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## Preferences of Students towards Conducting Qualitative Research in Social Sciences at Higher Education Level

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### Abstract

The study aimed to explore the intentions of higher education students towards conducting qualitative research in social sciences. The study included four PhD and six MPhil students from Punjab University (Institute of Education and Research) and Education University who were selected through purposive sampling technique. A semi-structured interview protocol was constructed which was validated through experts' opinion. The respondents were asked about their feelings, knowledge, skills, interests and barriers towards qualitative research. A thematic analysis was applied after obtaining the data through audio recording and field notes. The results revealed that most of the PhD scholars did not possess knowledge and skills required to conduct qualitative research. There was no visible difference between the responses of IER (PU) and EU students. But PhD and MPhil Students had different preferences towards conducting qualitative research.

**Keywords:** higher education, qualitative research, student's aptitude

### Introduction

In 1879, qualitative methods were presented in psychology (Wertz, 2011) when William James and Sigmund Freud initially utilized the qualitative research approaches to provide the basis of knowledge of psychology (Willig & Rogers, 2008). Despite its early use, mostly researchers have adopted both approaches quantitative and qualitative approaches together (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

Since 1980s, the social sciences have shown considerable interest towards qualitative research. Although, there are a number of similarities between qualitative and quantitative research methods, studies that incorporates both of the methods are relatively new. The impact of a researcher on a study, the standards and outcomes of testing, and the procedure of association and translation influence inquiry modes. The ascent of qualitative research is additionally reflected in expanding in-depth reading and preparing

materials, exploratory affiliations, meetings, workshops and college courses (Wertz, 2011).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of theoretical approaches and methods. Qualitative research can contribute to social sciences through providing in-depth contextualized understanding of human behaviors and accounts of personal experiences and meanings that may not be possible with quantitative methods (Bhati et al., 2013; Kidd, 2002). Qualitative research methods involve the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material from multiple sources of data collection. It is used in the exploration of meanings of social phenomena as experienced by individuals themselves, in their natural context. Qualitative research is still regarded with skepticism by the medical community, accused of its subjective nature and the absence of facts. Although the adequacy of guidelines has been vigorously de-

bated within this cross-disciplinary field (Kvale, 1996).

Wegener and Fabrigar (1997), portrayed that states of mind dependably have effects on judgments and practices. Additionally, to expand the utilization and instruction of qualitative research plans in sociology, it is vital to comprehend the flow of impression of qualitative investigation held by social study students and scholastics. Understanding understudy dispositions can possibly illuminate instructing methodologies to strengthen understudies' sentiments of control and authority of research techniques and decrease negative exploration introductions.

Although, the measure of subjective examination has expanded as of late, but a lot of this investigation is occurring inside of the field of training and development. The development of expert doctorate projects, for example, the Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.), has brought about more educators taking part in investigation in their own particular instructive foundations, known as "professional enquiry" (Hellowell, 2006).

To date, few distributed studies have analyzed the dispositions of scholastics and understudies towards subjective examination in social sciences. While the qualitative quantitative debate has been broadly included in the scholarly writing (Krantz, 1995), this might mirror the perspectives of people vigorously putting resources into specific philosophies as opposed to the full scope of states of mind held by sociology understudies. Tsai (2002) interviewed 21 brain research scholastics and 13 graduate understudies, taking note of the apparent authenticity of subjective examination in brain science varied crosswise over projects and schools.

While the benefits of qualitative researcher have extensively mentioned in literature, field experts and academicians have given less attention towards its usability (Taylor, 2011). Promoters and commentators alike have referred to numerous preferences and burdens associated with subjective

exploration. This paper not only highlights some of the advantages and associated barriers related to qualitative mode of inquiry, but also presents a classification of these factors in relation to the stages of qualitative data collection and analysis.

Unlike quantitative scientists, insider specialists are free from the impacts of society; they can mix into circumstances without aggravating social settings (Aguiler, 1981). Unlike the quantitative analyst, who might be new, or if nothing else less recognizable than a subjective analyst with the social gathering or culture under study, Aguiler (1981) noted that for the quantitative specialist, cooperation is more regular and they are more averse to generalization. It is frequently accepted that being a subjectivist means simple access (Merriam et al., 2001), particularly when contrasted with quantitative analysts, who might not have contacts inside of the social gathering and have less information of how "participation" is achieved.

There are various methodological issues connected with subjective exploration. Objectivity might be hard for the subjective analyst to accept. Sikes and Potts (2008) note that further confusions might emerge from the scientist "going local." Going local is a term connected with humanities, participatory exploration, and ethnography; it alludes to tackling the qualities of individuals around you and of those under study. The subjective specialist might get to be aware of private data about partners and/or the organization under study; this can possibly adversely influence connections (Bell, 2005).

