

CHALLENGES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS WHO DISCONTINUED THEIR DEGREE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Date of publication: 29 July, 2026

ABSTRACT- This phenomenological study examined the lived challenges that contributed to the discontinuation of Doctor of Technology Education studies at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines. Eight former doctoral students—four men and four women aged 27 to 68—were selected purposively and interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. ChatGPT was used only to assist preliminary coding and pattern identification. Four interconnected themes emerged: (1) navigating academic stress through coping and support, (2) academic challenges and support deficiencies, (3) emotional and practical barriers to doctoral persistence and completion, and (4) the need to strengthen academic and research support systems. Participants described workload pressure, self-doubt, research difficulty, inconsistent guidance, digital-technology challenges, work-family conflict, program misalignment, and financial constraints. Recommended clearer academic expectations, coordinated supervision, peer mentoring, research-writing support, more responsive communication, flexible arrangements for working learners, mental-health assistance, and access to research funding. The findings show that doctoral discontinuation is not attributable to one isolated cause but to the cumulative interaction of academic, psychological, financial, and institutional conditions. The study offers evidence for retention policies in technology-education doctoral programs.

Keywords- Academic support, Doctoral attrition, Doctor of Technology Education, Phenomenology, Student persistence, Thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education develops advanced research capacity, disciplinary expertise, and leadership; however, entry into a doctoral program does not guarantee completion. Graduate-school completion varies substantially across institutions and fields, and attrition frequently occurs after students have already invested considerable time, finances, and professional effort [1, 2]. Contemporary reviews describe doctoral withdrawal as a cumulative process shaped by supervision, research progress, well-being, financial security, work demands, social support, and institutional arrangements rather than as a single academic failure [3, 4].

Similarly shows that inadequate mentoring, delayed evaluation, limited resources, financial instability, and weak peer collaboration can undermine doctoral students' mental health and research engagement [5]. In the Philippine setting, graduate students also report that thesis and dissertation delays are associated with research anxiety, competing responsibilities, limited access to advisers, financial constraints, and difficulty sustaining momentum [6]. These conditions are particularly salient for employed doctoral students who simultaneously perform professional, family, and academic roles.

The local institutional record that motivated the present study showed that 71 students were officially enrolled in the Doctor of Technology Education program from academic years 2020–2021 to 2021–2022, while eight had graduated at the time the record was prepared, corresponding to approximately 11.3% [7]. This figure is not treated as a cohort-completion rate because students may require different lengths of time to finish; nevertheless, it signals the need to examine why some students discontinued and what

forms of institutional support might have changed their decisions.

Studies emphasize completion statistics or the experiences of students who remain enrolled. The perspectives of those who have already withdrawn are less visible, particularly within technology-education doctoral programs in Philippine state universities. Exploring their accounts can reveal how academic requirements, personal circumstances, motivation, institutional practices, and support systems intersect at the point where persistence becomes difficult.

Accordingly, this study asked: What challenges led Doctor of Technology Education students to discontinue their doctoral degree? By centering the narratives of non-completers, the study aimed to produce context-specific evidence that may guide admission, orientation, supervision, research development, financial assistance, and student-support policies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study integrated three complementary perspectives. Tinto's theory of student departure proposes that persistence is influenced by students' academic and social integration within an institution [8]. Although originally developed for undergraduate contexts, the framework is useful for understanding doctoral experiences in which unclear expectations, weak supervisory relationships, limited peer connection, and poor institutional fit may reduce commitment to continued study.

Bean and Metzner's model of nontraditional student attrition emphasizes environmental pressures—including employment, finances, family obligations, and external responsibilities—that may exert stronger effects on adult learners than campus social participation [9]. This

perspective is especially relevant to doctoral students who are full-time professionals, parents, caregivers, or household providers.

Self-Determination Theory explains sustained motivation through the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness [10]. Doctoral students may disengage when they perceive little control over their work, feel unable to meet research demands, or experience isolation. A phenomenological study of doctoral attrition similarly found that diminished autonomy and relatedness became especially consequential during the dissertation stage [11]. Together, the three frameworks enabled the analysis to connect institutional integration, external pressures, and internal motivation without reducing discontinuation to a single cause.

