The Road to a Phd in Nursing: Challenges We Don't Talk about Enough: A Reflective Commentary

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ABSTRACT

Every nursing PhD thesis has a backstory of quiet perseverance, family obligations, and late nights. While we honor Florence Nightingale as the pioneer of research and nursing, today's Indian PhD students must contend with a totally different environment. This paper examines the practical difficulties of obtaining a PhD in nursing in India, including financial strain to balancing health, work, and research. We must first recognize and remove the obstacles if we genuinely hope that nursing research will transform practice in the same way that Nightingale's work did.

Keywords: PhD Nursing, Nursing Research, Challenges, Publication, Reflective Commentary

INTRODUCTION

Florence Nightingale was not only the pioneer of modern nursing but also of nursing research. Her pioneering use of data, statistics, and graphical representation formed the basis of health reforms for soldiers in the barracks during the Crimean War. She also laid down early policies that influenced India's public health system. Taking inspiration from her legacy, many nursing aspirants today are pursuing PhD in Nursing to advance evidence-based practice and research. Over the past few decades, nursing education in India has experienced a transformative shift from a purely clinical focus to an academically rigorous discipline emphasizing scholarly inquiry (Kim et al., 2022). The Indian Nursing Council established the National Consortium for PhD in Nursing to strengthen doctoral education and promote research that contributes to evidence-based nursing practice, educational innovation, health policy, and quality improvement. Additionally, INC has standardized doctoral studies. Despite this structural expansion, doctorate applicants still face institutional, sociocultural, and pedagogical obstacles that jeopardize the effectiveness and scientific output of nursing research. In addition to fulfilling demanding PhD requirements, many nursing researchers also serve as educators, clinicians, administrators, and family caregivers. The quality and speed of doctorate research are still impacted by a lack of research infrastructure, insufficient mentorship, financial limitations, publishing pressures, and limited access to sophisticated methodological support. A recent multicenter survey of nurse researchers in Karnataka identified lack of time, money, poor writing abilities, and inadequate technological support as the major barriers to research production, highlighting persistent problems in the Indian nursing research ecosystem. (Rajendran et al., 2026). Development of favourable institutional frameworks and a strong research culture within academic health science institutions requires a careful assessment of these multifaceted constraints. Therefore, this paper is the outcome of the reflection to the current state of nursing research , the challenges faced by doctoral scholars, the lived experiences of the doctoral journey, existing support systems, research gaps, and tactical suggestions for improving doctoral nursing education. This reflective commentary is genuine thoughts penned to improve the doctoral training and developing a sustainable nursing research workforce.

Current Landscape of Doctoral Nursing Research in India

In India, PhD nursing education has expanded dramatically over the last 20 years, reflecting the increased recognition of nursing as a research-focused profession. Research capacity has increased and evidence-based

nursing practice has evolved because to initiatives like the Indian Nursing Council's National Consortium for PhD in Nursing and the establishment of doctoral programs at several universities. The University Grants Commission (UGC) concurrently created laws to uphold academic integrity, improve research quality, and standardise PhD education [UGC, 2022]. In India, PhD nursing research encompasses wide fields including digital health, artificial intelligence, simulation-based education, community health, indigenous health system in addition to more conventional clinical and pedagogical subjects. Nursing educators have been encouraged to acquire advanced degrees by regulatory bodies, resulting in more nursing doctorates for academic and clinical leadership. The number of nurse researchers pursuing doctoral studies has steadily increased as a result of more colleges offering PhD programs in nursing (Hayter&Jackson, 2019). Despite these advancements there exists gaps such as funding, mentorship, research infrastructure, and access to cutting-edge research resources.

Reflections On Challenges

I. Challenges arising from the scholar's personal situation and preparedness:

Issues Related to the Scholar

Down the lane , many scholars who register for PhD do not have genuine interest . They enrolll in PhD programs simply due to institutional requirements, professional growth, social comparison, or external expectations. They do not understand that research work involve sustained drive, intellectual engagement, critical thinking, resilience, and a readiness to work independently for a long time. Scholars find it challenging to identify and refine research questions, organise and carry out studies, analyse findings, and finish thesis writing within the anticipated period. All this contribute to academic delays and decreased research output.

Demographic Challenges

The majority of nurses are still women. Most registrants enroll for PhD at the age of late forties due to various commitments further adding health burden like lifestyle diseases like diabetes and hypertension , which in turn hampers their research output.

