Innovations

Work-Life Balance and Resilience Strategies of Doctoral Students: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: *Doctoral studies present significant challenges to student well-being and academic success. This systematic review synthesizes extant research to examine the multifaceted challenges faced by doctoral students, explore effective work-life balance (WLB) strategies, and highlight the crucial role of resilience. Key challenges identified include work-life imbalance stemming from competing academic, personal, and professional demands; intense academic pressures, such as publication expectations and imposter syndrome; resource constraints, particularly in developing countries like the Philippines; and institutional and programmatic factors, including ambiguous research roles and inadequate support structures. The absence of precise policies on study leaves in the Philippines further aggregates. This review elaborates on the interaction between WLB and resilience, showing how they are implicated in one another's elaboration. Furthermore, it explores the influence of factors beyond WLB and resilience, including supervisory relationships and mentorship, social support and community, access to mental health resources, and the impact of program structure and institutional culture. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive support systems addressing individual, institutional, and cultural contexts to promote well-being and academic success. These systems should include clear policies on study/parental leave and funding, accessible mental health and academic support, mandatory supervisor mentorship training, and community-building initiatives. Ultimately, this review advocates for an institutional culture prioritizing student well-being alongside academic excellence, recognizing that thriving scholars achieve greater academic success and contribute meaningfully to their fields.*

Keywords: *doctoral students, resilience, mental health, Philippines, work-life balance*

Introduction

Pursuing a doctoral degree is a rigorous academic journey that requires time, energy, and dedication. It is a long-term commitment that involves staying dedicated and resilient and overcoming many challenges (Karannagoda et al., 2024). Doctoral students in universities worldwide experience a complex set of challenges that usually affect their well-being and academic progress. Such challenges are severe in developing countries like the Philippines, where limited resources, socio-economic disparities, and cultural expectations add more burden to the doctoral students.

Globally, the challenges faced by doctoral students have been extensively studied. These include overload, lack of support, work-life imbalance, and persistent pressure to publish. Self-doubt, anxiety, and imposter syndrome seriously hamper the PhD journey (George, 2023). Likewise, Mercer et al. (2022) highlighted those doctoral researchers are most likely to rely on cognitive coping strategies for academic stress management.

This study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), specifically SDG 4, Quality Education (United Nations, n.d.); this goal emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. The study directly contributes to SDG 4 by identifying challenges faced by doctoral students to address these issues and improve the overall quality of higher education, promote well-being for academic success and overall quality of life, and enhance learning environments to promote a positive and productive academic experience.

In the Philippine academic landscape, graduate students face specific challenges, including time constraints, financial difficulties, limited resources and technology, and the struggle to achieve work-life balance (Osea et al., 2021). Institutional and goal commitment, faculty support, peer interaction, and financial stability are crucial for student retention (Curbano et al., 2020; Esquerra, 2020). Demands such as ambiguity in research roles, inadequate program resources, and interpersonal conflict can negatively impact well-being (Acharya, 2024), although some demands, like workload, can also contribute to personal growth. This finding highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve the graduate student experience in the Philippines.

While a growing number of doctoral students are pursuing higher education, empirical research on their experiences and strategies for balancing work, life, academics, and building resilience is still limited. According to Bernuzzi et al.

(2022), resilience is inversely related to work-life conflict and positively linked to work-life balance and enrichment, mutually benefiting each other and mitigating the adverse effects of work-life imbalance.

The concept of work-life balance has garnered significant attention in recent years, particularly regarding students' experiences navigating the demands of academia alongside personal responsibilities. In doctoral studies, work-life-academic balance effectively manages and prioritizes competing demands from work, personal life, and academic pursuits. As a student or researcher, the pressure to work tirelessly can make achieving a healthy work-life balance impossible (Khan, 2022). The lack of a delicate balance affects mental health, productivity, and well-being. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adverse situations. For doctoral students, fostering academic resilience is crucial for preventing adverse outcomes such as poor academic performance and dropout rates (Radhamani & Kalaivani, 2021).

