

## Doctoral Students' Perspectives on Academic Support Factors: A Qualitative Study in the Doctoral Program

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.61796/icoss.v2i3.247>



### Sections Info

#### Article history:

Submitted: April 16, 2025

Final Revised: May 26, 2025

Accepted: June 10, 2025

Published: June 20, 2025

#### Keywords:

Doctoral education  
Academic support factors  
Learning motivation  
Self-regulated learning  
Social environment  
Qualitative study  
Educational management

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to qualitatively explore doctoral students' perspectives on the academic support factors that influence the timely completion of their studies in the Doctoral Program in Educational Management at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). **Method:** Employing a phenomenological approach, the study involved many informants, including active students, alumni, and academic supervisors. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and limited observational studies. **Results:** The findings revealed three main themes: (1) social environment serves as a pillar of emotional and practical support, enhancing students' academic resilience; (2) learning motivation acts as an internal driving force that maintains commitment and consistency throughout the study process; and (3) self-regulated learning (SRL) reflects students' academic autonomy in managing time, setting goals, and evaluating their learning progress. These findings highlight that success in doctoral studies is not solely determined by individual capabilities but rather by the dynamic interplay of personal, social, and institutional factors. **Novelty:** The results of this study are expected to inform academic policymakers in designing strategies to enhance the quality of doctoral education and accelerate students' study completion in a sustainable and contextually relevant manner.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid and complex nature of global change has profoundly impacted the direction of policies and the implementation of higher education worldwide, including in Indonesia. Universities must increasingly be adaptive and responsive in delivering educational services that align with the current era's characteristics and society's needs. The foundation for educational transformation is the 21st century, which is marked by the importance of mastering six core competencies—computational thinking, compassion, creativity, communication skills, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. At the same time, additional challenges brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the Society 5.0 era, and the ambition to become a World-Class University (WCU) further underscore the urgency of reforming the education system, particularly at the doctoral level.

On the other hand, the presence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforces the notion that higher education, particularly doctoral programs in the field of Educational Management, plays a strategic role in preparing high-quality human resources who not only possess knowledge and technological expertise but also demonstrate strong integrity and leadership abilities. Doctoral graduates are expected to serve as planners, consultants, education managers, and professional educators. To achieve this, a strategically designed, transformative, and integrated curriculum is essential to address contemporary challenges contextually.

In this context, identifying academic support factors becomes a crucial step in ensuring the success of the educational process, especially in achieving learning outcomes effectively and sustainably. These factors encompass cognitive aspects and an academic environment that fosters innovative interaction, collaborative learning, and adequate institutional support. One key indicator of academic success that has received considerable attention is the timely completion of studies. Although this is a normative target for institutions, in reality, many doctoral students encounter obstacles that lead to delays in completing their studies.

Several studies have revealed that internal and external student factors influence delays in completing doctoral studies. [1] states that personal motivation and the quality of final project supervision play a central role. This is reinforced by the findings of [2] who adds that academic procrastination also contributes significantly to delays in study completion. [3] further emphasizes the importance of the social environment and the availability of resources in supporting students' academic achievement.

In addition, individual factors such as age, gender, and coping strategies for academic pressure have been shown to affect students' academic performance [4]. Motivation is a mediating variable in shaping academic self-efficacy [5] and the effectiveness of online learning [6]. Equally important are mental health aspects, particularly stress levels and financial anxiety, which serve as significant barriers to the academic success of doctoral students [7].

High-quality interpersonal support, especially from academic supervisors, is also a critical determining factor. [8] asserts that a positive student-supervisor relationship facilitates the smooth completion of academic tasks. [9] emphasizes that in higher education contexts with limited resources, the quality of supervision is a crucial element. Other studies have also found that the supervisor's research experience, the compatibility between student and supervisor, and the clarity of academic direction significantly influence the successful completion of doctoral studies [10]-[12].

Globally, the duration of doctoral studies has shown an increasing trend. [13] noted that the average length of study approaches six years, although, in North America, it typically ranges between five and seven years [14]. Other research indicates that the overall final project submission rate reaches 83%, with a median time to completion of 3.4 years for full-time students and 4.1 years for degree conferral [15]. This variation suggests that institutional policies and the educational systems of respective countries significantly influence the duration of doctoral studies.

A similar situation is observed in the Doctoral Program in Educational Management at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA), where data indicate that the study duration ranges from 3 to 7 years. This variation reflects a range of academic and non-academic dynamics that influence students' progress and achievement.

