

A Qualitative Study on the Challenges in Doctoral Education Encountered by Full-time Working PhD Students*

Tam Zamanlı İşte Çalışan Doktora Öğrencilerinin Doktora Eğitiminde Karşılaştıkları Zorluklar Üzerine Nitel Bir İnceleme

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the number of students enrolling in higher education institutions worldwide. In this respect, full-time working PhD students emerged as a new trend. However, working at a job while studying for a doctorate degree can be challenging. In this context, this research aimed to investigate the difficulties full-time working PhD students face in doctoral education. A phenomenological approach was used in this study. This study used the criterion sampling method to select a sample of full-time PhD students. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, consisting of open-ended questions. According to the analysis of research data, the challenges experienced by full-time working PhD students during their doctoral education are "time management problems", "workplace problems arising from high expectations and negative attitudes", "transportation and attendance problems", "problems performing and focusing" "problems getting support and help". Individuals who work in a related field to the one in which they study, as well as those currently employed in higher education institutions, reported fewer challenges during their doctoral education. It has been determined that the most common problem is time management. Psychoeducation programs can be helpful them to adapt to challenging time schedules.

Keywords: Higher education, PhD students, interpretive phenomenology, qualitative study

Öz: Yükseköğretime başlayan öğrenci sayısında son yıllarda büyük bir artış yaşanmaktadır. Bu anlamda, tam zamanlı bir işte çalışırken doktora öğrenimini sürdürmekte olan öğrenciler günümüzde yeni bir trend olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Fakat bir işte çalışırken doktora eğitimini sürdürmek bireyler için oldukça yıpratıcı bir süreç olabilir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, en az bir yıldır aktif olarak doktora öğrenimini sürdürürken tam zamanlı bir işte çalışan öğrencilerin doktora eğitiminde karşılaştıkları güçlükleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma için fenomenoloji yaklaşımı kullanılmıştır. Örneklem seçiminde tam zamanlı bir işte çalışırken doktora eğitimini sürdürmekte olan bireylerin bulunması amacıyla ölçüt örneklem kullanılmıştır. 20 kişiyle gerçekleştirilmiş olan bu çalışmada verilerin elde edilmesi aşamasında açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılmıştır. Araştırmadan elde edilen verilere göre tam zamanlı işte çalışan doktora öğrencilerinin doktora eğitiminde yaşadıkları zorluklar "zaman yönetimi ile ilgili sorunlar", "iş yerinin yüksek beklentisi ve olumsuz tutumu sonucu ortaya çıkan sorunlar", "ulaşım ve devamsızlık konusunda yaşanan sorunlar", performans gösterme ve odaklanma ile ilgili sorunlar", "destek ve yardım alma konusunda yaşanan sorunlar" altında toplanmaktadır. Doktora eğitimi aldıkları alan ile paralel bir alanda çalışmakta olan bireyler ile halihazırda yükseköğretim kurumlarında çalışan bireyler, doktora eğitiminde daha az sorun durumu yaşadıklarını bildirmişlerdir. En fazla yaşanan sorun durumunun ise zaman yönetimi konusunda olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yükseköğretim, doktora öğrencileri, yorumlayıcı fenomenoloji, nitel çalışma

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Introduction

In recent years, the number of university students has significantly increased, especially in Türkiye (Yavuzaslan et al., 2016). Similarly, this trend has emerged all over the world, and the number of people studying at universities has started to increase (Skaniakos et al., 2018). In this regard, Temel et al. (2023) report a considerable demand for PhD education. Today, there has been a significant global increase in the number of doctoral enrollments and graduates (Yılar, 2020a). For instance, between 1983 and 2003, the number of doctoral students in China surged from 18 to 188,000 within just 20 years following the awarding of its first doctoral degree (Zhuang, 2007). European Union (EU) nations produce approximately 100,000 PhD graduates annually, while the

USA produces around 53,000 (Halse & Mowbray, 2011). Thus, PhD education has gained great importance in higher education institutions.

According to the Higher Information Management System (2024), the number of master's students has fluctuated in the last ten years, while the number of PhD students has constantly increased. It also shows that until the 2019-2020 academic year, PhD students remained below 100 thousand. The number of these students has exceeded 100 thousand in recent years but has not decreased at all in the last ten years. These data suggest that the number of PhD students will continue to increase in the coming years and constitute a large population in higher education. The graph below was created based on the Higher Education Information Management System data.

