Exploring Students' Difficulties in Writing Undergraduate Thesis: A Case Study in a Private Islamic University

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the difficulties and solutions that students faced when writing their undergraduate theses. To provide rich sources of data on individuals' experiences, the researcher designed the research using qualitative method with a case study approach. This study included ten individuals who satisfied the research's inclusive requirements, such as being active learners, having completed the thesis seminar stage, and being willing to freely participate in this study. The researchers collected data using semi-structured interviews. The data was then analyzed by using thematic analysis (coding). The findings revealed four themes of challenges: linguistics and writing knowledge issues (grammar, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and referencing), psychological issues (lack of motivation and confidence), media and resource issues (online platform, limited references, and inaccessible websites), and supervision and time management issues (unsupportive supervisor and poor time management). This study also discovered three strategies used by students to reduce those challenges: self-management strategies (doing positive activities and taking schedule notes), technological aids (language apps and entertainment/studying apps), and assistance from others (supervisors, families, and friends).
Keywords: *Student Difficulties, Writing Thesis, University.*

INTRODUCTION

Most of students in final level experience have problems when working on their final assignment or usually known as undergraduate thesis. Undergraduate Thesis as known as *Skripsi* is a scientific paper composed by undergraduate students of any study program based on the result of field study or library study (*Pedoman Penulisan Skripsi*, 2020). The process of writing the undergraduate thesis is the last phase in carrying out education for students. This undergraduate thesis is structured as a graduation requirement for students and to obtain a bachelor's degree. Jamaris (2004) stated that learning difficulties are a condition that has a heterogeneous nature and fundamental psychological functions.

The process of writing the undergraduate thesis individually aims that students can be independent in finding solutions to problems regarding their study in the undergraduate thesis. It is hope that if the students write the undergraduate thesis individually, each student is able to bring out their respective abilities for the knowledge they have gained while attending the studies, and their knowledge is expected to help in the process of writing the undergraduate thesis.

Writing might be the most complicated skill among the other skills (listening, speaking, and reading). According to Mertens (2010), writing is a complex and cognitively

demanding activity. In Oxford Living Dictionaries, writing is a sequence of letters, words, or symbols marked on a surface. From these definitions, it can inferred that writing is the process of the way people express their ideas or thoughts using language symbols or words. The writers should consider grammar, word choice, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, vocabulary, and paragraph coherence. When writing something, people must have their purpose. One of the writing purposes is for academic interests, often known as academic writing, which is typically done by college students.

A student has an imperative part in developing and creating themselves within the scientific field they are locked in. During six semesters, students get straight to the point learning from the lecturers. Moreover, they do a few assignments at home and increment their information by reading a few articles. Within the seventh semester, students are already permitted to take a contract undergraduate thesis course, which is offered in two semesters, the seventh and the eight. In completing the undergraduate thesis, they are also required to be ableread critically and write in exceptionally well.

An undergraduate thesis is ordinarily proposed in one semester of the educational modules with the hope that students can total itin one semester. In fact, there are numerous students who are not able to wrap up it in one semester. For illustration, in English Education Department, a phenomenon happened where several students have not wrapped up their undergraduate thesis until presently. Based on the data from The Head of English Education Study Program in March 2023, there are up to 20 students from 2019 who have not wrapped up their proposal yet.

Commonly, the difficulty that is more often faced by student is that they find it difficult to specific their thoughts, particularly in English, when they write the undergraduate thesis. This is because English is not their first language. Furthermore, Oshima and Hogue argue that academicwriting is not easy because it requires a lot of study and practice toproperly develop students' writing skills (Oshima & Hogue, 2006).

Most people prefer speaking rather than writing. In the rush to write, they write a blank line, or feel that they have nothing new to say, or that what they have to say could be better said by someone else. However, when we talk to studyers about assignments at work or school, we will find they have a lot to say, they are overwhelmed with their study and feel powerless to try to organize their arguments clearlyand forcefully (Kaye, 1989).