Recent studies highlight the challenges faced by Filipino workers and students in achieving a satisfactory work-life balance. A 2024 report ranked the Philippines second to last globally in work-life balance, with an index score of only 27.46 out of 100. This ranking reflects long working hours and inadequate statutory benefits, complicating efforts to maintain a healthy balance between professional and personal lives (Galang, 2024). In particular, graduate students often struggle with these demands, as illustrated by a study conducted in Manila that revealed many respondents were only marginally able to maintain their work-life balance (Pinlac, 2024).

While pursuing doctoral studies is recognized as a valuable endeavor, the Philippine Civil Service Commission (CSC) Memorandum Circulars, which provide guidelines on study leave, generally do not explicitly include provisions for doctoral students pursuing full-time studies. This absence creates a potential gap in support for this specific group of learners, highlighting the need to further consider their unique circumstances within existing policy frameworks.

This study aims to identify the key challenges faced by doctoral students in the Philippines, explore the strategies they employ to manage work-life-academic balance and examine the resilience factors that enable them to overcome adversity and persist in their doctoral studies. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the unique experiences of doctoral students in the Philippines by identifying key challenges, exploring work-life balance strategies, and examining

resilience factors. The findings will inform the development of effective support mechanisms.

Review of Related Literature

The rigors of doctoral studies often lead to a delicate balance between academic pursuits and personal commitments. As doctoral students navigate the complexities of their academic journey, they face numerous challenges that can impact their well-being and overall success. A growing body of research has explored the multifaceted nature of these challenges, particularly regarding work-life balance and resilience. Researchers have identified vital factors that bring about academic and psychological well-being among doctoral students by examining experiences across the world.

Work-Life Balance of Doctoral Students

Work-life balance (WLB) has become a critical concern for academic researchers, particularly doctoral students. A study by Drăghici et al. (2022) indicates that academic burnout is more pronounced than work-related burnout, with test anxiety as a mediator between burnout and poor academic adjustment, influenced by the students' occupational status. These finding underscores graduate students' unique pressures, who often grapple with high expectations and extensive workloads. Schwoerer et al. (2021) further emphasize that graduate students frequently experience substantial stress while struggling to maintain a healthy work-life balance. They advocate for graduate programs to prioritize student well-being through proactive strategies, such as fostering supportive learning environments, providing stress management resources, and creating opportunities for a balanced lifestyle.

Moreover, effective time management emerges as a crucial factor in achieving WLB. Kashyap (2024) highlights that prioritizing tasks, setting deadlines, and minimizing distractions can enhance productivity, reduce stress, improve work-life balance, better decision-making, and greater overall satisfaction. This finding aligns with the findings from Haider and Dasti (2022), who demonstrate that mentoring relationships positively influence research self-efficacy and work-life balance, ultimately contributing to the psychological well-being of doctoral students.

Resilience Strategies of Doctoral Students

Resilience is important for doctoral students to navigate the numerous challenges inherent in their academic journey. According to Kokotsaki (2023), there are several effective resilience strategies that doctoral students employ, including

positive thinking, seeking social support, and developing effective coping mechanisms. The study highlights that these strategies are essential in overcoming personal, professional, and institutional barriers that impede progress. Further, mindfulness and meditation are emphasized as significant practices that increase resilience and reduce levels of stress among the students in order for them to maintain focus and emotional balance in times of trying.

To further support the resilience of doctoral researchers (DRs), Mercer et al. (2022) advocate for universities to provide tailored workshops and resources focused on cognitive coping strategies. Such initiatives can foster increased self-efficacy and improved self-management skills, ultimately enhancing resilience. At a minimum, institutions should offer cognitive-based support to help students develop self-regulatory skills. Ideally, they should also provide task-specific assistance, such as academic writing support, to address the unique stressors DRs face throughout their doctoral studies. By implementing these strategies, universities can create an environment that helps students cope with adversity and promotes their overall well-being and success in completing their degrees.