* This study was presented at the 24th International Psychological Counseling and Guidance Congress

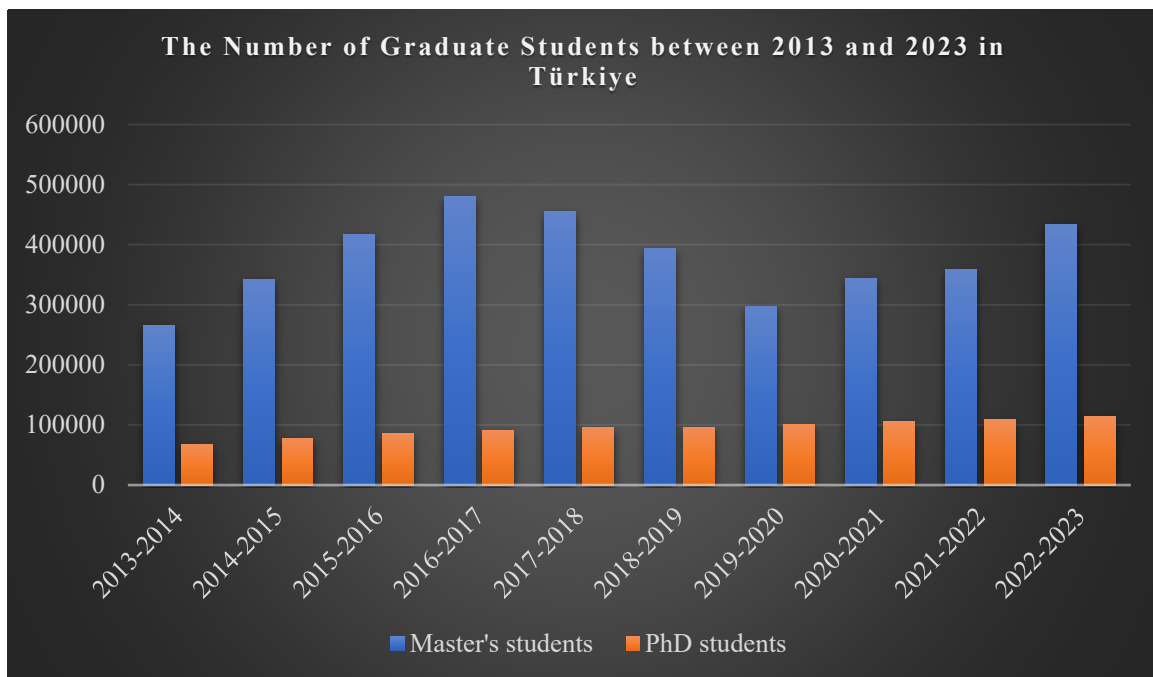


Figure 1. The number of graduate students between 2013 and 2023 in Türkiye

The quality of PhD students is as significant as their quantity. In parallel with the increasing number of PhD graduates in recent years, countries use these individuals to advance international competitiveness and the knowledge economy. Furthermore, universities have prioritized policies to ensure that PhD students do not drop out of their education and complete it on time (McAlpine et al., 2020). Despite all efforts, numerous studies show high doctoral dropout rates (Seçer, 2021). In this respect, Déri and Tremblay-Wragg (2022) report that the average doctoral education dropout rate is 50% across all disciplines worldwide. Career, family, and academic issues may play a critical role in the problems of PhD students (Mboniyirivuze et al., 2023). According to Mawson and Abbott's (2017) research, many doctoral students are pursuing professional careers along with their education. This can be attributed to the opportunities provided by higher education graduation, such as better income, higher status, and a wider range of jobs (Tural, 1995). Thus, full-time working PhD students are a new trend today.

Doctoral education can be challenging and stressful for individuals (Mackie & Bates, 2019) because a doctoral student should be able to think creatively and critically, use research methods, possess a good command of foreign languages, provide rational solutions to problems, conduct high-quality academic research, and make a significant contribution to humanity through their thesis (Yılar, 2020b). At the same time, working a full-time job brings extra burden and difficulty to PhD students. It is evident that these problematic situations negatively affect doctoral education. However, no up-to-date empirical study in the literature addresses the challenges experienced by full-time working PhD students in their doctoral education for the Turkish sample. An increasing number of full-time working PhD students reveals the necessity of examining this issue.

Working actively in a full-time job and continuing the doctoral education brings a tremendous financial and moral burden. As a result, problems can arise for both students and higher education institutions. For example, Tekneci (2016) states that the tendency of PhD students to disenroll and drop out of university is a crucial problem for higher education

institutions and these individuals. Different hypotheses can be put forward regarding why doctoral students leave their education unfinished, such as leaving education due to economic concerns and turning to a job or being overwhelmed by the problems that come with working in a job and not finding the strength to continue their doctoral education. However, today's increase in the number of employed individuals receiving doctoral education suggests the need to examine this issue.

There are various suggestions for improving the educational processes of doctoral students and reducing the problems they experience. Performance-oriented institutional policies are recommended for doctoral students to boost their doctoral education (McGill & Settle, 2012). On the other hand, too much emphasis on research performance in today's higher education system has transformed the concept of research from 'conducting research' to 'creating papers.' (Billot & Codling, 2013). Hence, performance-oriented institutional policies should be implemented in a balanced way.