Balancing Multiple Professional and Personal Responsibilities

Competing obligations are among the most significant obstacles facing nursing doctoral academics. Many of the doctoral students in other fields are full-time students, however in nursing many doctoral students work as faculty or nurse clinicians while pursuing their doctorate.They have to juggle between research activities alongside their teaching assignments, administrative duties, patient care obligations, and familial responsibilities. Collecting data, reviewing the literature, writing a manuscript and analysing statistics all take a lot of time and focus. This imbalance often results in slow progress in research and longer time to completion.

Personal & Academic Lacunae

During the Masters program in nursing despite submitting a dissertation as partial fulfillment of the course many candidates are not trained enough in research . Also, investing time and money to improve research methods and academic writing is limited and a roadblock.

II. Challenges directly related to conducting the research

Methodological and Statistical Challenges

Nursing research needs to be more methodologically sophisticated. The problems of modern health care often need advanced research designs, mixed techniques, longitudinal studies, implementation science frameworks, and complex statistical analyses.

Many doctoral scholars encounter difficulties in:

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- Selecting appropriate research designs
- Determining adequate sample sizes
- Performing advanced statistical analyses
- Interpreting research findings
- Integrating qualitative and quantitative data

Limited exposure to advanced research methods during earlier academic training can create additional learning demands during doctoral study.

Field-Level Challenges

Ethical clearance ,problems like consent, attrition and mortality during data collection generate mental and logistical stress. Although sample size is calculated with attrition in mind, these factors often disrupt timelines.

Ethical and Regulatory Complexities

The process of gaining ethical clearances and administrative permissions may be time-consuming, especially for multicentred investigations.

Scholars must navigate:

- Institutional ethics committee requirements
- Informed consent procedures
- Participant confidentiality safeguards
- Data protection standards
- Regulatory documentation

While these processes are essential for ensuring research integrity, prolonged approval timelines can delay project implementation and completion.

III. Institutional, supervisory, infrastructural, financial, and collaborative barriers:

Limited Research Mentorship and Supervisory Support

Good supervision is a key part of successful PhD education. However, there are still a few universities with limited experienced nursing researchers and doctoral faculty.The lack of experienced mentors impacts the quality of doctorate research and can perhaps compromise the confidence of academicians to engage in autonomous research. Strong mentor-mentee connections are crucial for scholarly development and research achievement.

Strained Supervisor -Scholar Relationship

Scholars are financially or emotionally burdened by their supervisors. Some supervisors at doctoral committees' meetings or thesis corrections impose extra expenditures or delays that hinder the timely submission of the thesis. Sometimes supervisors deliberately interfere with routine processes, creating obstacles that significantly hinder the scholar's advancement. Sometimes it can be considered as an analogue that supervisor treats scholars the same way she was treated. The dynamics usually resemble the mother-in-

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law-daughter-in-law relationship: causing tension, power imbalance, and unspoken expectations. Sometimes the ego battles between supervisors and co-supervisors are also detrimental. Instead of being a genuine pursuit of knowledge, collaborative study is frequently a battleground of authority.

Insufficient Research Infrastructure

An essential foundation for excellent doctoral work is research infrastructure. However, different universities have different levels of access to research resources.

Common limitations include:

- Restricted access to scientific databases and journals
- Inadequate statistical consultation services
- Limited software availability for qualitative and quantitative analysis
- Insufficient laboratory and simulation facilities
- Lack of dedicated research support units

These limitations might force academics to rely on outside resources, which would raise the cost and complexity of their research.

Financial Constraints

Although pursuing a doctorate can advance one's career, it is also costly. There may be significant financial strain from tuition fees, research costs, travel expenses, conference attendance, publication fees, and data collection costs. Compared to other health science fields, funding possibilities specifically for PhD candidates in nursing have been very restricted. Many researchers, therefore, finance their own studies, which may limit the breadth and scientific rigour of their work. The financial constraints become more acute when scholars seek publishing in the internationally indexed journals, where the prices for processing articles can be high.

IV. Publication, disciplinary, and career-related academic pressures:

Publication Pressure and Academic Expectations

Publishing has become an integral part of the doctorate education. Most of the universities mandate researchers to publish their research articles in indexed Q1/Q2 journals before they are allowed to submit their thesis. The process takes a lot of time, work and publication fees, which can be a financial strain for many scholars. Although publication requirements aim to enhance research quality, they may also create considerable pressure. Scholars often face challenges related to:

- Manuscript preparation
- Journal selection
- Peer-review revisions
- Publication costs
- Predatory journal identification

The emphasis on publication metrics can sometimes shift focus from meaningful knowledge generation toward meeting administrative requirements.

