirely, facilitating the scholars with online exchange of materials, easy communication between instructors and students, and ease of performing academic activities (Bervell & Arkorful, 2020). Direct access to learning resources and quality online learning environment to support synchronous learning are the remarkable opportunities provided by LMS platforms. These platforms also provide access to educational sources and track learning progress (chen et al., 2009).

LMS tools make the students able to learn independently with flexible schedule which is basic for independent nature of education. Though these systems offer valuable resources, yet the true potential of technology is realized only when students actively engage with these platforms and use them effectively to support their learning goals (Md Yunus et al., 2021).

The distance education system is continuously evolving with technological innovations and learning resources. The distance doctoral programs offer flexibility, but they also pose unique challenges related to research, peer interaction and access to specialized resources.

Purpose of the Study

To explore the alternative sources of learning in order to engage the doctoral students, was the purpose of this study (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). The increasing demand of distance learning, specifically at the doctoral level often causes the students to face a variety of challenges like limited personal interaction with faculty, peers, feelings of isolation and the requirement for self-governed learning. The study also aimed at identifying the nontraditional resources and methods that doctoral students may use to support their education and meet these challenges.

Research Questions

- 1) RQ1: How do doctoral students utilize off campus learning resources to enrich their academic experience in a distance education program?
- 2) RQ2: How do online discussion boards support doctoral students enrolled in distance learning programs in their intellectual exchange and academic collaboration?

Research Methodology

To investigate the lived experiences of the doctoral students in distance education, this research employs phenomenological case study approach. This methodology makes the researcher able to develop a deeper insight into the students' experiences. It also provides a bulk of information regarding strategies to tackle different challenges in distance education. The case study conducted in this research makes a through explanation of the unique context of distance education in a public sector university. It also encompasses the opportunities provided by the distance education as well as the challenges that students' face. The underlying process and factors in the contribution of students' experience and outcomes is also its focus (Tomaszewski

et al., 2020). This case study deeply analyzes the complexity of doctoral distance education within a public sector university in Pakistan.

Data collection

The distance doctoral students in a public university were the population of the present study. Snowball sampling was adopted to select 25 students as a sample. A number of 16 semi structured interviews were conducted along with three focus group discussions. It was done by utilizing phenomenological approach to encompass transparent, open and lived experiences of participants (Bevan, 2014). The format of interviews was designed carefully to encourage open and interpersonal conversation. The researcher adopted an accepting attitude and maintained active listening in the whole process. Prior to interviews the purpose of the research was shared with the participants and formal consent was taken. To maintain accuracy transcription of audios was matched with original recordings time and again.

Data Analysis

The commonalities and variations that emerge during the collection of data via interviews can be examined through thematic analysis. In addition, it is also a suitable method if someone wants to scrutinize the information (Creswell, 2009). Resemblance and variations can also be pin pointed through this method of data collection. It also supports the researcher in classifying and organizing the data into themes and to study the way a problem influences the opinion of participants. The arrangement of data and cluster formation depending on the resemblances and differences is also possible through thematic analysis (Miles & Huberman, 2002). The process of thematic data analysis covers coding, classification and highlighting the patterns which may incorporate in theme identification at various levels (Terry, 2017). It also helps in establishing coherent sequence. The description of the procedures through which data is gathered can be made in a concise way through this method. The researcher arranges and classifies the ideas and concepts produced by the research at the end of the data collection. Building of coherent conclusions and creating frameworks based on the organized data are involved in this process. Following this phase, the researcher must make the sense of contradictory and similar data (Creswell, 2007).

Results of the Study

RQ1: How do doctoral students utilize off-campus learning resources, to enhance their academic experience in distance education?

Any non-traditional resources and materials that students may utilize in place of textbooks, lectures, and class activities are referred to as alternative learning resources in distance education. It helps doctoral students to overcome obstacles, build their academic networks outside of the university and improve their research work.

Off Campus Learning

Writing research work can benefit greatly from the assistance of former university professors, peers, senior students, social media groups, online research videos, and academic writing seminars. Even though universities offer a wealth of resources and assistance to help scholars along the way, advice from professors outside of universities can be especially helpful. For doctoral researchers who might feel stuck in their work or who require an alternative viewpoint to tackle an issue, this can be especially helpful. Professors outside of universities can offer beneficial networking opportunities. Their relationships with other researchers in the field may allow doctoral scholars to access resources and broaden their network that they otherwise might not have had. These relationships, also pave a way for future partnerships. Fruitful criticism on research concepts and procedures help the scholars to improve their work.

To deal with diverse data types, the presence of the *statistician* is a great blessing. They can help the researcher to select the best statistical tools to examine their data. Such assistance leads to accurate interpretation and findings. Through a lot of assistance is provided by the universities, yet the guidance from outside experts is also of key importance. The participant “9” narrated her experience as,

For two months, I worked under the supervision of a statistician who was not serving my university. He supported me at every stage of my research like creation of data tables and analysis of data. He motivated me to carry out my own investigations. I am grateful for him as he made me an expert in data analysis.