Doctoral students' problems can be significantly reduced when they feel they belong to the scientific community they are in (Pyhältö et al., 2012). In this respect, doctoral students experience lower emotional exhaustion when they receive strong support from their faculty, have high-quality supervisory relationships, and work with experienced advisors (Hunter & Devine, 2016). Scientific communities that value doctoral students and create different opportunities for doctoral students by cooperating with firms reduce the problems of doctoral students (Thune, 2009). Additionally, equipping at an institutional level is seen as necessary for doctoral students in order to improve their doctoral education by preventing their problems (Carpenter, 2012). Maximizing the well-being of doctoral students is another critical element in improving doctoral education (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Similarly, Waight and Giordano (2018) emphasize that supporting mental health is essential in reducing the educational problems of doctoral students. Taken all together, the literature highlights the importance of academic and non-academic support in doctoral education.

In today's world, doctoral education is now subject to criticism that it is challenging for students to continue this process even by focusing only on education (Tucker et al., 2021; Tutar et al., 2021). In addition to doctoral education, a job in which students actively work affects their doctoral education as it takes up a significant portion of their time and energy. Since doctoral candidates play a very important role in the formation of the future of countries in terms of their fields of expertise, explanations should be made about taking the appropriate measures by the competent institutions and organizations and making possible legal arrangements in order to eliminate the obstacles that may adversely affect their education (Yılar, 2020a). This study will be helpful both for doctoral students to raise awareness on this issue and for policymakers to take precautions. Whittington and Barnes (2021) indicate that different trends may emerge in different countries of the world in terms of doctoral education. Since the number of full-time working PhD students is increasing in Türkiye, like in most countries, this study is crucial in identifying the problems experienced by PhD students and suggesting solutions.

Thus, the current article aims to investigate the views of full-time working PhD students on the challenges they encounter in doctoral education. Accordingly, the research problems of this study are as follows:

1. What are the views held by full-time working PhD students regarding challenges during their doctoral education?
2. What are the views held by full-time working PhD students regarding the impact of the workplace on their doctoral education?
3. What are the views held by full-time working PhD students regarding the impact of the coexistence of their working life and education life on their doctoral education?
4. What are the views held by full-time working PhD students regarding the fears and concerns on their doctoral education?

Method

Numerous studies have been conducted in the literature to address the problems PhD students face. However, individuals simultaneously studying for a doctorate and working full-time have been neglected. Because there is a limited number of studies on this subject, this study has employed a qualitative method to investigate the experiences of these individuals in depth. Within the scope of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with full-time working PhD students to gain insight into their experiences. The study's sample was chosen using criterion sampling, a type of purposive sampling. For phenomenological studies, it is recommended that a criterion sampling technique be used while selecting participants. When the number of individuals experiencing the identified phenomenon is high, identifying criteria to select participants is a critical way to get rich information about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

The evaluation of qualitative data was conducted using an interpretative phenomenological approach. This approach is related to comprehending how individuals perceive themselves and the world. In this sense, the lived experiences of individuals are the main concern for this approach (Moriah, 2018). The interpretative phenomenological approach aims to understand how individuals perceive their experiences and make sense of them (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). For this

approach, the complexity and content of the meanings are more important in the analysis process rather than examining the frequency of specific meanings. Therefore, the researcher scrutinizes the transcript from an interpretative perspective (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

According to Heidegger (1962), who is a representative of the interpretative phenomenological approach, individuals' realities are inevitably affected by the world they live in. People cannot isolate themselves from the world, and human subjectivity has no pure, unadulterated content. Therefore, interpretative phenomenology focuses on what people imply about their daily life experiences (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This study focuses on the detailed experiences of participants in a typical doctoral education and the meaning of these experiences for them. Interpretative phenomenology refers to looking at the meanings embedded in individuals' life experiences beyond simply describing concepts and their attributes. These meanings are not visible to the participants but are generated from their stories. Interpretative phenomenology focuses not on human experiences but on what people consciously know based on these experiences (Solomon, 1987). The interpretative phenomenological approach is an appropriate method for subjects where the participants' experiences are of primary interest and where limited studies have been conducted before (Munroe et al., 2016). That is why the interpretative phenomenological approach was used for this study.