RELATED LITERATURE

Doctoral disengagement often develops gradually. Longitudinal research indicates that persistent doubts can evolve into reduced identification with the doctoral role and eventual withdrawal [12]. Stressors commonly appear early in doctoral training and include workload, uncertain expectations, time pressure, supervisory concerns, financial strain, and work-life imbalance [13]. During periods of disruption, academic burnout has also been associated with emotional exhaustion and difficulty sustaining advanced study [14].

Rapid expansion, uneven supervision, institutional capacity, and changing academic labor expectations [15]. In the Philippines, Phenomenological and case-based inquiry for examining how learners and teachers interpret educational challenges in their own settings [16–18]. Local evidence on thesis and dissertation procrastination also underscores the need for structured research support, accessible mentoring, and institutional mechanisms responsive to working graduate students [6].

Across the literature, four recurring domains are evident: academic demands and research competence; supervisory and institutional support; emotional well-being and motivation; and environmental pressures such as employment, family, and finances [3–6, 12–15]. The present study examined how these domains were experienced together by students who had already discontinued, thereby extending retention research from predictors of attrition to the meanings attached to the decision to leave.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Setting

A descriptive phenomenological design was used to understand how former doctoral students perceived and made sense of the challenges preceding their discontinuation. Phenomenology was appropriate because the research question concerned lived experience rather than prevalence or causal estimation [19]. Qualitative inquiry is particularly useful when participants possess direct, information-rich knowledge of a phenomenon and when the researcher seeks contextualized meanings [20, 21]. The study was conducted at the University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines and focused on former students of its Doctor of Technology Education program.

The approach was also consistent with locally published phenomenological research that used participant narratives to illuminate educational experiences in Philippine settings [16, 17]. The researchers served as the primary instruments in participant recruitment, interviewing, transcription, coding, interpretation, and reporting.

Participants and Sampling

Eight former Doctor of Technology Education students were selected through purposive sampling: four men and four women, aged 27 to 68. Eligibility required prior formal enrollment in the program, discontinuation before degree completion, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Graduates and individuals who discontinued a different doctoral program were excluded. Pseudonymous codes were used throughout the analysis and reporting.

Table 1. Demographic Profile Of Participants

Code	Age	Sex
MP1	58	Male
MP2	27	Male
MP3	36	Male
MP4	39	Male
FP1	68	Female
FP2	38	Female
FP3	43	Female
FP4	34	Female

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face or through synchronous Messenger calls to accommodate participants' schedules and locations. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to pursue a common set of questions while probing the meanings and circumstances introduced by participants [22]. Each interview was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes documented contextual details and observations relevant to interpretation. A short demographic form was used to describe the participants.

The interview protocol focused on academic requirements, research experiences, supervision, motivation, emotional well-being, work and family obligations, finances, program fit, institutional communication, coping, and forms of support that might have encouraged continuation. Quotations were lightly edited only for punctuation and readability; their substantive meanings were retained.

Data Analysis and AI-Assisted Coding

The transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase reflexive thematic analysis: familiarization, initial coding, generation of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report [23]. The analysis considered both explicit meanings and underlying patterns. Codes were compared across participants and organized into categories that addressed the research question and the three theoretical perspectives.

ChatGPT was used as a supplementary tool during preliminary coding and pattern identification. Prompts asked the system to identify recurring ideas, summarize related statements, and suggest provisional categories. Following methodological guidance on AI-supported qualitative

analysis, all prompts and outputs were documented, checked against the original transcripts, and subjected to human review [24–26]. AI-generated suggestions were not accepted automatically; the researchers revised, merged, rejected, or renamed codes and made all final interpretive decisions. This procedure was intended to gain efficiency without transferring analytic accountability to the AI system.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The researchers practiced bracketing and reflexive self-examination to identify assumptions that could influence interpretation. Peer debriefing was used to scrutinize coding decisions and theme boundaries, consistent with current guidance on reflexivity in sensitive qualitative research [27]. Credibility was further supported by repeated transcript reading, comparison of themes with raw quotations, and transparent documentation of AI-assisted steps. Participants received information about the study and provided informed consent before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms protected identity, recordings and transcripts were handled confidentially, and reporting avoided information that could unnecessarily reveal individual participants. No ethics approval number was stated in the source manuscript; consequently, none is claimed in this revised version.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four themes explained the challenges leading participants to discontinue their doctoral studies. The themes were interconnected rather than independent: academic pressure intensified emotional strain; weak guidance reduced competence and confidence; work, family, and financial demands constrained time and choice; and insufficient institutional support made recovery from setbacks more difficult. Table 2 summarizes the themes, representative codes, and illustrative extracts.