Based on this background, the present study aims to qualitatively explore doctoral students' perspectives on academic support factors in completing their studies in the Doctoral Program of Educational Management at UNESA. The primary focus of this research is to uncover students' experiences in describing the roles of institutional

support, personal motivation, the quality of academic relationships, and the challenges they encounter throughout their studies. Unlike previous studies that emphasize students' internal aspects, this research adopts a more comprehensive approach by simultaneously addressing institutional and systemic factors.

Accordingly, the results of this study are expected to provide both empirical and practical contributions for policymakers at the Faculty of Education and Universitas Negeri Surabaya, particularly in formulating strategies to improve the quality of academic services and accelerate the time to degree completion for doctoral students. This study may also serve as a reference for other universities in designing academic policies that are contextually based on the specific needs of doctoral students.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This design was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of doctoral students regarding the academic support factors that influence their success in the Doctoral Program of Educational Management at Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA). The phenomenological approach enables the researcher to capture the meanings embedded in students' lived experiences within higher education institutions [16].

The study was conducted in the Doctoral Program (S3) of Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The informants in this study consisted of active students and alums of the Doctoral Program in Educational Management who had completed at least four semesters of study and academic supervisors. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria established by the researcher to obtain relevant and in-depth data. A total of 10 informants participated in the study, comprising six active students, two alums, and two academic supervisors.

Data were collected using the following techniques: Semi-structured in-depth interviews aimed at exploring students' understanding, perceptions, and academic experiences related to academic support; Document analysis, including academic guidelines, supervisor assignment decrees, and academic reports; Limited observation, particularly in academic supervision forums or seminars, to enhance understanding of the dynamics of student-supervisor interactions. Interviews were conducted in person and online, using an interview guide developed based on a literature review and the academic context at UNESA.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Results*

#### **Social Environment: A Pillar of Emotional and Academic Support**

The social environment emerged as a fundamental factor influencing the process and success of doctoral students in completing their studies. Based on interview results, most informants emphasized that support from family, peers, and a positive academic

atmosphere greatly helped them maintain motivation, focus, and emotional stability throughout their academic journey.

"At one point, I almost gave up on completing my studies. But my family always supported me." (Informant M2)

"My fellow doctoral students on campus are like a second family. We support and remind each other to finish our studies together, so we don't feel alone." (Informant P4)

Social support was not only emotional but also practical and instrumental. For example, one informant mentioned that their family understood the demands of academic life, particularly during intense work on assignments and the final dissertation.

"My family is very supportive and understands the busy schedule of completing my final project. They help with household chores, which really eases the burden." (Informant L5)

### **Learning Motivation: The Internal Driving Force in Academic Progress**

Learning motivation emerged as a strong internal factor that significantly influences students' persistence and intensity in completing academic tasks, including proposal seminars, publications, and dissertation writing.

"My motivation has been clear from the start: I want to become a professor, and this doctoral program is a step toward that dream. So I cannot afford to quit halfway." (Informant K3)

"I feel the need to set an example for my family and staff. If I can't complete a doctoral degree, how can I teach them the value of higher education?" (Informant Y1)

Several informants also mentioned that their motivation fluctuated over time but was reinvigorated by life goals or external encouragement.

"Sometimes I get tired, even burnt out, but I always remind myself: I'm not doing this just for me, but for the community where I teach. I want to create change." (Informant H6)

### **Self-Regulated Learning (SRL): Independent Strategies for Managing Studies**

Doctoral students' ability to independently manage and regulate their learning processes emerged as a key finding. Several informants indicated that from the outset of their doctoral journey, they knew the importance of planning and self-discipline to complete their studies on time.

"I created a personal timeline from the first semester. I listed all my targets – when to do the proposal seminar, when to submit journals – everything is written on my personal calendar." (Informant D2)

"If you can't manage your time, it's going to be tough. I work too, so I use a daily schedule system. I allocate specific times for reading, writing, and meeting with my advisor." (Informant S7)

SRL encompasses time management and the ability to evaluate progress and adjust learning strategies when encountering obstacles.

"I once hit a three-month stagnation. Then I did a self-evaluation: I realized I was multitasking too much. After that, I changed my approach – dedicated one full day just for research. It worked." (Informant R8)

## *Discussion*

The social environment in this context serves not merely as a supporting factor but also as a system that upholds the psychological and cognitive balance of doctoral students. Positive social interactions provide a sense of belonging, security, and a space for mutual reinforcement in the face of high academic pressure. Healthy interpersonal relationships with family and peers serve as a buffer against stress, while also strengthening students' self-confidence and mental resilience.