Sample

This research involved 20 PhD students who were working full-time jobs. Participants were selected from those who had completed at least one year of doctoral education and worked full-time during this period. The duration expected from the participants in this study is critical in terms of predicting the formation of the experience. Since it is aimed at reaching the essence of the experiences related to the phenomenon, maturation of the experience is required in phenomenological research (Saban & Ersoy, 2016). Life experience is the state of consciousness that occurs as a result of a purposeful relationship of individuals with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The criteria for achieving this state of consciousness require participants to have experienced the phenomenon for a specific period of time, so participants were determined according to specific characteristics. The characteristics of the participants can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. The characteristics of the participants

		n	%
Gender	Female	6	30
	Male	14	70
Marital status	Single	12	60
	Married	8	40
PhD Stage	Dissertation period	11	55
	Class Period	6	30
	Qualification period	3	15
Job	Psychological counselor	9	45
	Teacher	4	20
	Lecturer	2	10
	Research Assistant	2	10
	Enginer	3	15
Professional Seniority	1-5 year	12	60
	6-10 year	6	30
	11-15 year	2	10

All participants were expected to be active in doctoral education and work life for at least one year in order to convey their experiences effectively. The standards of doctoral programs in public universities in Türkiye are regulated by the same laws because they are all affiliated with The Council of Higher Education. Individuals from different professional groups are subject to the same standards in doctoral programs at public universities. Doctoral duration, doctoral stages, title received, and postdoctoral achievements are subject to the same regulations. In developing educational policies regarding higher education, revealing the experiences stemming from doctoral education standards in individuals is the first step in developing recommendations for policymakers. Similarly, the civil servant status determined for individuals working in the public sector carries certain conditions and defines rights such as academic leave during postgraduate education, so another important participant selection criterion is the experience of public employees in pursuing their doctoral education within the standards of the public sector. Thus, the participants are public employees who continue their doctoral education at public universities.

Before the study, the purpose of the research was explained to the participants in detail. Participants were informed that voice recording would be used during the interview, and they were assured that the data obtained would not be used for any other purpose. It was reported that the identity information of the participants will not be matched with the transcripts. Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could terminate their participation at any time. Voluntary consent forms were obtained from the participants. No participants withdrew during the interview. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes. Interviews were conducted between August and October 2023. The data collected through voice recordings were given numbers to keep personal information confidential.

Researchers

Researchers continue their doctoral education in the fields of guidance and psychological counseling and educational psychology. One of the researchers works as an expert psychological counselor in the Ministry of National Education and the other in the Ministry of Family and Social Services. The researchers have a long experience as full-time working PhD students. At the same time, researchers have been in dialogue with full-time working PhD students for many years.

For phenomenological research, it is crucial how the relationship is established between the individuals whose experiences are examined and the researchers who interpret these experiences. Researchers in this relationship need to suppress their prejudices and previous beliefs about the feelings and thoughts they are aware of to avoid undermining the research (Creswell, 2005). In this respect, Tufford and Newman (2012) indicate that bracketing is a method used by researchers to minimize the impact of their own preconceptions on qualitative research, making the research more rigorous. They also state that bracketing helps protect researchers from being overly influenced by emotionally challenging material, allowing for deeper reflection at every stage of the research process. Since the researchers had similar experiences with the participants, various discussions were held to explore their prejudices and beliefs arising from their experiences during the doctoral education. Researchers continued the study, taking these discussions into consideration. Therefore, researchers have bracketed their

biases. The researchers were careful to continue the study while being as aware of their biases as possible.

Data Collection Tool

In the research, a semi-structured interview form was developed to collect data. A detailed literature review was carried out during the preparation phase of the form. A question pool was created as a result of group work with the participation of researchers. After that, an interview form was created by selecting questions suitable for the purpose of the research. After two experts examined the questions, the necessary adjustments were made. A pilot application was carried out before the study to understand whether the questions in the created form were comprehensible. After the pilot application conducted with four participants, the interview form took its final form. The form was then applied to other participants without any changes.

In the interview guide, various topics related to work-life and doctoral education were addressed to detail the difficulties experienced by the participants in doctoral education. During the interviews, the responses of every participant were recorded. Transcripts of the audio recordings were created. The theme contents were analyzed. For ethical permission for the research, an application was made to Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University Educational Sciences Ethics Committee, and approval was obtained (Ethics Committee Decision Number: 08/02).

Questions included in the interview guide:

- You have been studying for your doctorate and working a full-time job for more than a year. What are the difficulties you have experienced during your education process while continuing both?
- In your opinion, how does working a full-time job during your doctoral education affect your education process?
- What does your workplace expect from you? How do these expectations affect your educational process?
- In what way and how was your life affected when you started to pursue your job and your doctoral studies together?
- Do you have fears and concerns about continuing your PhD studies along with your job? If so, what are they?

Credibility / Transferability / Consistency / Confirmability Studies

To ensure credibility in the research, the researchers conducted pre-interviews with participants to explain informed consent in detail. Then questions were asked to the participants. As in all qualitative studies, transferability is also essential in phenomenological research. Therefore, the field of research, the participants, and how the data were collected and analyzed should be explained in detail (Cilesiz, 2011). This study provided detailed explanations regarding the research process to ensure transferability. In this sense, the development of the data collection tool, the data collection and analysis, and the researchers' role are explained in detail.