A student who is not familiar with statistical tools will find data analysis to be a very challenging step. According to the participant, the statistician assisted her in creating tables, determining her research strategy, and presenting the findings. He inspired her to become a skilled data analyst as well. She believes that he provided her with helpful advice for her quantitative research. She was able to make her research accurate and significant by collaborating with a statistician.

The majority of the scholars have limited opportunities to use laboratories for data collection

because they live far from the university. If a nearby university permits the student to use its laboratory for data collection, it becomes extremely advantageous for him. In this regard, participant "14" expressed his opinions as follows: *"I sought assistance from my former M.Phil. supervisor because I was unable to live in the university residence hall. He gave me permission to conduct experiments and gather data in the lab. It enabled me to finish my work on schedule"*. The variety of experiments can be increased by having easy access to the laboratory. It may contribute to more precise and thorough outcomes. The participant was fortunate to receive this benefit. Different new perspectives on problems can be guided by other researchers. They offer perspectives and answers that the learner might not have thought of. Researchers can pool their expertise by working together. It enables a researcher to take on challenging issues. Better research results may result from this.

The self-directed and highly motivated learner "15" shared his opinions as follows: *"At one point, I was having trouble choosing research methodologies, and my supervisor didn't have a lot of time for me"*. I spoke with my senior fellow from the other university about my issue, and he came up with a solution.

The stress and strain of conducting research can be lessened with the assistance of other researchers. It can be very helpful to have someone to talk to and share experiences with because research is a difficult and overwhelming process. Talking about research with other researchers can lead to fresh concepts and approaches. The participant "2" expressed his opinion as follows:

Like everyone else, I undoubtedly sought assistance from my former university professor. She gave me her thoughtful advice from start to finish. Throughout my research, I met with her frequently, and she consistently granted my requests.

To ask a question and share his thoughts a student feels less shyness from his former professors. They may provide a valuable guidance regarding the research procedure. Their criticism on research work is very helpful for researchers to improve their skills and techniques. The below mentioned participant "6" shared her experience as:

I was fully confused, when my synopsis was turned down with a lot of negative remarks. I could not encourage myself to work on my research for a full year. I started thinking to quit my studies due to inappropriate guidance from university end. It was my good luck that my fiancé sent me to a professor, who motivated me and gave me a good piece of advice. He pointed out different shortcomings in my synopsis, and fortunately I was able to get it accepted.

The generous guidance provided by the professor outside of the university proved a milestone of her career when he was about to leave the studies. The student was inspired to finish his work by the professor's support and encouragement. She assisted him in writing his synopsis in addition to providing him with motivation. Professors outside of universities can offer special advantages, even though universities provide a wealth of resources and support services for PhD students. They provide a novel viewpoint for research concepts. They can assist scholars in thinking more critically and creatively about their research by providing different points of view, which can result in more inventive and significant work. Professors outside of universities provide support and direction to students through counseling or even casual discussions. From publishing to research design, they can provide advice and insight. Therefore, consulting with professors outside of the university can be a great way for doctoral students to get advice. Focus group 1 participant "17" expressed the following opinions about seeking outside assistance:

My former professors were very helpful in helping me navigate the difficult and complex process of finishing my doctorate. I occasionally saw him, and he helped me work through my issues with choosing a theoretical framework.

Similarly, the participant "19" of the same group expressed his experience as:

I was not proficient in quantitative data analysis. My former university's generous professor helped me gain the abilities and information required to properly use software tools for data analysis. He gave me excellent supervision and assisted me in identifying and resolving a variety of issues.

The identical circumstance was also explained by focus group-2 participant "21." *"My former professor not only assisted me with data analysis but also provided guidance when I was discussing the study's findings"*. Former professors frequently possess extensive experience and expertise in the field of research. They are able to offer students insightful advice. The discussion above clarifies why the doctoral scholar turned to their former university professors for a lot of assistance. They offered advice and assistance in every manner they could. It was beneficial to the participants in that they were able to receive the support

and guidance they needed at home and were not burdened.

RQ2: How do online discussion boards support doctoral students enrolled in distance learning programs in their intellectual exchange and academic collaboration?

Digital Discussion Forums

Students can interact with peers, teachers, and experts through digital discussion forums, which fosters group learning and idea sharing that advances their academic development in distance learning. Now a days social media plate forms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp are good source in maintaining relationships with class fellows and supervisors. Due to their familiarity and ease of use, WhatsApp groups can offer a number of benefits to scholars during their doctoral studies. These groups can be an invaluable resource for doctoral scholars, providing everything from emotional support to communication and collaboration facilitation.