The Interplay of Work-Life Balance and Resilience

The interplay between work-life balance (WLB) and resilience is multifaceted and critical for the success of doctoral students. Research suggests that maintaining a healthy work-life balance can significantly enhance resilience by reducing stress and burnout, equipping individuals to better cope with challenges and setbacks. For instance, studies indicate that when doctoral students manage their time effectively and establish boundaries between their academic and personal lives, they experience lower anxiety levels and improved overall well-being. This relationship highlights the importance of creating an academic and personal environment where students can thrive.

Institutions play a significant role in promoting work-life balance and resilience among doctoral students. Flexible work arrangements, adequate support services, and a supportive academic culture are essential strategies for enhancing student well-being. For instance, Mercer et al. (2022) suggest that universities should provide workshops and resources that teach cognitive coping strategies, which can lead to increased self-efficacy and improved self-management skills. Furthermore, task-specific support, like academic writing support, can help address the unique stressors of doctoral researchers at different stages of their journey. In this way, universities can foster a more supportive environment for doctoral students to develop resilience and achieve a sustainable work-life balance.

Doctoral Students' Experiences

Research on the experiences of doctoral students in the Philippines reveals a range of unique challenges that significantly impact their academic journey. Osea et al. (2021) identified several critical issues graduate students face, including limited study time due to various commitments such as work and family responsibilities, financial constraints, and barriers to accessing necessary resources. These factors contribute to difficulties balancing academic demands with personal obligations, ultimately affecting students' professional development. Additionally, the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, as many students struggle with technological adaptation and communication barriers, further complicating their educational experiences.

Further, supported by Curbano et al. (2020) highlighted that institutional commitment and goal orientation are significant predictors of student retention in doctoral programs. They found that faculty support and peer interactions are crucial in helping students navigate their academic paths. Moreover, Esquerra (2020) pointed out that financial issues are a primary reason for student attrition, alongside delays in completing essential requirements like theses or dissertations. Acharya (2024) further emphasized that the demands of doctoral studies, including role ambiguity and interpersonal conflicts, threaten students' well-being. The combination of these factors underscores the need for tailored support programs to address the specific needs of Filipino doctoral students, ensuring they receive adequate resources and guidance to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Discussion

This systematic review synthesized existing research to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by doctoral students, explore strategies for achieving work-life balance (WLB), and examine the crucial resilience factors that enable them to navigate the demanding landscape of advanced academic study. The findings underscore a complex and dynamic interplay between these elements, revealing that addressing the challenges of doctoral life requires a holistic and multi-pronged approach. This framework encompasses robust support systems, effective time management practices, a strong emphasis on mental health, and institutional policy changes to foster a sustainable WLB and ultimately support doctoral student well-being and academic success.

Challenges Faced by Doctoral Students

Doctoral studies present a unique set of challenges extending beyond the rigorous academic demands, significantly damaging students' well-being,

resources, and ability to progress effectively. These challenges are not isolated but intersect and compound each other, creating a complex web of difficulties.

Work-Life Imbalance

The struggle with work-life imbalance is a constant battle. Juggling research, personal relationships, work responsibilities, and family obligations creates immense pressure. Research by Yusuf et al. (2020) supports this, identifying key stressors in three categories: "work" (academic workload, course requirements), "life" (work obligations, finances, home/domestic responsibilities, social life), and the stress of balancing the two, highlighting the significant impact of external responsibilities, particularly work and domestic duties, compounded by academic workload and time management difficulties, on both the academic and personal lives of graduate students. This imbalance is not merely a logistical issue; it has profound implications for mental and physical health, potentially leading to chronic stress, burnout, and even physical ailments.