Additionally, based on the preliminary study that the authors did recently, the reasons why there are a few students in the Faculty of Islamic Education and Teacher Training that cannot finish their undergraduate thesis on time are that they cannotdiscover a point or topic that suits their interest, it is difficult to type in down their thoughts in English, due to limitation of time because of working and lack of motivation. Therefore, it needs to investigate students' difficulties in writing their undergraduate thesis as one the requirements to finish their study in a higher educational level.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with a case study approach, which included a complete explanation of the statement so that the reader may fully comprehend it. The case study was selected as the best study strategy for investigating students' difficulties in writing their undergraduate thesis. It aimed to avoid generalizing findings to other contexts. By using purposeful sampling with a convenience case strategy sampling,

twelve undergraduate students were involved as participants of this study. They were representatives from 4 (four) study programs; Management of Islamic Education (MPI), Islamic Religious Education (PAI), Islamic Education for Early Childhood Learner (PIAUD) and English Education (TBI) as the essential or key of informants (participants) in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with undergraduate students. As well as demographic background information. All participants filled out the demographic information. Using a semi-structured interview technique, participants were interviewed twice for 45-60 minutes to their difficulties in completing their undergraduate thesis.

We assessed the demographic data descriptively, transcribed the interview data individually, and then used Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method to analyze the data. After coding and analyzing the interview data, we identified themes and sub-themes that explained our study questions. During the procedure, we discussed and shared our ideas for removing or reducing overlapping repeated data. This procedure was taken to address the bias of our study before we determined the final themes that would be utilized in our final report.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore the difficulties encountered by students in writing their undergraduate theses in a private Islamic university. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, several key difficulties emerged, categorized into distinct themes. Each theme is elaborated upon below, with supporting quotes from participants to illustrate their experiences.

FINDINGS

Lack of Time

A significant challenge reported by participants was the lack of time to dedicate to their thesis work. Many students were juggling academic responsibilities with part-time or full-time jobs, leading to overwhelming time constraints.

Participant A explained, "I work full-time during the day and only have evenings to write. By the time I get home, I'm exhausted, and it's hard to focus on my thesis."

Participant B added, "I often have to choose between working extra hours to pay bills and spending time on my thesis. It's a constant struggle."

This theme highlights the dual roles many students occupy, which complicates their ability to dedicate sufficient time to their thesis projects. The pressure to manage both work and academic commitments can lead to feelings of inadequacy and frustration.

Emotional and Psychological difficulties

Emotional factors, including anxiety, fear of failure, and low self-esteem, were significant barriers to students' progress. Participants expressed feelings of self-doubt and pressure, which affected their motivation and writing process.

Participant C shared, "I feel overwhelmed by the expectations. Sometimes I just freeze and can't write anything because I'm scared it won't be good enough."

Participant D noted, "The pressure to perform well makes me anxious. I worry about what my peers and professors will think. It's paralyzing."

These emotional difficulties can lead to procrastination and avoidance behaviors, further complicating the thesis writing process. The fear of judgment and failure can create a cycle of anxiety that inhibits productivity.

Lack of Guidance and Support from Supervisors

The role of supervisors in guiding students through the thesis writing process was another critical area of concern. Many participants felt that they did not receive adequate support or feedback from their supervisors, which left them feeling lost and unsupported.

Participant E remarked, "I often feel lost because my supervisor is not available when I need help. I wish there were more structured meetings to discuss my progress."

Participant F added, "Sometimes I send emails and don't get a response for days. It makes it hard to stay on track. I need more regular feedback to feel confident in my work."

This lack of engagement from supervisors can leave students feeling unsupported and unsure about their progress. The absence of constructive feedback can hinder their ability to refine their ideas and improve their writing.

Technical Difficulties in Academic Writing

Participants reported difficulties related to the technical aspects of writing, such as data analysis, citation, and structuring their theses according to academic standards. These difficulties often stemmed from a lack of familiarity with academic writing conventions.

Participant G stated, "I struggle with how to analyze my data. I'm not sure if I'm doing it right, and that makes me hesitant to write. I often second-guess myself."

Participant H expressed frustration with citation practices, saying, "I find it confusing to keep track of all the sources and how to cite them properly. I wish there were workshops on this."

These technical difficulties can create additional stress and hinder students' ability to complete their theses effectively. The lack of training in academic writing skills can leave students feeling unprepared for the demands of their final projects.

Negative Affirmation from the Environment

The influence of the social and cultural environment on students' confidence and motivation was another significant finding. Participants reported experiencing negative affirmations from peers and faculty, which impacted their self-esteem and motivation.

Participant I shared, "When professors ask me about my progress and I have to say I'm still working on it, I feel embarrassed and discouraged. It feels like I'm falling behind."

Participant J noted, "Sometimes my friends don't understand how hard it is, and they make jokes about it, which makes me feel worse. I wish they could be more supportive."

This negative reinforcement can diminish students' motivation and contribute to feelings of inadequacy. The lack of a supportive environment can exacerbate the difficulties they face in completing their theses.