Practical support from the social environment suggests that academic success is not solely the result of individual effort, but also a collaborative effort between the student and their surrounding environment. When students feel fully supported – both mentally and practically – they are more likely to maintain motivation and productivity in their learning. Thus, the social environment plays not only a background role but also becomes an active agent in the doctoral journey. This finding aligns with [17], [18], who emphasised that a supportive social environment and system can reduce stress, enhance concentration, and accelerate the completion of studies.

In another aspect, learning motivation serves as the driving force that directs and sustains students' academic behaviours. Within the context of doctoral studies, which demand a high degree of independence and long-term perseverance, motivation becomes a critical element that maintains students' persistence in overcoming various challenges. Strong motivation, mainly when rooted in personal meaning (such as the desire to become a role model or bring about change), tends to be more enduring and more effective in encouraging concrete actions.

The strength of motivation lies not only in its intensity but also in students' ability to manage it when facing fatigue or boredom. In this process, motivation functions as a reinforcer of positive emotions, a tool for self-regulation, and a source of inspiration that sustains long-term commitment. Therefore, learning motivation is not merely an initial condition but a dynamic internal process that must be continuously developed and maintained throughout the academic journey. These findings reinforce the results of [19]–[21], which indicate that learning motivation significantly influences academic success, including the commitment to consistently complete one's studies.

From another dimension, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) reflects the level of independence and academic maturity students demonstrate in managing their learning processes. In the doctoral context, where the structure of learning is more flexible and less rigid than in previous educational levels, SRL becomes a key mechanism that determines time effectiveness, learning direction, and overall study quality. Students with high SRL typically set clear goals, formulate strategies, and conduct ongoing evaluations and adjustments to their learning progress independently.

SRL also functions as a tool to anticipate stagnation and manage academic workload. When students can identify the causes of delay and quickly adjust their learning strategies, they are more likely to complete their studies on time. In other words, SRL is not merely a technical strategy but also a form of self-awareness, self-control, and long-term planning that is vital within the doctoral education framework. These findings

are consistent with those of [22], [23], which show that SRL is positively correlated with academic outcomes, particularly in terms of time management and the effectiveness of independent learning.

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding :** Based on the findings of this study, the academic success of doctoral students in the Doctoral Program in Educational Management at UNESA cannot be reduced solely to individual academic ability. Instead, optimal academic achievement results from the complex and dynamic interaction of personal, social, and strategic factors. Fundamentally, this study identifies three key elements that support doctoral success: strong social support, robust internal motivation, and effective self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies. A supportive social environment – including family, peers, and the academic community – provides not only psychological stability but also practical assistance, creating a healthy and conducive academic ecosystem. Meanwhile, internal motivation acts as the primary driving force that guides and sustains students' persistence throughout the long academic journey. Students with strong personal and professional goals tend to be more resilient when facing pressure and academic challenges. Additionally, SRL reflects students' level of academic maturity; their ability to manage time, set learning goals, monitor progress, and evaluate learning strategies is a critical indicator of their readiness to complete doctoral studies independently and sustainably. These three dimensions – social support, internal motivation, and SRL – do not function in isolation but instead complement one another to form a comprehensive academic support system. This reinforces the notion that doctoral education is not only a matter of intellectual capacity, but also of self-management and systemic support.

**Implication :** This reinforces the notion that doctoral education is not only a matter of intellectual capacity, but also of self-management and systemic support. **Limitation :** Nevertheless, this study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The research focused solely on a single study program at one institution, the Doctoral Program in Educational Management at UNESA, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other doctoral programs across disciplines and institutions. Furthermore, the use of a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews allowed for rich insights into students' experiences but did not enable quantitative analysis of the relationships between variables, such as the strength of influence of motivation or SRL on academic performance. Moreover, the informants in this study were at varying stages of their doctoral journey (early, middle, and final stages). However, these differences were not analysed explicitly in terms of how they may have influenced perceptions and experiences. **Future Research :** In light of these limitations, future studies are encouraged to expand the scope of inquiry to include various doctoral programs and institutions, thereby gaining a more comprehensive and contextual understanding. The use of a mixed-methods approach is also highly recommended to combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for a more holistic analysis of the relationships among social support, motivation, and SRL. In addition, further research should explore

the institutional role in greater depth, including academic policies, advisor availability, and infrastructural support, as integral components of the doctoral success ecosystem. Such studies are expected to provide broader contributions to the development of strategies aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of doctoral education programs in Indonesia.

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