Academic Pressures

Academic stressors are equally significant. The pressure to publish, the constant evaluation of work, the inherent uncertainties of research, and the pervasive imposter syndrome can be overwhelming. Johann et al. (2024) revealed that academics under intense publication pressure often prioritize journal reputation and speed, potentially at the expense of research quality. This pressure is further amplified by the time constraints many doctoral students face, often exacerbated by the need to work to support themselves. As Wang et al. (2024) suggest, while journal publication is important, fostering a sense of writer identity through mutual and self-recognition can mitigate some of this external pressure, highlighting the need for a supportive research environment that values the process of scholarly development as much as the final product.

Resource Constraints

Resource constraints, particularly in the Philippines, present significant hurdles. Diocos (2022) identified critical research challenges faced by Filipino graduate students, including poor time management, financial difficulties, uncooperative respondents, difficulty identifying research issues, limited ICT resources, advisor conflicts, and lack of researcher commitment. These challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions, including improved research methodology training, enhanced resource access, and more muscular institutional support systems. These financial constraints often intersect with work-life imbalance, forcing students to work more to make ends meet, reducing their time for research and personal life.

Institutional and Programmatic Factors

Beyond individual challenges, systemic issues within institutions and doctoral programs significantly impact student well-being and retention. Ambiguity in research roles, inadequate resources for doctoral programs, interpersonal conflicts (with supervisors or peers), and a lack of institutional commitment create a challenging environment, contributing to feelings of isolation, stress, and even attrition. Recent studies, such as a scoping review of 32 quantitative studies (2015-2021) by Hurtado et al. (2024), emphasize the multifaceted nature of these issues. This review identified key subfactors influencing doctoral student success—female student status, self-efficacy, and motivation (individual); supervisor relationships (academic); psychological support (institutional); and migratory status (socioeconomic)—revealing a need for research that explores the interplay of these factors beyond the current emphasis on individual factors.

Policy and Study Leave Limitations

The current study leaveframework in the Philippines, as outlined in Civil Service Commission Memorandum Circular (CSC MC) No. 21, s. 2004, creates an untenable situation for individuals pursuing doctoral studies, as it does not explicitly provide guidelines for study leaves for doctoral programs. This policy gap undermines their ability to conduct essential dissertation research while balancing demanding work responsibilities with rigorous academic requirements. The experience of Dominador P. Martin, a doctoral student in Rural Development, illustrates this difficulty. While Mr. Martin acknowledged that, under normal circumstances, the denial of study leave would not significantly impact his ability to balance work, studies, and personal life, his current situation presents unique challenges. Due to a timeline for completing his dissertation before a curriculum change and his designation as a Section Chief, the denial of study leave has "moderately affected his ability to balance the demand of finishing his dissertation, workload demand, and personal life because of its timing" (D.P. Martin, personal communication, January 24, 2025). He has been forced to use earned leave for data gathering and writing. Mr. Martin believes that amending CSC Memorandum Circular No. 21-2004 and DENR MC No. 03-2023 to include PhD students in study leave privileges would encourage more professionals to pursue advanced studies, ultimately benefiting the agency through research related to its mandate (D.P. Martin, personal communication, January 24, 2025). This policy gap underscores the need for urgent attention and reform to support the professional development of Filipinos.

These challenges, while individually significant, often intersect and amplify one another. For example, financial strain can exacerbate work-life imbalance by necessitating longer working hours, which, in turn, can negatively impact mental health and reduce resilience. The experience of Mr. Martin, forced to use earned leave due to the lack of dedicated study leave provisions, further exemplifies the difficulties doctoral students face in balancing competing demands. This intersectionality underscores the need for comprehensive and multifaceted support systems, including policy reform, to mitigate these negative impacts and allow the positive aspects of the doctoral journey—intellectual growth, skill development, and personal fulfillment—to flourish.

The Synergistic Interplay of Work-Life Balance (WLB) and Resilience

The synergistic interplay between work-life balance (WLB) and resilience is crucial for doctoral student success. The demanding nature of doctoral studies, characterized by heavy workloads, complex research, financial uncertainties, and the pressure to produce original work, can significantly impact well-being. Maintaining a healthy balance and fostering resilience are essential for navigating this challenging landscape. While resilient individuals can temporarily endure stressful situations, prolonged exposure to excessive demands can lead to burnout, anxiety, and depression (Vilser et al., 2024). This observation underscores the importance of managing stress, not simply enduring it.