The expert review technique is among the most helpful and widely used for credibility in qualitative research. In the expert review technique, the field expert can be asked whether the researchers interpreted the data reasonably and whether the results are consistent with the collected data (Merriam, 1995). In this research, an expert review technique was used to ensure the credibility of the data. Additionally, the coding made by each researcher was compared with that of the other researcher

to obtain reliable data. Furthermore, detailed reporting in qualitative research is considered an effective way to ensure credibility, and it is recommended to include sufficient information about the participants and direct quotations (Creswell, 2013). In this context, this study provides detailed information about the participants and includes direct quotations. Moreover, researchers have been careful to bracket themselves. They refrained from using researchers' biases and experiences in interpreting research data during the data interpretation process. Daytner (2006) indicates that prolonged engagement refers to investing a sufficient amount of time in the research setting. In this sense, researchers used prolonged engagement by spending a sufficient amount of time with participants to gain a better understanding.

Analysis Process

During the analysis phase, the statements of full-time working PhD students were divided into main and subcategories using the open coding method until no new categories emerged. Through the next step, axial coding, an attempt was made to establish a relationship between the codes carried out in the first step. The main themes were reached as a result of two cycles of coding. Quotations were made from the statements of full-time working PhD students while giving their opinions. The criteria for quotations are based on reflecting similarities.

Findings

The findings determined as a result of in-depth interviews with full-time working PhD students were discussed within the framework of the determined themes. These findings were also supported by quotes from the interview transcripts. After analyzing qualitative data, five themes were identified regarding the challenges full-time working PhD students face during their doctoral education. These are 1) time management problems, 2) workplace problems arising from high expectations and negative attitudes, 3) transportation and attendance problems, 4) problems performing and focusing, and 5) problems getting support and help.

Theme 1: Time Management Problems

The study participants reported that they mainly experienced time management problems during their doctoral education. Participants had positive thoughts about doctoral education and made positive attributes to doctoral education. In this sense, while very few participants stated the intensity of doctoral education as the reason for time management problems, most of the participants reported the intensity of the workplace as the cause. Additionally, participants emphasized that doctoral education is not just about homework and class attendance. They expressed their motivation to do extra academic work. However, they reported that they were content with fulfilling the mandatory and most basic responsibilities of doctoral education due to time management problems.

The expressions of the participants on this subject are as follows:

"I cannot find time for myself due to my intense work and academic schedule. This leaves me unable to pursue activities I enjoy, and my doctoral education suffers as a result."

"During my doctoral education, I have to complete homework and paperwork, including notes at the institution where I work. This creates a time management problem for me."

"Because of the demanding nature of my lectures and my job at the school, I faced difficulty in managing my time effectively. The coursework and assignments from teachers were particularly challenging to handle. As a result, I found myself with less time to focus on my personal life. I had to dedicate most of my time to school and doctoral courses, leaving me with very little time for myself."

"Due to working 8-5, I couldn't allocate sufficient time to master my subjects, which prevented me from mastering the subjects more."

"One of the significant challenges I encounter while pursuing my doctoral education alongside a full-time job is time constraint. Due to lack of time, my learning process suffers. Because I am in the field of social sciences, this has led to a decline in the quality and quantity of work that I produce."

"I mostly have problems with time management. I have meeting appointments at the school where I work. I sometimes have problems completing this on time along with doctoral education."

As a result of continuing work and doctoral education together, individuals do not have time for the activities they enjoy, which indirectly has a negative impact on doctoral education. When considering the sanctions individuals will face if they do not fulfill their work and doctoral responsibilities, hobbies are among the first to be sacrificed in case of time problems. Time problems force full-time working PhD students to make detailed priority planning and force them to make choices that will affect their doctoral education. For full-time working PhD students, both work and doctoral education create a time problem because they impose responsibilities that must be done on time. Instead of focusing on just one, both must be carried out in a balanced manner, and since both require significant effort, a time problem arises. When time problems occur, doctoral education is prevented from being productive.

Theme 2: Workplace Problems Arising from High Expectations and Negative Attitudes

Participants emphasized their co-workers and managers as critical influencers in maintaining motivation for doctoral education. All participants pursue doctoral education while working on weekdays. In this regard, work and doctoral education processes are highly linked for participants. For this reason, participants hold specific expectations from their colleagues and managers. Participants expressed these expectations as supportive, tolerant, and sensible attitudes. In this sense, workplace problems may demotivate participants towards the doctoral education process. Participants stated that their motivation for work decreases when they encounter negative attitudes and behaviors from their colleagues and managers about pursuing their doctoral education. Some participants indicated that their colleagues showed negative attitudes later towards them for the days they did not come to work while continuing their doctoral education. Encountering a negative attitude at work is likely to reduce participants' tolerance toward pursuing their education while working full-time simultaneously.

