Motivational factors behind timely thesis completion: a transcendental phenomenological study of English education graduates

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ABSTRACT

Completing a thesis within the expected timeframe is a crucial academic milestone, yet many students struggle to achieve it due to personal, academic, and institutional challenges. This study explores how graduates who succeeded in completing their theses on time experienced and sustained their motivation throughout the process. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach—an approach that focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences—this study involved in-depth interviews with six graduates from the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan. The analysis reveals that timely thesis completion was driven by an interaction of internal motivation, such as personal responsibility and clear goal setting, and external influences, including family expectations, peer support, career aspirations, and academic supervision. These factors collectively shaped students' persistence, time management, and commitment to completing their work without delay. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of motivational processes in higher education and offer practical insights for supervisors and institutions in designing academic support systems that foster timely thesis completion.

1. Introduction

Completing a thesis within the expected timeframe represents a key indicator of academic success in higher education, as it reflects students' ability to manage complex academic demands while preparing for professional or further academic pathways. For universities, timely thesis completion is closely linked to program effectiveness, graduation rates, and institutional accountability [1]–[3]. Conversely, delays in thesis completion often result in extended study periods, increased financial pressure, and heightened emotional strain for students, while also posing challenges for institutional performance and planning [3], [4]. Despite its significance, the thesis process presents substantial challenges for many students. Common difficulties include refining research focus, sustaining writing productivity, balancing academic and personal responsibilities, and navigating iterative feedback processes [5]–[7]. These challenges are frequently intensified by psychological barriers such as procrastination, self-doubt, and academic isolation, which weaken persistence over time [8], [9]. Institutional conditions, including limited supervisory support or unclear academic guidance, may further contribute to delayed completion.

Motivation plays a decisive role in determining how students respond to these challenges. Internal factors such as personal commitment, goal clarity, and self-discipline support sustained engagement, while external influences, including family expectations, peer environments,

career aspirations, and academic supervision, reinforce students' determination to complete their theses on time [10]–[12]. However, motivation is not solely an individual attribute; it emerges through continuous interaction between personal aspirations and social-institutional contexts. Although previous studies have examined barriers and delays in thesis completion, limited attention has been given to how students who succeed on time experience and sustain motivation throughout the process [13], [14]. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of graduates who completed their theses within the expected timeframe using a transcendental phenomenological approach. By foregrounding success-oriented narratives rather than deficit-based accounts, this study offers a novel contribution to higher education research, providing experiential insights into motivational dynamics that can inform more responsive supervision practices and institutional support systems.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of graduates who completed their theses within the expected timeframe. The approach emphasizes understanding participants' experiences as they are perceived, while reducing researcher bias through epoché, a process of bracketing prior assumptions [15], [16]. This design was chosen to capture how motivation was experienced and sustained throughout the thesis process.

2.2. Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Six graduates from the English Language Education Study Program at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan who had completed their theses on time participated in the study. Their shared academic context and successful completion provided relevant insight into motivational processes associated with timely thesis completion.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to describe their motivations, challenges, and strategies in their own words. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured through anonymization.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed established transcendental phenomenological procedures. After engaging in epoché, significant statements were identified through horizonalization and clustered into meaning units. These were developed into textural and structural descriptions, which were then synthesized to capture the essential motivational dynamics underlying timely thesis completion [17].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Epoché and Horizontalization

The process of epoché requires setting aside preconceived notions, personal biases, and assumptions to approach the participants' experiences with fresh eyes. This bracketing allows the researcher to authentically engage with the participants' perspectives, free from judgment or interpretation influenced by prior knowledge or beliefs [16]. As the foundation of phenomenological inquiry, epoché ensures that the essence of the participants' lived experiences emerges untainted. In this study, epoché was particularly crucial given the topic's relevance to higher education contexts, where societal and institutional narratives about timely thesis completion often shape our understanding. In this study, horizontalization involves identifying and treating every statement made by the participants as equally significant in the early stages of analysis. This ensures that no data is prematurely prioritized or dismissed, allowing all experiences to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon [16].

3.2. Meaning Units

Following horizontalization, significant statements from the interview data were clustered into core meaning units that capture recurring patterns in participants' experiences of timely thesis completion. These meaning units represent shared experiential themes while remaining

grounded in participants' original expressions. To maintain clarity and coherence, each unit reflects a distinct motivational condition that later informs the textural and structural descriptions. The meaning units derived from the participants' interviews are presented in Table 1. These units have been organized into a table to provide clarity and structure, accompanied by narrative explanations that connect the patterns to the participants' lived experiences.