The relationship between work-life balance and resilience is bidirectional and synergistic. A strong work-life balance can bolster resilience by reducing chronic stress and providing opportunities for rest, rejuvenation, and engagement in activities that promote well-being. Conversely, high resilience can facilitate establishing and maintaining a healthy work-life balance by enabling individuals to effectively manage stress, prioritize tasks, and set boundaries between their academic and personal lives. This interplay is supported by research indicating that personal resources like self-efficacy play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between resilience (work resources), stress (work demands), and work engagement, suggesting that bolstering self-efficacy and resilience can enhance both work engagement and personal satisfaction (Cabrera-Aguilar et al., 2023). Furthermore, a study by Zhang et al. (2024) found that individuals with substantial psychological resources are more resilient in facing challenges and can better maintain their mental health, demonstrating that work-life balance positively impacts mental health through the sequential mediation of psychological capital and job satisfaction. A better work-life balance contributes to more substantial psychological resources (like self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience), leading to greater job satisfaction and improved mental well-being.

Vilser et al. (2024) advocate for practical interventions to foster WLB and resilience. These include mindfulness training, personal development workshops, open discussions about stress, supervisor training to support students better, and institutional changes such as addressing salary concerns to alleviate financial strain. These interventions, targeting both individual and institutional levels, are crucial for creating a supportive environment that promotes doctoral student well-being and success.

The lived experiences of doctoral students further reinforce the profound connection between well-being and academic success. These narratives consistently demonstrate that prioritizing work-life balance (WLB) is not merely a desirable add-on but a fundamental prerequisite for navigating the rigors of doctoral studies. A consistent pattern emerges across diverse disciplines, including Development Education, Public Administration, Fisheries Technology,and general PhD programs: neglecting personal well-being undermines academic performance while actively cultivating balance fosters resilience, enhances creativity, and facilitates successful program completion.

Several core themes resonate throughout these diverse reflections. First, the detrimental consequences of neglecting WLB are starkly evident. Research consistently demonstrates the link between poor WLB and adverse outcomes such as burnout, stress, and decreased well-being (Jyoti et al., 2022). This finding is further illustrated by the experiences of doctoral students in this study. For example, Romer D. Tanyag, PhD, (personal communication, January 20, 2025) directly connected the lack of balance to impaired stress management, diminished problem-solving abilities, and a decline in overall well-being. Similarly, Michelle A. Peralta, PhD, (personal communication, January 21, 2025) described experiencing illness after pushing herself too hard to meet dissertation deadlines, a common consequence of neglecting WLB (Hagi, 2024). These accounts serve as powerful cautionary tales, highlighting the critical need for proactive strategies to prevent such damaging outcomes. Strategies such as incorporating regular breaks, prioritizing social connections, and engaging in restorative activities are well-documented in the literature (Hreha, 2023). This approach is not simply about "taking time off" but strategically investing in one's well-being to enhance productivity, prevent debilitating stress, and safeguard mental and physical health.

Second, effective stress management, meticulous task prioritization, and establishing clear boundaries between academic and personal life may emerge as essential tools for navigating the multifaceted demands of doctoral work. Research