"Whether or not I could get permission from the school was a difficult situation for me. I had a problem getting permission from the head of the school to go to lectures. So, I could not say I could go to lectures comfortably whenever I wanted. I was constantly worried about getting permission from the head of my school."

“Since I am a civil servant, academic study is not encouraged much. They want me to do purely secretarial work. Sometimes we need to proctor exams, prepare and implement the program, and make presentations.”

“My job description is to attend class. Nevertheless, I also have to fulfill the responsibilities given to me by the school. There may be extra tasks. These expectations inevitably have a negative impact on my education process because I spend extra time.”

“The expectations of my workplace from me are to be able to achieve the goals, but sometimes, I can fail there because of my PhD. I don't do the work on time as expected from me. Sometimes, these can fail. Because of my negligence, I may have problems with the managers at work.”

“I have to take leave from school. During this process, the workplace expects performance from me. They tell me at every opportunity that I need to concentrate on my work.”

“The expectations of my workplace are sometimes not really realistic. I encounter situations that exceed my duties and responsibilities. But I still try to do my job well. Doing my job well and trying to continue my doctoral education all have a challenging effect on me.”

Full-time working PhD students are concerned about getting permission to participate in doctoral education if they have a job that requires them to go every weekday. The fact that doctoral education is quite challenging on its own makes it even more difficult for individuals who have permission problems while participating in education. When leave is taken to attend doctoral education, the workplace has higher expectations from the employee in terms of performance in the workplace. While doctoral education is a newly emerging responsibility, increasing expectations of the workplace make doctoral education even more difficult. Also, the fact that the work done in the workplace is very unrelated to academic studies and is tiring reduces motivation for doctoral education.

Theme 3: Transportation and Attendance Problems

Some participants pursued their doctoral education in the same city where they lived, while others continued to do so in a different city. In this sense, participants evaluated the transportation issue as challenging regarding time and money. Moreover, participants reported varying employer attitudes toward taking leave from work for regular doctoral education attendance. Furthermore, participants whose workplace and the university where they received their doctoral education were in different cities expressed more difficulties in transportation and attendance to doctoral education. Some participants claimed they didn't attend classes regularly because their workplace would only permit their doctoral education for a few weeks.

“The biggest difficulty I have experienced is that the place where I work and the place where I do my doctorate are different places. Commuting here is a problem. It causes both financial and physical fatigue. For example, it would be easy if I had completed my doctorate at the same place I worked. But I work in a different city. The issue of commuting is my biggest difficulty in the PhD program.”

“There were many difficulties, mainly in terms of transportation. I could not spare time for my own hobbies. Doctoral education was taking up a lot of my time. At the same time, since I do not have my own car, it was a waste of time, and I could not spare time for other things.”

“Of course, working full-time and getting a doctorate education also had their problems. There were difficulties in terms of transportation and time.”

“Since I continue to work, there is a problem with coming and going regarding my leaves. It's a problem because of the distance.”

“The difficulties I experience are that I have to work within my working hours when there are lectures. Therefore, I have to stay at the institution for specific periods.”

“My job and academic work schedule are very busy. Since I work at a school, I have problems with the leave processes related to my doctorate. Therefore, it is a very tiring process for me. Especially the process of getting permission from the school was a bit tiring.”

When full-time working PhD students receive their doctoral education at a distant university, the efficiency of their doctoral education decreases due to the distance between their workplace and the place of their doctoral education. The proximity of the workplace and the university where the doctoral education is received is a great advantage in regular participation in doctoral education, as both of them require the individual to be present on certain days. Experiencing transportation problems also increases time problems because most of the individuals' time is spent traveling.

Theme 4: Problems Performing and Focusing

During their doctoral education, participants reported experiencing intermittent periods of loss of focus and decreased performance. They expressed high motivation for doctoral education but reported workplace anxiety negatively impacted their performance and focus on the responsibilities for doctoral education. Besides, participants indicated decreased energy and difficulty continuing their doctoral education due to negative attitudes from co-workers and work-related stress. In addition, participants highlighted that their work life not only takes up their time while they are at work but also keeps them occupied outside of work with various responsibilities. They also stated that struggling with obsessive thinking related to work-life further adds to their difficulties in staying focused on their doctoral education.

“Of course, I have problems focusing. I work with students, and there are divisions since I am a research assistant. I cannot focus on my PhD studies when I have any responsibilities because I do other jobs, such as secretarial, independent of my own work.”

“I couldn't focus fully. I can't focus. I spend 8-9 hours a day in a workplace. I think the quality of education is low for me because I work a full-time job and cannot focus on my education.”

“First of all, the difficulty I experienced during the education process is a factor that significantly reduces my educational performance while working a full-time job. In terms of quality, the time I spend on my work is decreasing.”

“I have a concern about the decrease in the efficiency of doctoral education. I think that variables such as the attitude of the academicians and the advisor during the doctoral process greatly affected my anxiety, fear, and educational performance.”