Table 1. Meaning Units

Meaning Unit	Illustrative Statements	Interpretation
Intrinsic Motivation	*"Internal motivation from within myself… why take so long if we can finish it quickly?"* (LI); *"The most important thing is to graduate on time"* (LA).	A strong internal drive to achieve timely thesis completion based on personal goals and a desire for efficiency.
Goal-Oriented Planning	*"The desire to graduate on time according to my plan"* (PN); *"The main target is indeed a maximum of 4 years"* (AW).	The participants set clear timelines and goals, which helped guide their efforts to stay on track.
Avoidance of Procrastination	*"If it can be done quickly, why not?"* (SF); *"If we are not completing the thesis on time, we are wasting our time"* (HL).	Participants emphasized the importance of avoiding delays to ensure productivity and time management.
Family Expectations	*"My parents keep asking me, 'When did you graduate?'"* (AW); *"Completing our obligations to our parents"* (LI).	Family support and expectations acted as external motivators, fostering urgency and dedication.
Career Aspirations	*"I want to join PPG after graduation"* (HL); *"Start a career in the future"* (PN).	Participants were motivated by their future professional goals, which required completing their theses promptly.

3.3. Textural Description

Participants experienced timely thesis completion as a process driven primarily by strong internal commitment and efficiency-oriented attitudes. Intrinsic motivation was frequently described as a personal determination to avoid unnecessary delay. One participant stated, *"Internal motivation from within myself… why take so long if we can finish it quickly?"* (LI), while another emphasized, *"The most important thing is to graduate on time"* (LA). Completing the thesis was thus experienced as a self-imposed responsibility rather than an externally enforced demand. Clear goal setting further shaped participants' experiences. Timely graduation was treated as a fixed target that guided daily academic decisions. As one participant explained, *"The desire to graduate on time according to my plan"* (PN), and another added, *"The main target is indeed a maximum of four years"* (AW). These goals helped participants structure their work, sustain consistency, and maintain focus throughout the thesis process.

Family expectations were likewise experienced as supportive external motivation. Participants frequently referred to parental reminders as a source of encouragement. As one participant recalled, *"My parents keep asking me, 'When did you graduate?'"* (AW), while another described thesis completion as *"completing our obligations to our parents"* (LI). These experiences strengthened participants' resolve to complete their studies responsibly. Future-oriented goals gave additional meaning to the thesis process. Participants linked timely completion to career preparation and further professional opportunities. One participant stated, *"I want to join PPG after graduation"* (HL), while another expressed the desire to *"start a career in the future"* (PN). Finally, academic support contributed to participants' sense of direction and confidence, as reflected in the acknowledgment of *"support from family, friends, and supervisor"* (PN).

3.4. Structural Description

The experience of completing the thesis on time was shaped by the dynamic interaction between personal motivation, social contexts, and institutional support. While intrinsic motivation emerged as a central condition, its form varied across participants. For some, it was grounded in a strong sense of efficiency and self-discipline, where delaying the thesis was perceived as unnecessary. For others, intrinsic motivation was closely tied to the desire for closure and fulfillment of their academic journey. Despite these variations, intrinsic motivation consistently functioned as the internal anchor that sustained persistence. Family expectations further shaped how participants experienced urgency and responsibility. Parental reminders and inquiries were interpreted not as pressure but as emotional affirmation, positioning thesis

completion as a shared responsibility rather than an isolated task. This relational dimension reframed academic effort as part of broader social obligations, strengthening participants' resolve to remain disciplined. Future-oriented aspirations also structured participants' engagement with the thesis process. Career plans and professional pathways provided a forward-looking framework that linked present academic demands with anticipated outcomes. By situating thesis completion as a prerequisite for future opportunities, participants experienced their academic work as purposeful and time-sensitive