supports the efficacy of these strategies in promoting well-being and academic success. Coping strategies significantly help students manage academic stress, which is crucial for enhancing academic achievement and overall mental health; therefore, educational programs focusing on stress management can mitigate the negative impacts of academic stress on students' mental health and performance (Córdova et al., 2023). Research indicates that effective time management practices are linked to reduced academic stress and improved academic performance. For example, students who utilized structured time management techniques reported lower levels of stress and higher levels of satisfaction with their academic experiences (Basith et al., 2021). Establishing clear boundaries between academic and personal life is also essential for maintaining a healthy WLB; students who set firm boundaries experienced less academic stress and improved emotional well-being, positively affecting their academic performance (Tharaldsen et al., 2023). For example, adoctoral student in Public Administration, Leonila T. Conrado (personal communication, January 20, 2025), emphasized the importance of prioritizing activities outside of research, setting clear boundaries, and practicing stress management techniques such as mindfulness. These strategies align with findings that mindfulness-based interventions can effectively reduce stress and improve focus (Delgado, 2023). Chris B. Cordinete (personal communication, January 21, 2025), a Public Administration student, exemplified this with a structured, three-pronged approach encompassing self-care practices, prioritization based on urgency and importance, and establishing firm boundaries between academic and personal spheres.Similarly, Peralta emphasized prioritizing tasks using timelines and to-do listsand recognizing the importance of occasional breaks (M. A. Peralta, personal communication, January 21, 2025), aligning with research on the importance of developing strong time management skills to reduce stress and improve overall productivity in both academic and professional settings (Nancholas, 2023). These strategies provide a practical framework for managing competing demands, maintaining focus, and preventing the pervasive sense of overwhelm that can hinder doctoral progress.

Third, the vital role of psychological resources is repeatedly emphasized in research. Self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, and job satisfaction positively impact well-being and academic performance (Wong et al., 2023). These internal resources influence a student's capacity to maintain balance amidst challenges. Conrado explicitly linked these resources to the ability to bounce back from setbacks, maintain motivation, and connect research to personal passions (L. T. Conrado, personal communication, January 20, 2025). Peralta reinforced their importance in navigating doctoral challenges (M. A. Peralta, personal communication, January 21, 2025). Cordinete further connected self-efficacy to

effective task prioritization, optimism and hope for sustained motivation, and resilience to adaptability in the face of setbacks (C. B. Cordinete, personal communication, January 21, 2025). This perspective underscores the importance of implementing external strategies for WLB and actively cultivating the internal psychological resources necessary to sustain these practices over the long term.

Finally, the reflections of RodelynF. De Vera (personal communication, January 21, 2025) provide further nuanced insights into the role of time management. Effective time management is crucial for balancing academic commitments with personal life (Naidu et al., 2022). Devera highlighted the importance of effective time management as a crucial component of WLB, particularly when facing multiple, simultaneous deadlines. Devera's emphasis on improved decision-making skills and the ability to prioritize academic commitments over leisure activities underscores the need for strategic resource allocation (R. Devera, personal communication, January 21, 2025). Moreover, adopting a long-term perspective focused on personal growth rather than rapid program completion is essential for mitigating pressure (Stanley et al., 2023). The emphasis on mental fortitude and a "mind over matter" approach further highlights the importance of cultivating mental resilience to cope with challenges such as distance learning and disruptions to routine.

These diverse narratives converge to form a compelling argument: WLB is not a mere reactive measure to mitigate stress but a proactive and essential strategy for thriving within the demanding context of doctoral studies. It is a fundamental element that fosters resilience, fuels creativity, safeguards mental well-being, and facilitates successful academic outcomes. Doctoral programs and individual students should prioritize developing and implementing strategies that promote WLB, recognizing its crucial role in cultivating successful scholars and healthy, well-rounded individuals poised to make significant contributions to their respective fields.

Key Factors Shaping the Doctoral Experience: Beyond WLB and Resilience

Several interconnected factors beyond WLB and resilience significantly shape the doctoral experience: supervisory relationships and mentorship, academic identity and professional development, social support and community, mental health and well-being, and program structure and institutional culture. These factors influence students' ability to maintain WLB, develop resilience, and contribute to their well-being and success.