“It is necessary to compromise on times such as weekend holidays and evening time that you can devote to your family. Because you work so hard, you may feel bored or lose motivation from time to time.”

"I had to postpone some essential issues in my life so that I could continue my doctoral education. Nevertheless, it is really exhausting to continue working together with doctoral studies."

For full-time working PhD students, the fact that their job is quite different from the field expertise in which they received their doctorate education means that they are largely divided. The significant differentiation of responsibilities and expertise between doctoral education and the workplace complicates the focus on doctoral education. Also, if the academic advisor has a negative approach, students' focus and performance on their doctoral education may decrease.

Theme 5: Problems Getting Support and Help

During their doctoral education, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of feedback their advisors and academics provided. Participants highlighted that because the doctoral education process is lengthy and has several stages, they sometimes feel lonely due to inadequate support. Most participants reported insufficient support from their workplaces for their doctoral education. Some of them emphasized that, contrary to the support from the workplace, they encountered negative attitudes such as jealousy, envy, and gossip that undermined their doctoral education. Some of them emphasized that they faced negative attitudes like jealousy and gossip when they expected support from their workplace. During their doctoral education, participants more highlighted the significance of the support they received from their workplaces.

"How will I write the dissertation? I constantly think. Can I complete my dissertation? Of course, I am going through a process that tires my mind. Am I adequate in terms of time management? I have numerous concerns. I sometimes worry about getting feedback from my advisor."

"If I worked at another job, I would be affected worse. For example, you see your advisor, your dissertation comes to your mind, and when that happens, it really excites you. Being in the same environment and working in the same environment encourages you in that sense."

"Our workplace generally has expectations that we complete our doctorate and publish. You already provide these in your doctoral education. Since I work at a university, doing a PhD also adapts to the expectations of the workplace."

"Unfortunately, my workplace does not want young people like us who are studying for a doctorate to come to the fore. Unfortunately, people at work do not want us to get a doctorate and move up."

Full-time working PhD students expect great support from academic advisors during their doctoral studies and rely on them to alleviate their concerns. Insufficient support in this sense can significantly increase their concerns about doctoral education. The fact that individuals receiving doctoral education work in a university environment and can frequently reach their academic advisors effectively reduces the difficulties in doctoral education. It is also important to motivate individuals more for their doctoral education. In addition to the support received, being close to the support and having the support easily accessible is beneficial for doctoral students. If there is a lack of support for doctoral education in the work environment, doctoral education will likely be negatively affected.

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

This study aims to explain the challenges experienced by full-time working PhD students regarding doctoral education. After interviews were completed, the following five themes were identified: 1) time management problems, 2) workplace problems arising from high expectations and negative attitudes, 3) transportation and attendance problems, 4) problems performing and focusing, and 5) problems getting support and help.

Challenges in doctoral education arise from a multitude of factors influencing the daily life of full-time working PhD students. The most mentioned themes were time management problems and workplace problems arising from high expectations and negative attitudes. In alignment with the literature findings, this study found that full-time working PhD students have numerous problems affecting the quality of doctoral education (Déri & Tremblay-Wragg, 2022; Mbonyirivuze et al., 2023; Seçer, 2021).

Long working hours may have a detrimental effect on individuals' motivation by reducing the energy and time they devote to doctoral education. Spending a large part of the day at work reduces focus on doctoral education. At the same time, it restricts PhD students' social life and prevents them from relaxing and being motivated. In professions where work-related responsibilities continue outside of work in addition to long working hours, it becomes more challenging to attend, focus, and perform in doctoral education. Currently, research performance is at the center of doctoral education and requires significant effort (Billot & Codling, 2013). Thus, high expectations and negative attitudes of the workplace carry the risk of reducing the efficiency of doctoral education.

It is evident that long working hours limit the time and energy PhD students can devote to their doctoral education. Merely attending class and fulfilling essential responsibilities are not enough for PhD students and countries. Doctoral education has a greater mission where extra scientific studies are expected. Since PhD students are expected to develop the knowledge economy by countries (McAlpine et al., 2020), there is a need for policymakers to introduce policies that make it easier for these students to devote more time and energy to doctoral education. PhD students who work 8-5 working hours report that the efficiency of their doctoral education decreases, so if countries want PhD students to contribute to the country's development by increasing scientific studies, it may be helpful to make working hour arrangements directly for these students. Today, there is no legal regulation binding on workplaces in Türkiye to support and encourage the extra academic studies of PhD students. More importantly, full-time working PhD students are sometimes prevented from attending classes by their workplaces, thus disrupting their doctoral education or demotivating them by exhibiting negative attitudes. The decrease in the problems experienced by doctoral students during the education process mostly depends on their well-being (Sverdlik et al., 2018). In this sense, when they feel supported, they feel less emotional exhaustion (Hunter & Devine, 2016). However, the negative attitude they receive and the prevention of their participation in doctoral education can cause their problems to become deep-rooted. Thus, it may be beneficial to ensure that participation in doctoral education is secured by law rather than left to the initiative of workplaces.