Bowen (2005) focused on the special challenges of employing a qualitative methodology. The lessons are: (1) Read, read, read; (2) Consult the experts; (3) Adhere to university regulations; (4) Pay attention to rigor and trustworthiness; (5) Give details of the methodology; (6) Don't be afraid to include numerical data.

Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified three key advantages of being a qualitative researcher: (a) having a greater understanding of the culture being studied; (b) not altering the flow of social interaction unnaturally; and (c) having an established intimacy which promotes both the telling and the judging of truth. Further, insider-researchers generally know the politics of the institution, not only the formal hierarchy but also how it “really works”. They know how to best approach people. In general, they have a great deal of knowledge, which takes an outsider a long time to acquire.

## 2. Rationale of the Study

Deciding whether to use a quantitative or qualitative research method can be a difficult task for the students at higher education level. Qualitative research aims to understand the problems that are investigated in greater detail and is often quite subjective. There may be a number of different intentions and views of the higher education students to conduct a qualitative research in social sciences. For instance, supervision, knowledge about qualitative research, communication challenges, taking consent of respondents, issues in methodology, personal interest etc. Therefore, the study aims to identify the intentions of higher education students towards conducting qualitative research in social sciences.

The main objective of the study is to identify the preferences of higher education students towards conducting qualitative research in education. Moreover, to compare the preferences of the students towards conducting qualitative research between University of the Punjab (IER) and Education University (EU). One of the delimitation of this study includes the focus of graduates and post graduate programs of Mater of Science (18 years) and Doctor of Philosophy students.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to get the views and

intentions of higher education students towards conducting a qualitative research particularly in Education.

### 3.1. Sample Description

The population of the study was comprised of all the MPhil and PhD students of social sciences in public universities of Lahore. The selection of participants for this study was based on a strategy referred to as, “purposeful selection” which (Maxwell, 2005) denotes that “a selection strategy in which particular settings, persons or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that cannot be obtained from other choices”. The selection criterion was based on most reputable universities in the field of education in Lahore. Therefore, five students (2 PhD, 3 MPhil) from PU (IER) and five students (2 PhD & 3 MPhil) from EU were selected to fulfill the purpose of the study. This study aims to understand the participants’ lived experiences, and preferences.

### 3.2. Interview Procedure

Interviews with higher education students were semi-structured in nature. It was aimed to elicit information of each component of the attitude and preferences of the students towards qualitative research through interviews. Interview questions were constructed on the basis of literature review and research questions of the study. After constructing the instrument, validation process was ensured through expert opinion of the research supervisor and discussion with two senior PhD fellows. Participants were asked about their feelings and emotional responses, experiences, intentions, knowledge, thoughts and associations and interests and barriers about conducting qualitative research in social sciences particularly in Education.

### 3.3. Data Analysis and Results

This research study followed the Creswell’s (2009) six steps during the data analysis process and, although these steps are described in linear order, Creswell de-

scribed “an interactive practice” to analysis. The analysis of the data was based on the research questions accordingly.

**a. Research question 1.** *What do students feel of conducting a qualitative research?*

The students of PhD from both PU and EU have feelings of *appreciation* when they come to know that someone is conducting qualitative research. Specifically, students of PU were of the view that conducting qualitative research is very *rare* and *unique* in education. The researcher needs to possess a strong knowledge on qualitative knowledge and expertise while conducting qualitative research. This research is *lacking* in Higher Education, so qualitative research trend should be flourished.

The students of PhD from EU shared that this becomes *shocking* and *appreciable* when someone conducts qualitative research in education field. Doing research with qualitative approach is not easy task.

MPhil students in PU feel that doing qualitative research is really *effortful* task and ensures some *quality work*. Researcher is competent and has *grip on knowledge* and *groundings* of qualitative research. Libraries are full of quantitative works but there is no applicability and validity of that researches. They have very positive feelings about conducting qualitative research.

The students of MPhil from EU feel that qualitative research is *in-depth* study of the phenomena and very *difficult to conduct*. This research is not only counting the numbers but an in-depth investigation of certain problems. It requires *quality work* and theoretical knowledge to conduct that people don't usually have. Therefore, respondents appreciated conducting qualitative research.

**b. Research question 2.** *What do students believe about their knowledge of qualitative research?*

Almost all the respondents have not yet attended any *formal training* on conducting

qualitative research. They had studied the qualitative research in their course work. The students of PhD in PU have fundamental *knowledge* of conducting qualitative research as they have studied qualitative research as a subject in their course work of PhD. Therefore, they had strong grip on *theoretical knowledge* of qualitative research. The respondents heartily appreciated the effort of their teacher of qualitative research in PhD course work. The teacher ultimately made them to understand the complex and informative knowledge of qualitative research.

Likewise, PhD students in EU had *knowledge* of qualitative research and already oriented with the basics of qualitative inquiry. Besides, they had idea about all the procedures from topic selection to report writing.