Supervisory Relationship and Mentorship

Doctoral students often describe the supervisory relationship as the linchpin of their journey. A positive, supportive supervisor provides academic guidance and acts as a mentor, fostering intellectual growth, building confidence, and offering emotional support during challenging times. This description aligns with research by Igumbor et al. (2022), who found that adequate doctoral supervision requires a research-supportive environment where supervisors and students regularly communicate and reflect on their relationship, responsibilities, and interests, with supervisors tailoring their approach to individual student needs, especially in interdisciplinary contexts requiring co-supervision. However, supervisors' use of mediated power (presumably meaning power derived from their position/authority within the institution and control over resources rather than expertise or personal respect) is associated with poor-quality doctoral supervision, negatively impacting students' mental well-being and perceptions of decent work (Moshtari et al., 2024).

A clear advantage of strong mentorship is establishing a solid academic identity. Through collaborative research, conference presentations, and networking opportunities that their supervisors may organize for them, students start viewing themselves as legitimate members of the academic community. Such an opportunity to belong and strengthen commitment in the chosen field is a boost. Conversely, where mentorship is not forthcoming, students are left disarmed to face the professionalism required in college life or some careers if they pass out. This lack of mentorship can also dent their WLB by leaving them to find their way into the maze of research and academic life.

Social Support and Community

Social support and community are also crucial for doctoral student well-being. Peer support networks provide a safe space for students to share experiences, offer encouragement, and combat feelings of isolation daily during the demanding doctoral process. As Pontillas et al. (2024) demonstrated, stress management and coping strategies like exercising, hobbies, and turning to friends and family helped maintain good health. However, the lack of a supportive community, coupled with intense competition and feelings of inadequacy (imposter syndrome), can exacerbate mental health challenges. The uniqueness of the challenges for doctoral students, as highlighted by Casey et al. (2023), makes them uniquely vulnerable; indeed, high-intensity academic loads, isolation, and economic burdens are typical in this setting and create the perfect storm of stressors that significantly impair their mental well-being. Access to mental health services and a supportive institutional culture are essential for addressing these issues.

Access to counseling services, stress management workshops, and open discussions about mental health are crucial advantages. However, the stigma surrounding mental health in academia may prevent students from seeking help, creating a significant disadvantage. Finally, program structure and institutional culture play a significant role in shaping the doctoral experience. Students see flexible program options, clear program guidelines, and supportive institutional policies regarding study leave, parental leave, and funding opportunities as significant advantages. These factors contribute to a better work-life balance and reduce stress. Conversely, rigid program structures, unclear expectations, and a lack of institutional support can create significant barriers to student success and well-being. For example, inadequate funding can force students to take on excessive work, compromising their work-life balance and impacting their mental health. Moreover, an institutional culture prioritizing research output over student well-being can create a highly stressful and competitive environment.

This systematic review synthesized existing research to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by doctoral students, explore strategies for achieving work-life balance (WLB), and examine crucial resilience factors. The findings reveal a complex interplay between these elements, necessitating a holistic and multi-pronged approach encompassing robust support systems, effective time management, a strong emphasis on mental health, and institutional policy changes to foster sustainable WLB and support student well-being and academic success. Key challenges identified include work-life imbalance due to competing demands, intense academic pressures such as publication expectations and imposter syndrome, resource constraints (particularly in the Philippines), and institutional/programmatic factors like ambiguous research roles and inadequate support. The synergistic relationship between WLB and resilience was highlighted, emphasizing their mutually reinforcing effects. Furthermore, factors beyond WLB and resilience, such as supervisory relationships and mentorship, academic identity development, social support, and community, access to mental health resources, and program structure and institutional culture, significantly shaped the doctoral experience. The absence of precise study leave policies in the Philippines was identified as a critical policy gap exacerbating these challenges. Ultimately, this review underscores the need for comprehensive individual, institutional, and policy interventions to promote doctoral student well-being and facilitate successful academic outcomes.

Conclusions

This systematic review unveils a complex and interconnected web of challenges confronting doctoral students, particularly within the Philippine context.

These challenges encompass work-life imbalance arising from the competing pressures of academic, personal, and professional responsibilities; intense academic pressures, including publication demands and imposter syndrome; resource constraints, notably financial limitations; and institutional and programmatic factors such as ambiguous research roles and inadequate support structures. The absence of precise study leave policies in the Philippines further exacerbates these difficulties, creating a particularly precarious situation for aspiring scholars.