The lack of precise regulation regarding academic leave in Türkiye is a vital problem. Leaving the initiative to the administrative manager regarding academic leave and

prioritizing the workplace causes anxiety and stress in PhD students. Most participants emphasize that continuing their doctoral education while working a full-time job is very challenging. According to the literature, the dropout rate from PhD education is relatively high (Déri & Tremblay-Wragg, 2022). Hence, there may be a considerable number of individuals who cannot continue their doctoral education because they cannot obtain academic leave or who abandon their doctoral education due to a busy workplace. With binding legal regulations for workplaces, the continuity of doctoral education for full-time working PhD students can be effective in the long term. Until this urgent need is met and settled, short-term measures should be taken to prevent losing PhD students who are at risk of dropping out of their doctoral education. In this regard, increasing doctoral scholarships to a level that these students can sustain their lives may be beneficial for full-time working PhD students to quit their jobs and continue their doctoral education with this alternative when conditions require.

According to the findings of this study, individuals who work in a related field to the one in which they study, as well as those currently employed in higher education institutions, reported fewer challenges during their doctoral education. Expectations from individuals working in higher education institutions are parallel to the requirements of doctoral education. On the other hand, workplaces outside higher education institutions are far from displaying a similarly supportive attitude. There is a need to develop policies, especially for individuals working outside higher education institutions and simultaneously receiving doctoral education. It can be thought that co-workers and managers working in higher education institutions focus on scientific studies as a common goal. In this respect, when doctoral students' belonging to their scientific communities and workplaces increases, their educational problems tend to decrease (Pyhältö et al., 2012). On the other hand, while individuals outside higher education institutions are not encouraged to receive doctoral education, situations such as not coming to work to attend doctoral courses may cause them to be excluded.

Laws are fundamental elements that protect the rights of both employees and individuals receiving education. It may also be necessary for attitude change in the workplace because while duality does not arise regarding the rights regulated by law, negative attitudes may emerge more apparent in the absence of a precise regulation. For this reason, it may be an essential step to at least exclude participation in doctoral courses from the discretion of workplace managers in the form of academic leave.

Full-time working PhD students also have different roles outside of work and education. In parallel with the findings of Mbonyiriyivuze et al. (2023), this study found that the problems experienced in doctoral education arise from the combination of responsibilities brought by the different roles that PhD students have. According to this study, work-life significantly affects the doctoral education process. This study was limited to work and education status. Future studies may consider different variables such as marital status, socioeconomic status, and gender because the roles of PhD students may increase or decrease according to these factors. This study is limited to Türkiye, and it is crucial to address this issue in other countries due to differences in legal regulations and cultural elements. While there are very few private universities in Türkiye, the extra obligations of paid PhD education abroad should also be taken into consideration.

Effective policies can be created by making comparisons between countries.

As a result of the interviews, it may be recommended that full-time working PhD students be supported with psychoeducation programs on time management. It may be beneficial to create alternatives by providing more diverse scholarship opportunities to these students. Increasing and continuing programs such as "ÖYP", which was previously implemented but abolished in Türkiye, and "YLSY", which is still being implemented, may be valuable for PhD students to continue their education by receiving scholarships to focus on their doctorates. Increasing the number of job postings in higher education institutions for PhD students and encouraging them to work in their fields may be beneficial in terms of efficiently continuing their doctoral education. Studies need to examine how the obligations to complete a master's degree to become a specialist teacher and doctoral education to become a head teacher, stipulated by the Teaching Profession Act put into effect by the Ministry of National Education, change teachers' perceptions about doctoral education. Policies can be developed by measuring the effectiveness of today's Teaching Profession Act in practice. Evaluating the Teaching Profession Act in terms of its contribution to teachers' perspectives on doctoral education is crucial. Similarly, enacting laws that encourage doctoral education for other professional groups may be beneficial.

The findings of the study show that full-time working PhD students have difficulties in their doctoral education and reveal the necessity of regulations that facilitate their participation in doctoral education for individuals working outside higher education institutions. During this process, they should be supported in terms of time management and mental health problems. There is a need to make arrangements for full-time working PhD students to attend PhD courses. By ensuring harmony between the family member, employee, and student roles of full-time working PhD students, workplaces and their families should be encouraged to support the doctoral education of these individuals. Thus, support programs should be developed considering the different individual needs of full-time working PhD students.

Author Contributions

All authors took an equal part in all processes of the article. All authors have read and approved the final version of the study.

Ethical Declaration

This study was conducted with the approval decision taken at the Ethics Committee for Educational Sciences (Protocol No. 08/02) of Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University, dated 28.08.2023.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of the study.

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