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Disciplinary Specificity & Rejection:

Nursing research is generally focused on health and well-being, knowledge, attitudes, practices, compliance and quality of life unlike the focus of pharmacy and physiotherapy research on treatments. Nursing being a soft science leads to a greater rejection rate of manuscripts in high impact journals.

Long Wait Period & Indexing Issues

Many institutions mandates the research papers to be indexed in Scopus before synopsis submission. Despite papers being published some journals lose their Scopus indexing status during synopsis submission forcing candidates to re-publish. This further contributes to serious delays in the evaluation process of theses.

V. Overall quality and evaluation of doctoral research:

Quality Assurance and Evaluation Challenges

Given the variability in evaluation processes from institution to university, maintaining consistent quality in doctoral nursing research is difficult. Standardised evaluation frameworks, examiner training, and transparent assessment standards can be enhanced to increase the legitimacy and quality of doctoral research.

VI. Emotional and psychological consequences:

Emotional and Psychological Burden

The PhD process is mentally challenging and emotionally draining. Doctoral students frequently cite experiences of uncertainty, self-doubt, research exhaustion, loneliness and academic stress.

Factors contributing to psychological strain include:

- Extended research timelines
- Repeated manuscript rejections
- Data collection challenges
- Balancing professional and personal commitments
- High performance expectations

Despite the prevalence of these experiences, structured psychological support systems for doctoral scholars remain limited within many institutions.

The Prevailing Research Gaps

There is a paucity of evidence assessing the doctoral research ecosystem, despite the significant growth of PhD nursing education in India during the last two decades. Most of the published literature has focused on nursing education, workforce issues or research productivity, with relatively few studies that systematically examined the experiences, challenges, outcomes and long-term impact of doctoral nursing programs. Filling these knowledge gaps is necessary for the development of evidence-informed policies and the improvement of doctorate education.

Limited Empirical Evidence on Doctoral Experiences

There is a lack of empirical evidence in the current literature on the lived experiences of PhD nursing scholars in varied institutional settings in India. The existing studies are largely cross-sectional and descriptive, with limited study into the impact of institutional culture, quality of mentorship and research environments on

doctoral progression, completion and career development. Future qualitative and longitudinal research is needed to better understand the varied experiences of nursing doctorate applicants.

Insufficient Evaluation of Mentorship Models

The role of mentorship is generally accepted as an important factor in doctoral performance, however there is limited information to evaluate the usefulness of formal mentorship programs in Indian nursing institutes. Comparative research of supervision approaches, mentor competencies and mentoring outcomes may provide best practices for PhD education.

Limited Research on Research Capacity Building

Workshops, faculty development programs, and research training activities are increasingly used, but few studies have examined the long-term effects on PhD nursing scholars' research ability, publication productivity, grant acquisition, or career promotion. Systematic evaluation of these activities would be a step toward identifying the most successful techniques to increasing research capability.

Underrepresentation of Diverse Institutional Contexts

Many of the available data are from established universities and academic medical centers. Relatively little is known about doctoral nursing research in new universities, private institutions, rural settings, or resource-limited settings. Future multicentre research should incorporate a variety of institutional settings to improve the generalisability of findings and to help the formulation of equitable policy.

Limited Focus on Outcomes of PhD studies.

The career progression of the PhD-prepared nurses in India has been addressed longitudinally in few studies. Future study should explore the impact of doctoral education on academic leadership, research productivity, clinical innovation, policy participation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and retention of nurses in the workforce. This evidence would be useful in understanding the return on investment of PhD education.

National-Level Evidence

The existing evidence on doctoral nursing research in India is from single institutions or regional studies, which limits the generalisability of conclusions. National multicentre studies on doctoral education, supervision quality, research productivity, career trajectories and policy impact are needed to provide evidence to inform educational changes and national research plans.

Recommended Strategies For Strengthening Doctoral Nursing Research

Strengthen Structured Mentorship Programmes

Good mentoring is the foundation for successful doctorate education. Universities should develop structured mentorship methods that complement formal supervision by engaging experienced nurse researchers, transdisciplinary scientists and early-career faculty mentors. Individual research plans, regular meetings between mentor and mentee and ongoing feedback can promote research competency, scholarly confidence and timely completion of PhD studies. Mentorship programs should also cover scientific writing, grant development, research ethics and career planning (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019).