This review's central and compelling finding is the synergistic relationship between work-life balance (WLB) and resilience. Maintaining a healthy WLB is a desirable outcome and a powerful catalyst for building resilience. By mitigating stress and providing opportunities for rejuvenation and personal pursuits, WLB empowers students to better cope with the inherent stressors of doctoral study. Conversely, resilience is a crucial enabler of WLB, providing the mental fortitude and coping mechanisms necessary to manage competing demands, prioritize tasks effectively, and establish healthy boundaries between academic and personal life. This bidirectional relationship underscores the importance of addressing WLB and resilience.

Beyond this crucial interplay, this review highlights the significant influence of several other key factors on the doctoral experience. These include the quality of supervisory relationships and mentorship, developing a strong and secure academic identity, robust social support networks and a sense of community, access to adequate mental health resources, and the broader impact of program structure and institutional culture. These factors do not operate in isolation; they interact in complex and often compounding ways. For instance, financial strain can significantly exacerbate work-life imbalance, leading to increased stress, decreased well-being, and a higher risk of attrition. This interconnectedness necessitates a holistic and integrated approach to supporting doctoral students.

Ultimately, this review underscores the urgent and critical need for comprehensive, multifaceted support systems that address the intersecting individual, systemic, and institutional challenges doctoral students face. Fostering a supportive, inclusive, and empowering environment is not merely a matter of mitigating negative experiences; it is about actively cultivating the conditions in which students can truly thrive, realize their full intellectual potential, and make meaningful contributions to their respective fields.

The following interconnected recommendations are proposed: Institutions must prioritize developing and implementing clear, comprehensive, supportive policies and guidelines for doctoral studies. These policies should explicitly address crucial areas such as guaranteed study leave (critical in addressing the identified gap in the Philippine context), adequate parental leave provisions, and transparent and accessible funding opportunities. These policies should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure they remain responsive to the evolving needs of doctoral students. Significant and sustained investment is also required in robust and readily accessible support systems that address the holistic needs of doctoral students.These support systems include providing access to high-quality mental health counseling services, offering practical stress management and time management workshops, establishing dedicated academic support programs such as writing centers and research methodology training, and creating streamlined communication channels to facilitate efficient interaction between students, faculty, and administrative staff. These services should be widely publicized and destigmatized to encourage utilization.

Furthermore, institutions should prioritize the cultivation of positive and effective supervisory relationships. This prioritization requires mandatory training for supervisors on best practices in mentorship, emphasizing empathetic and supportive communication, constructive feedback mechanisms, and creating research-supportive environments that foster intellectual growth, professional development, and healthy work-life integration. Building a strong sense of community and peer support among doctoral students is also essential for combating feelings of isolation and promoting a sense of belonging. Institutions should actively facilitate peer interaction opportunities through peer mentoring programs, support groups, regular social events, interdisciplinary collaborations, and dedicated spaces for student interaction and collaboration. Establishing transparent and open lines of communication between students, faculty, and administrators is paramount. This approach includes implementing regular feedback mechanisms at both the program and institutional levels to proactively identify and address emerging challenges, ensure student voices are heard and valued, and inform continuous improvement in program and policy development.

Finally, increased and sustained funding for doctoral programs and research is essential.Thisapproach will directly alleviate financial burdens on students, enhance resource availability for research activities, and enable essential support services' development, expansion, and sustainability. This investment should be viewed not as an expenditure but as a strategic investment in future research and scholarship. Perhaps most importantly, institutions must actively advocate for a

culture of student well-being and academic excellence. This approach involves concerted and sustained efforts to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health challenges, promoting work-life balance as a core institutional value, and cultivating a supportive, inclusive, and equitable environment where all doctoral students feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. This cultural shift, therefore, involves more than merely implementing policies and programs; instead, it pertains to instilling a core change in the values and priorities of the institutions.

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