MPhil students have inadequate knowledge about qualitative research approach. The MPhil students of PU have more *basic understanding* of qualitative research approach than the students of EU. This is perhaps due to the difference in research orientations. There seems to be relatively more importance given to quantitative research methodology.

On the other hand, MPhil students of EU could not attend any formal trainings or workshops. But one respondent had *strong knowledge* on qualitative research as he attended workshop on qualitative data analysis twice. Other respondents had very *less knowledge* on qualitative research approach because importance was given to quantitative research rather than qualitative research in their MPhil course work.

**c. Research question 3.** *Do students have the pre-requisite skills to conduct a qualitative research?*

As the PhD respondents already had studied in-depth knowledge about qualitative research approach, therefore, they were capable to conduct a qualitative research project. They claimed that they possessed all

the *necessary skills* requiring conducting a qualitative research. Even they all are conducting a qualitative research project that was compulsory for the course work requirement. They encompassed all necessary procedures, methodology and data analysis techniques for conducting this project. The students of PhD from PU had more acknowledgment for their teacher to give them a chance of having a qualitative research project during course work. They were in view that before PhD course work, most emphasis was paid towards quantitative researches. The respondents told a number of *benefits* of using qualitative research approach for their research project.

Moreover, MPhil students from IER (PU) had some basic understanding about qualitative research. Therefore, they were completely unable to conduct qualitative research because they *did not have fundamental skill* or expertise. They argued that only *basic concept* of qualitative research was taught in Masters and MPhil course work.

The MPhil students from EU responded that they *did not have necessary skills* to conduct qualitative research. But one responded had conducted mix method research in his MPhil thesis so he was quite sure to *have the skills* and understanding of qualitative research approach. The MPhil students of EU had more understanding and positive thought towards equipping skills of conducting qualitative research.

**d. Research question 4.** *How can qualitative research contribute in the development of social sciences particularly in education field?*

The respondents highlighted the significance and importance of qualitative research in education. They demanded the qualitative research approach in *complex educational problems and issues*. PhD students of PU enlightened the importance of qualitative research in social sciences particularly in education field. They argued that through qualitative research hidden and *unaddressed problems* can be explored and researched in

educational context. Moreover, to investigate the teachers' attitude and school environment, qualitative research approach is the *best possible approach*.

Likewise, PhD students from EU University viewed that qualitative approach is best suitable to identify the in-depth feelings of the persons and *ground realities* of the situations while using face to face data collection methods. It plays a vital role in education while collecting valid information about current practices and realities through qualitative methodologies.

Besides, the MPhil students from EU highlighted that qualitative research approach always matters when we need to get *detailed information* about a complex phenomenon. It would be inappropriate to deny the importance of qualitative investigations in social sciences. Respondent M-2, MPhil argued that word fake is very easy to be called in quantitative researches.

**e. Research question 5.** *Do students of higher education prefer to conduct qualitative research in future?*

PhD students intended to go for qualitative and mix method research in future. Both the PhD students from PU intended to go for adopting mix method research. They argued that mix method and qualitative researches are the need of time. By adopting *mix method research*, we produce new idea through qualitative approach and we judge that idea at same time. Therefore, this is more *composite research approach*. We have to adopt different research methodologies either qualitative or quantitative to get our objectives fulfilled.

On the other hand PhD students from EU intended to *prefer qualitative* research approach in future. They view that they had been conducting some quantitative researches, so now onwards they would prefer qualitative research. Through qualitative research approach, we can get more in depth knowledge and understanding about the phenomena. Moreover, qualitative research

has *many benefits* rather than quantitative. It is more *productive, correct* and *judged correct situations*.

The two MPhil students of IER in PU responded that they would *prefer quantitative*

understanding and background of quantitative research approach. So, it's easy for her to conduct.

**f. Research question 6.** *What are the barriers stopping researchers to conduct*



Figure 1. A model of prerequisites for conducting qualitative research

research because they don't have much knowledge and expertise on qualitative research. But one respondent intended to *adopt mix method research* approach because through mix method research we have both qualitative and quantitative perspective. *We get rich data that leads to valid decisions, analysis and findings.*

Likewise, two MPhil students from EU responded that they would prefer to go for *mix method* research because in this approach in depth knowledge can be obtained and researcher has certain skills in both qualitative and quantitative research. But one respondent desires to *adopt quantitative research* approach because she had good

*qualitative research?*

Almost all the respondents viewed that qualitative research is *difficult to conduct* because researchers don't have much expertise and actual knowledge on qualitative research approach.

PhD students of IER particularly highlighted the barriers of *lack of ability* among students to conduct qualitative research. The students don't know about *the procedure of qualitative* research like data collection, data analysis and transcriptions, memoing and coding etc. Moreover, students *don't have time and labor* to conduct qualitative research. The respondents also *hesitate and*

*avoid giving data* and information during qualitative research.