Table 2. Summary of Themes, Codes, and Illustrative Extracts

Theme	Representative codes	Illustrative extract
1. Academic stress and coping	Workload; burnout; self-doubt; isolation; support strategies	<i>“I face stress, self-doubt, even burnout, but I managed with support strategies.”</i>
2. Academic challenges and support deficiencies	Research difficulty; unclear expectations; inconsistent supervision; digital challenges	<i>“There is a lack of direction with my research; professors have different standards.”</i>
3. Emotional and practical barriers	Fear of failure; work-family conflict; exhaustion; program misalignment; finances	<i>“I experienced self-doubt... during late nights, trying to meet deadlines after working all day.”</i>
4. Stronger academic and research support	Funding; mentoring; research bootcamps; communication; flexible deadlines	<i>“Provide access to research grants, assistance, and funding opportunities.”</i>

Theme 1: Navigating Academic Stress Through Coping and Support

Participants consistently described doctoral study as intellectually and emotionally demanding. Workload, deadlines, research tasks, and professional responsibilities generated stress, self-doubt, and episodes of burnout. MP1, MP2, FP1, and FP3 summarized the experience as facing “stress, self-doubt, even burnout” while attempting to manage through support strategies. MP4 and FP4 reported feeling overwhelmed by deadlines and withdrawing socially when research demands became difficult. These accounts suggest that coping did not eliminate the sources of stress; it temporarily enabled participants to continue despite them. Peer encouragement, supportive supervisors, family assistance, and personal time-management strategies were described as protective. This finding is consistent with reviews identifying well-being and social support as central to doctoral persistence [4], with evidence that stressors emerge early and accumulate across the doctoral journey [13], and with research showing that prolonged doubts can precede disengagement [12]. Recent Elsevier research likewise links supervisory support, peer collaboration, and financial security with stronger mental health and research engagement [5]. The theme also reflects Self-Determination Theory: support from peers and mentors can strengthen relatedness, while clearer guidance and research skill development can improve perceived competence [10]. Retention strategies should therefore address both coping resources and the academic conditions that produce repeated stress. Mental-health referral pathways, peer communities, realistic workload planning, and regular progress conversations may be more effective when combined rather than offered as isolated interventions.

Theme 2: Academic Challenges and Support Deficiencies

Participants described difficulty understanding academic expectations, completing time-limited assessments, using digital tools, and developing research. FP2 explained that a 45-minute examination was difficult because of unfamiliarity with gadgets and uncertainty about the program. MP2, MP4, FP2, and FP4 reported inconsistent research guidance and differing standards among professors. For working students, sudden deadlines and unclear instructions amplified existing time pressure. The issue was not simply that doctoral work was difficult. Participants interpreted the difficulty as harder to manage when standards, procedures, and sources of help were unclear. In Tinto’s terms, weak academic integration can reduce a student’s sense of belonging and confidence in navigating the institution [8]. Local evidence on graduate research procrastination likewise indicates that research anxiety and adviser accessibility can delay progress [6]. Institutional implementation and support arrangements shape how learners and teachers respond to demanding academic environments [16]–[18]. A coordinated supervisory system may reduce these barriers. Program-level rubrics, common research milestones, explicit turnaround expectations for feedback, adviser-development activities, and early diagnostic support in research methods and digital tools can make standards more predictable. Such

structures should not remove academic rigor; rather, they make rigor transparent and attainable.

Theme 3: Emotional and Practical Barriers to Persistence and Completion

Fear of failure, emotional exhaustion, work-family conflict, program misalignment, and financial pressure were central to the decision to stop. MP3, MP4, and FP3 questioned whether they remained capable of completing the degree, especially during late nights spent meeting academic deadlines after a full working day. FP2 reported fear that she might not succeed even though professors and classmates encouraged her. Other participants described the financial burden of living expenses and dissertation work, despite tuition support, as incompatible with family responsibilities.