In response to a query about other resources, participant "9" stated, *"Even prior to my doctoral studies, I was a part of a student social media group"* For doctoral scholars selecting a research topic can be a difficult task as it demands a thorough comprehension of existing data. The knowledge of new trends and opportunities is very helpful in selecting a research area. He also mentioned the advantage as *"I had a great information about modern research trends as I was an active member of social media groups. It also helped me to select my field of study in a big way"*.

Selection of research area is basic and troublesome assignment. It involves deep understanding of emerging trends and updated information. The participant described his experience of having an advantage from the social media groups as he was an active participant of social media groups so he was well aware of recent developments in research.

The third participant discussed the assistance from the discussion forum by saying, *"I joined academia.edu by chance. It gave me encouragement and information that really helped me write my thesis"*. The discussion forums provide information on various research topics. They can refine their ideas and pinpoint knowledge gaps by participating in debates and discussions with researchers and peers. The participant found the academic.edu discussion forum to be very beneficial for his research.

Scholars can discover new research areas, gain access to resources and data, and deepen their understanding of their field by interacting with other students in their field and forming partnerships. The participant "13" stated his experiences as;

The study material that our teachers gave us were only useful for writing assignments and taking tests. We created What's app group with our class fellows. We also invited our seniors and friends from other universities to join this group. All the group members of this group were encouraged to exchange research ideas and other material. This data proved very helpful for our research.

It is quite natural for scholars that they feel comfort when they know that they are not alone in the struggle.

The participant "14" expressed as;

For me, writing a doctoral dissertation was an extremely trying experience. The university fellows' social media group was a huge source of inspiration for me. I was inspired to finish my studies with a great deal of zeal and zest after learning about performances and accomplishments.

As they write their research work, scholars can find inspiration and motivation from social media groups. The participant talked about how interacting with other enthusiastic friends helped him rekindle his own enthusiasm for his research. The efforts and advancements of his peers served as an inspiration to him.

For students to write their research work in an appropriate way, a variety of online resources are crucial. They make pertinent research accessible and help with research study citation. In order to generate excellent and solid theses, they also help assess the reliability and applicability of various research sources. Focus group 2 participant "20" talked about his experiences, *"Being a computer programmer, I made use of both paid and free resources, such as Google Students. Additionally, I received assistance from a few of my academic friends in eliminating the board of studies' objections. "For me, WhatsApp groups are a major platform for sharing ideas, research experiences, literature, and resources,"* said participant "17" in focus group 1. He created a group on WhatsApp called "VECO." Many academics, instructors, professors from other universities, and principals are part of this group. It offers a great deal of information. *"We have also created a WhatsApp group, but only students are members of it,"* said the other group member. Therefore, we exchange thoughts and experiences. *Fortunately, we have a kind teacher who has given us a platform for guidance in the form of a WhatsApp group, according to participant "23" from group 3. He provides prompt*

answers to the questions posed by various doctoral students.

Social media and other online resources provide a forum for exchanging concepts, conversations about studies and seeking suggestions and criticism, enabling scholars to share resources and insights with peers having similar experience. Additionally, they can get encouragement and emotional support that can play a crucial role during the process of writing a thesis. Scholars can use recent developments and issues related to their field of study and access the most recent research in their field. Academic seminars are of vital importance for students in writing their research, enabling the scholars to engage with other students and have a guidance and feedback on their research from professionals to improve their critical thinking abilities. Their proficiency in academic writing shines through these seminars. About planning or attending seminars, participant 10 responded as follows:

Though I never led any seminars on my own, yet I have attended a great deal of seminars on academic writing, communication techniques and current research topics. They gave me a lot of information and always proved very supportive to me. These seminars helped me to become a better writer and presenter.

The participant described the ways in which seminars benefited him. He learned about various research trends and skills from these seminars. He organized his work in a practical manner based on the knowledge he gained from these seminars. Additionally, these seminars taught him how to write and present data in an effective way. The voice of participant "13" was,

I have led three seminars on communication skills as an assistant professor. I've also gone to a number of seminars on academic writing and research techniques. These seminars have taught me a lot of new things that will help me in both my professional and doctoral studies.

The participant talked about his experiences leading and going to various seminars. Since he is fully aware of the importance of seminars, he both conducts and attends them to hone his abilities. He reports that both his academic and professional lives benefited from these seminars. The second participant described what happened to him as

I have indeed participated in two seminars, one hosted by my university and the other by an online institution. To be completely honest, these seminars were crucial to my doctoral journey. I gained a comprehensive understanding of the entire doctoral study process thanks to these seminars.

Seminars were also very beneficial to him. He gained a comprehensive understanding of the entire research process from these seminars. He was able to approach research issues in a balanced manner. The participant "3" expressed his opinions as follows:

I was having a lot of trouble analyzing the data, and I was working very slowly. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to finish my work in time. I gladly accepted the invitation to attend an online seminar on data analysis that I received in my social media group. This seminar proved fruitful, though it was paid.