Strengthen Research Culture

Universities should create a culture of research through acknowledging excellent research, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration, providing support for grant applications, and promoting ethical publication procedures. The establishment of institutional writing centers, journal clubs and peer-review groups can also boost research productivity and scientific communication of PhD scientists.

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Enhance Research Infrastructure and Digital Resources

Support for rigorous doctoral research depends on institutional investment in research infrastructure. Universities should have equity of access to electronic databases, statistical software, qualitative data analysis programs, simulation laboratories and institutional research support services. A central research support unit offering methodological consultation, statistical support, plagiarism screening and editing advice can greatly improve the quality of research and publication.

Expand Funding Opportunities

Innovative research requires dedicated financing sources to minimise financial barriers to doctoral nursing research. More opportunities to compete for competitive fellowships, institutional seed grants, conference travel grant, and publication assistance would allow researchers to engage in multi-center investigations, employ advanced research procedures, and publish their findings in high-quality journals. Funding organisations should also consider prioritising research according to national health goals and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Strengthen Research Capacity Building

Ongoing professional development in research methods is critical throughout the PhD path. Universities should offer monthly workshops on advanced quantitative and qualitative methodologies, systematic reviews, evidence synthesis, implementation science, artificial intelligence in health research, grant writing, and responsible conduct of research. Training in scientific communication, including manuscript preparation, peer-review processes and reporting criteria such as CONSORT, PRISMA, STROBE and COREQ can further enhance study dissemination**.**

Promote Interdisciplinary and International Collaboration

Healthcare issues are complex and focus on collaborative study across fields to be encouraged between nursing researchers and specialists in medicine, public health, epidemiology, psychology, health informatics, biostatistics, and social sciences. International cooperation through academic exchange programs, joint research initiatives and multicenter studies might help in knowledge exchange, better methodological rigour and enhance the global visibility of Indian nursing research.

Strengthen Research Culture within Institutions

A lasting research culture can be fostered by institutional commitment and also by the ecosystem of the faculty involved in doctorate programs. Universities need to reward research achievements through incentives, protected research time, internal financing opportunities and promotion rules that promote high-quality scholarship. Regular journal clubs, research seminars, doctoral colloquia and multidisciplinary research forums can enhance intellectual engagement and promote collaborative learning.

Promote Scholar Well-Being

Increasingly, the psychological health of PhD scholars is a significant predictor of research success. Institutions should, provide a positive climate that encourages work–life balance, stress management, peer support and the availability of counselling services. The dissemination of realistic research timetables, structural reforms in doctoral supervision with transparent guidelines, accountability procedures and stronger support systems for researchers can help to prevent the burnout and increase wellness and productivity of doctoral students

Policy Priorities

The following priorities can boost doctorate nursing research in India:

- Expansion of nursing-specific PhD fellowships and competitive grants for research.

- Development of institutional research infrastructure and access to digital libraries
- Development of national mentoring frameworks for PhD education in nursing.
- Enhancement of prospects for interdisciplinary and international collaboration.
- Provision of employed PhD scholars with dedicated research time.
- Facilitation of translation of PhD research into health policy and clinical practice.
- Enhancement of national mechanisms to monitor the outcomes of doctoral education.

Collectively, these measures can strengthen India's nursing research ecosystem, improve research quality, and enhance the contribution of doctoral-prepared nurses to education, clinical practice, leadership, and health policy.

CONCLUSION

A robust and complete research ecosystem is needed, emphasising mentorship, research capacity building, financial assistance, and access to modern research equipment. The combined efforts of universities, regulatory organisations, health care facilities and funding organisations should be harnessed to enhance PhD training through coordinated supervision, multidisciplinary collaboration, improved methodological support and transparent quality assurance systems. The ecosystem should foster research culture that balances innovation, ethics, researcher well-being and scholarship. Strengthening these critical attributes will equip doctoral nursing scholars to conduct rigorous, meaningful, and relevant research in context that contributes to the body of nursing knowledge, influences health care policy, advances clinical practice, and ultimately improves patient outcomes. Investment in high-quality doctoral education must be made as a means to develop future nurse leaders and improve the nursing practice.

These are observations based on personal experience and may neither be universally accepted nor shared. The big problem is that a lot of the good work that is done in PhD does not translate into practice. What is really found in the field is often omitted in the thesis, and what is in the thesis often stays on the library shelves. We need to close this gap between research, practice and policy, to honour Nightingale's legacy.

Disclaimer: These are reflective observations based on personal and peer experience and may not represent all institutions.

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