These accounts illustrate the environmental pressures emphasized by Bean and Metzner [9]. Participants were not only students; they were employees, parents, providers, and professionals with work designations. When academic schedules collided with these obligations, the cost of persistence increased. Financial strain also affected more than tuition because dissertation expenses, transportation, technology, food, and household responsibilities continued [29].

Program misalignment further weakened motivation. Some participants had entered the program because of encouragement or promotion opportunities but later felt that the degree did not align with prior training or professional goals. This mismatch may reduce autonomy and competence, two needs identified by Self-Determination Theory [10]. Doctoral orientation and admissions processes should therefore help applicants examine program expectations, research readiness, career alignment, probable costs, and available time before enrollment. The purpose is not to exclude nontraditional learners but to enable informed commitment and timely support planning.

Theme 4: Strengthening Academic and Research Support Systems

Participants' recommendations extended beyond personal coping. They called for research grants, funding assistance, peer mentoring, research-writing bootcamps, clearer communication, compassionate supervision, and flexibility for working students and parents. FP1 recommended access to research grants and funding opportunities. MP4 emphasized mental support, peer mentoring, and research-writing bootcamps. MP3 urged administrators to communicate more effectively and to consider the realities of employed students and parents when setting deadlines.

The recommendations support a systems approach to retention. Mentoring is repeatedly identified as a promising doctoral-retention practice [28], while comprehensive reviews emphasize that supervision, institutional climate, financial resources, and well-being operate together [4]. The findings of the present study suggest that support should be organized across the doctoral pathway: readiness assessment and orientation before entry; research and digital-skills development during coursework; structured advising and peer communities during proposal development; and funding, milestone monitoring, and psychosocial support during dissertation work.

Institutional flexibility should remain transparent and equitable. Examples include published procedures for extensions, predictable research consultations, alternative schedules for employed students, and early alerts when progress stalls. Such practices can acknowledge diverse life circumstances without lowering academic standards. They also respond directly to participants' perception that the system was insufficiently prepared for doctoral students balancing advanced study, employment, and parenthood.

LIMITATIONS

The study involved eight purposively selected former students from one Doctor of Technology Education program. The findings therefore provide depth and contextual understanding but are not statistically generalizable to all doctoral students or institutions. Participants' accounts were retrospective and may have been influenced by the time elapsed since discontinuation. The researchers' interpretations also shaped theme development, as is expected in reflexive thematic analysis. Bracketing, peer debriefing, transcript checking, and documentation of AI-assisted steps reduced—but could not eliminate—interpretive influence. Finally, ChatGPT may overlook context, reproduce bias, or propose categories that appear coherent without adequately representing participants' meanings. Human verification was therefore maintained throughout the analysis.

CONCLUSION

Doctoral discontinuation in this study resulted from the cumulative interaction of academic, emotional, practical, financial, and institutional pressures. Participants experienced demanding workloads, research difficulty, unclear expectations, inconsistent guidance, digital challenges, self-doubt, exhaustion, work-family conflict, financial constraints, and program misalignment. Their experiences were consistent with Tinto's emphasis on academic integration, Bean and Metzner's focus on environmental pressures affecting nontraditional learners, and Self-Determination Theory's account of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The principal contribution of the study is its account of how these conditions converged in the lives of doctoral non-completers at a Philippine state university. Persistence cannot be strengthened by asking students to become resilient while leaving structural barriers unchanged. Effective retention requires coordinated academic guidance, responsive supervision, peer and mental-health support, flexible but equitable policies, research capability development, and realistic financial assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The program may establish a structured doctoral-support pathway that begins with readiness and program-fit assessment, continues through research-methods and digital-literacy development, and provides clearly defined milestones from coursework to dissertation completion. Supervisory expectations, feedback timelines, research standards, and administrative procedures should be communicated consistently across faculty members.

Peer mentoring, writing groups, research bootcamps, and accessible consultation schedules may reduce isolation and strengthen competence. Financial support should include transparent information on grants, dissertation expenses, and

external funding opportunities. Mental-health and counseling services should be visible and easy to access. For employed students and parents, flexible scheduling and documented extension procedures may improve persistence without compromising learning outcomes.

Future research may include multiple doctoral programs and institutions, compare completers with non-completers, and follow students longitudinally from admission through dissertation. Further work should also evaluate whether structured mentoring, research bootcamps, early-alert systems, flexible delivery, and targeted financial assistance measurably improve retention and completion.

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