The participant shared information about the challenges he faced during his study. In order to get the answers of his research questions, the participant had to pay to attend the seminar. Participant "18" gave opinion about attending seminars, by saying, "yes, I was able to better organize my academic writing owing to the information I gathered from seminars". He was able to present these points more succinctly and clearly. He received helpful advice on how to steer clear of typical mistakes in academic writing. In the same focus groups, participant "19" said, "I learned how to properly credit my sources and how to avoid plagiarism". Additionally, the seminar expert gave me some excellent resources for locating data relevant to my research. The focus group-2 participant "22" expressed his opinion "that's really important, especially for doctoral scholar". The data analysis seminar he went to was really beneficial. He learned some new methods for evaluating data and presenting it in an intelligible way as a result.

It is evident from the discussion above that seminars give students the chance to increase their knowledge, proficiency, and abilities in their field of study. Current research and new trends are presented to the doctoral students. Moreover, it is through these seminars that students avail a chance to join the network of field professionals. They also find an opportunity to explore the resolutions of issues related to their research. The ability to continue and maintain the hard work to complete the course work and achieve the educational objectives can be called persistence. It may involve the act of addressing the issues and maintaining commitments to face any kind of challenges. Doctoral students' perseverance is greatly influenced by time management, motivation and ability to keep a balance between academic work and

family obligations. Disciplined and motivated students are better able to end their work and enjoy success.

Discussion

At universities the doctoral students avail an access to diverse resources as libraries, labs and academic advisors. Doctoral students need to have an access to networks that support them as elaborated in studies by Dombroski et al. (2018) and Fahlman (2009). Family, friends and coworkers are also a source of practical assistants as well as financial support (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). In case of distance learning students, there is limited access to research resources. Former university professors being alternative sources in such cases may prove extremely beneficial.

The theme, “Off Campus Learning” gives a thorough insight of the resources utilized by students other than the university ones. The professors of former universities share their skills and knowledge with doctoral students and can guide the students in a variety of areas as skill development, motivation, collection and analysis of data. They may have specific skills, expertise and knowledge that can be very beneficial for the researchers. Additionally, ex university instructors provide individuals with care and attention that can be very fruitful in fulfilling their research requirements. This direct guidance and support make the scholars able to overcome challenges in their research. These professors also help the students in skill building as they have years of experience in their field and insight. They may offer students a training on data analysis software along with the guidance in their research publication. The access to ex university libraries and labs is also another advantage of networking with these professors. This type of facility is very crucial for the distance learning students who don't have access to conventional university resources, content or specific software.

A number of studies have explained the role and importance of support network of professors, caring people and resources (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Learning and leadership group are often a part of online doctoral programs (Corrales et al., 2020; Cavanaugh & Sessums, 2011). Moreover, educational conferences being attended by the students make them able to have an interaction with fellow educators and students (Grady, 2016; Williams et al., 2019).

“Digital Discussion Forums” being the second theme of the study highlights the role of the forums like Facebook, WhatsApp groups, online conferences and seminars providing the doctoral students with an asset of new ideas and innovative knowledge. It is through the acquaintance of others’ achievements that scholars get motivation and inspiration. These forums also help the students to make contacts with other researchers having similar research areas. These platforms help them in sharing their ideas, knowledge, information and receiving guidance and feedback by seniors. Such platforms are specifically valuable for distance learning students having comparatively less approach to their instructors. These forums are a source of inspiration and motivation in a way that students share their success with fellows, feel encouraged and motivated to carry on their work. They feel themselves as a member of research community, and this feeling abolishes the sense of isolation. Moreover, the participation of doctoral students in online seminars bless them with a valuable insight, ideas and training on different topics like collection and analysis of data, different research methodologies and publication of thesis. The seminars are also a source of valuable advices from experience and learned professionals which make them able to develop their skills and produce better quality research work.

Conclusion

“Off campus learning”, the first theme provides a detailed insight to the resources used by students outside the educational institution. The role of ex-university professors is very crucial in this regard. They not only provide the students a wealth of knowledge but also guide them in solving research relevant problems. They provide different perspectives about the research that is beneficial for them in selecting research area. They guide them in tool development and research methodologies. Also ex-university professors help the research students in data collection, statistical analysis and even in publication of the research.

The second theme concerning alternate resources utilized by students outside the university is “digital discussion forums”. Whatsapp, Facebook, and online seminars are valuable sources of information sharing and motivation. The sharing of new ideas and open discussions on different research related topics enable the doctoral students to have a deep insight on their research. These forums are also a great source of motivation as the achievement and performances shared by other members inspire the research students to achieve their goals with a greater passion.

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