The PhD students from EU responded that *confidentiality* is the main barrier during data collection process in qualitative research. Moreover, it's time taking and *difficult for analysis* and interpretation. The students also run away from doing *hard work* in qualitative researches.

MPhil respondents pointed out a number of different barriers of not conducting qualitative researches in social sciences particularly in education. Qualitative research is *difficult* and *time taking* according to MPhil respondents.

The MPhil students of PU responded that they did not have *courage* and *motivational support* from the teachers to conduct qualitative research, mostly teachers encourage the students for quantitative research. It's a typical myth the quantitative is easy than qualitative research. They are not provided *interactions and discussion* sessions for conducting qualitative research. Even teachers don't share ideas about qualitative researches. On the other hand, EU students of MPhil viewed that there are barriers of knowledge and confidentiality of the respondents stopping researchers to adopt qualitative research approach. Moreover, to observe the people and *analyze the collected* information is also a major barrier. *Lacking expertise* to conduct qualitative research is also considered as a barrier. After taking the views of the respondents, a model of prerequisites for conducting qualitative research has been developed by researchers. The most important component is positive attitude towards conducting qualitative research. Moreover, knowledge and skills in qualitative research are essentials to conduct a qualitative research. Training in qualitative research and overcoming barriers are also considered very important prerequisites to conduct a qualitative research.

#### 4. Discussion

The questions addressed the intentions of higher education students towards conducting qualitative research; feelings, knowledge, interests and barriers from the Education students of two different universities. Despite the fact that qualitative research is difficult to conduct and control, higher education students had the tendency to conduct the research using qualitative approach. They highlighted the importance of in-depth research studies to extract the hidden and complex issues in social sciences particularly in Education. The higher education students in the field of education had not enough knowledge and competency towards conducting qualitative research but they had positive intention to go for in-depth research and collecting subjective data from the natural environment. Previous studies had pointed out the worth, importance as well as challenges of conducting qualitative research in social sciences but not particularly in the Education.

The findings of the study verified the predictive indicators which stopped the researchers to conduct a qualitative research in Education field. As respondents had the positive inclination to adopt a qualitative research approach during their research work, but lack of proper supervision, lack of capability, confidentiality, time constraints, and lack of communication and most importantly the encouragement and motivation were the main barriers which were not allowing researchers to adopt qualitative research.

Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) described that qualitative researcher must encompass the strong knowledge and understanding about the phenomena. The results of the study also justified the importance of knowledge about conducting qualitative research is very important. Moreover, Researchers must have strong understanding over the qualitative methodologies.

Bowen (2005) focused on the special challenges of employing a qualitative methodology. The lessons are: (1) Read, read, read; (2) Consult the experts; (3) Adhere to



university regulations; (4) Pay attention to rigor and trustworthiness; (5) Give details of the methodology; (6) Don't be afraid to include numerical data. Likewise, the findings of the study clearly identified the importance of these components or challenges while conducting qualitative research. Having a strong knowledge is prerequisite for conducting qualitative research. Supervision or consulting professional is also important for qualitative research. Finally the researchers suggested a model of basic prerequisites for conducting a qualitative research.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Through a qualitative research approach, intentions of higher education students towards conducting qualitative research have been investigated. A thorough understanding of the higher education students' feelings, knowledge, interest and barriers towards qualitative research is explored through semi structure interviews. The students of PhD (4) and MPhil (6) in education from both University of the Punjab and Education University, have positive attitude to conduct qualitative research, however they express some of the barriers which do not allow the students to conduct qualitative research. PhD students have more knowledge and interest to adopt qualitative research methods during their researches. This is because the PhD students are taught a whole separate subject on qualitative research method and they have to write a qualitative research article. On the other hand, MPhil students want to conduct qualitative research but they don't have sound grip and expertise on qualitative research. Because, they are not taught any separate subject on qualitative research methods during their course work. Lack of knowledge, lack of confidence, lack of supervision, lack of motivation, lack of confidentiality were the main constrains pointed by the respondents to conduct qualitative research. Qualitative research is very important in social sciences particularly in education. Most students of higher education want to adopt mix method research approach because this is more accurate and composite

research approach. There are many un-addressed and complex phenomena which can be possibly addressed through adopting qualitative researches. This is the need of the time to bring the improvement in education sector through qualitative researches.

Universities may include the separate subject on qualitative research methods in their scheme of studies and should pay due importance and significance of qualitative research in social sciences. Moreover, teachers should motivate and support by assigning projects and assignments to higher education students related to qualitative research approach. Appropriate research supervision should be provided to the aspirants of qualitative research. Qualitative research training for the students of higher education may be arranged and promoted.

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