3.5. Composite Description

Timely thesis completion was experienced as a purposeful and sustained process shaped by the convergence of personal commitment, social reinforcement, and institutional support. At its core, participants' experiences were anchored in intrinsic motivation, expressed through a strong sense of responsibility, efficiency, and determination to complete the thesis without unnecessary delay. This internal drive functioned as the primary force that enabled participants to regulate their time, maintain focus, and persist through academic challenges. This personal motivation was continuously reinforced by external conditions. Peer environments created shared momentum, where observing others' progress normalized timely completion and strengthened accountability. Family expectations added emotional weight to the process, transforming thesis completion into a meaningful responsibility that extended beyond individual achievement. At the same time, future-oriented aspirations linked present academic effort to anticipated professional opportunities, giving sustained purpose to participants' engagement with the thesis process

3.6. Discussion: Theoretical Framework Revisited

The findings of this study reaffirm the central role of motivation in timely thesis completion and extend existing theoretical perspectives by illustrating how motivation is lived and sustained in real academic contexts. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) [18] and Social Cognitive Theory [19], the results show that timely thesis completion is shaped by the dynamic interaction between intrinsic motivation, external reinforcement, and contextual support rather than by isolated individual traits. From the perspective of SDT, participants' experiences strongly reflect intrinsic motivation grounded in autonomy, goal clarity, and personal responsibility. Graduates described completing the thesis on time as a self-endorsed commitment aligned with their academic values, supporting the view that motivation is strengthened when academic tasks are experienced as meaningful and self-directed [18]. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that students are more persistent when they perceive academic work as integral to their personal goals and sense of competence [20]. Intrinsic motivation functioned as a stabilizing force that enabled participants to regulate their behavior, manage time effectively, and persist through challenges.

At the same time, extrinsic motivation played a complementary and reinforcing role. In line with Social Cognitive Theory, social environments, particularly peer progress and family expectations, served as important sources of social reinforcement and self-efficacy [21]. Observing peers successfully navigate the thesis process strengthened participants' belief in their own capacity to complete the task, echoing prior findings on the motivational impact of social comparison and modeling [22]. Family expectations, rather than undermining autonomy, were internalized as meaningful encouragement, aligning with SDT's assertion that external influences can support motivation when they are integrated into personal values [11]. Future-oriented goals further structured participants' motivational processes. Career aspirations and professional plans provided a temporal framework that connected present academic effort with anticipated outcomes, consistent with goal-setting theory [23] and research on future time perspective [24]. Clear and personally relevant goals helped participants prioritize tasks, avoid procrastination, and maintain sustained engagement, reinforcing findings that goal clarity and self-regulation are critical for long-term academic tasks [25].

The findings also highlight the importance of time management and self-regulated learning as mechanisms through which motivation was enacted. Participants' resistance to procrastination reflects effective self-regulation, supporting prior research that links time-management practices with academic success [26] and frames procrastination as a failure of self-regulatory control [27]. Rather than treating procrastination as a personality weakness, this study positions it as a motivational and contextual issue shaped by goal orientation and support

structures. Finally, institutional support, particularly supervision, emerged as a key contextual condition that sustained motivation. Consistent with sociocultural perspectives on learning, guidance from supervisors functioned as scaffolding that supported persistence and competence development [28]. This aligns with models of academic integration, which emphasize that students are more likely to persist and succeed when they feel supported within their academic environment [29]. Together, these findings extend existing theories by demonstrating how intrinsic motivation, social reinforcement, future orientation, and institutional support converge in lived academic experience to enable timely thesis completion

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that timely thesis completion is shaped by the interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation rather than by a single determining factor. Graduates who completed their theses on time described a strong internal commitment to efficiency, personal responsibility, and clear goal setting, which helped them regulate their time and avoid procrastination. At the same time, external influences reinforced this internal drive. Family expectations created a sense of accountability, peer progress encouraged sustained effort, and future career goals transformed thesis completion into a meaningful step toward long-term aspirations. Supportive supervision further strengthened students' confidence and persistence during critical stages of the thesis process. The key contribution of this study lies in its focus on success-oriented experiences, offering an experiential understanding of how motivation is lived and sustained by students who complete their theses within the expected timeframe. Rather than framing thesis completion as an individual struggle or institutional problem, the findings highlight motivation as a relational and contextual process shaped by personal values. Practically, the study suggests that educators and institutions can promote timely thesis completion by fostering goal clarity, providing consistent and responsive supervision, encouraging peer-based academic communities, and integrating structured guidance on time management and self-regulated learning. These efforts can help create academic environments that actively support students in completing their theses on time.

Declarations

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