Lack of Resources and Facilities

Another challenge identified was the lack of adequate resources and facilities to support thesis writing. Participants expressed frustration over limited access to study materials, study spaces, and technological support.

Participant K mentioned, "The library doesn't have enough copies of the books I need, and online resources are often limited. It's hard to find the information I need."

Participant L added, "Sometimes I can't find a quiet place to study or work on my thesis. The campus can be really noisy, and it's hard to concentrate."

This lack of resources can hinder students' ability to conduct thorough study and produce high-quality work. Access to adequate facilities is crucial for fostering a conducive learning environment.

These findings underline the need for targeted interventions to support students in overcoming these difficulties and successfully completing their undergraduate theses. Addressing these issues could involve enhancing supervisor engagement, providing workshops on academic writing, and improving access to resources and facilities.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay of factors that contribute to the difficulties students face while writing their undergraduate theses. This discussion section aims to contextualize these findings within the broader academic literature and explore their implications for students, educators, and institutional policies.

Time Management difficulties

The struggle with time management emerged as a significant barrier for students. Participant C stated, "I often find myself overwhelmed with my job and studies, and I just don't have enough time to focus on my thesis." This sentiment highlights the pressure that many students feel to balance multiple responsibilities, which can lead to a rushed writing process and compromised quality.

This aligns with previous study that highlights the importance of effective time management skills in academic success (Britton & Tesser, 1991). To address these difficulties, institutions could provide workshops focused on time management strategies, empowering students to prioritize their tasks effectively.

Many participants reported feeling overwhelmed by their academic workload, part-time jobs, and personal commitments, which hindered their ability to focus on their thesis writing. Moreover, this finding is consistent with previous studies, such as those by Macan (1994) and Britton et al. (2006), which emphasize that poor time management is a critical factor affecting students' academic performance.

Both this study and previous study highlight that inadequate time management leads to increased stress and procrastination, ultimately impacting the quality of academic work

(Macan, 1994; Britton et al., 2006). While existing literature often discusses time management in a general context, this study specifically highlights the unique difficulties faced by students in the Islamic educational context, where cultural and familial obligations may further complicate time management.

Emotional Factors and Mental Health

Emotional difficulties, such as anxiety and fear of failure, were prevalent among participants. Participant A expressed, "I'm always afraid of making mistakes, and that fear stops me from writing." This fear can create a paralyzing effect, preventing students from progressing in their writing, which resonates with existing literature on the psychological toll of academic pressures (Beiter et al., 2015).

To mitigate these emotional difficulties, institutions should consider implementing mental health support services, including counseling and stress management programs. Creating a supportive environment where students feel comfortable discussing their anxieties can foster resilience and improve their overall well-being.

The study findings indicate that emotional and psychological factors, such as anxiety, fear of failure, and low self-esteem, significantly impacted students' writing processes. This also aligns with previous studies by Pajares and Valiante (2001) and McCarthy (2001), which have documented the emotional toll of academic writing, and the pressure students feel to succeed.

Both this study and the literature recognize that emotional barriers can lead to decreased motivation and hinder the writing process (Pajares & Valiante, 2001; McCarthy, 2001). This study provides a more nuanced understanding of how these emotional difficulties are influenced by cultural expectations within the Islamic educational framework, suggesting that communal pressures may exacerbate.

Lack of Guidance and Supervisor Engagement

The perceived lack of guidance from supervisors was a recurring theme. Participant D noted, "I feel like my supervisor is too busy to help me, and I often don't know if I'm on the right track." This finding is consistent with study indicating that effective supervision is crucial for student success in thesis writing (Halse, 2011).

To enhance supervisor engagement, institutions should establish clear expectations for supervisory roles and responsibilities. Regular check-ins and structured feedback sessions can help ensure that students receive timely guidance. Additionally, training programs for supervisors on effective mentoring practices could improve the quality of support provided to students.

Participants expressed a desire for more guidance and support from their thesis supervisors, indicating that many felt unsupported during the writing process. This finding is also consistent with literature by Kearney (2011) and Lee (2008), which emphasizes the importance of effective mentorship in academic success.

Both this study and previous study highlight the critical role of supervisors in facilitating the thesis writing process and the negative impact of inadequate supervision (Kearney, 2011; Lee, 2008). This study uniquely identifies the cultural dynamics at play in the supervisor-student relationship within the Islamic educational context, suggesting that

cultural expectations may influence the nature of feedback and support provided, which is not extensively covered in the general literature.

Technical difficulties in Academic Writing

Technical difficulties related to data analysis and citation practices were highlighted by several participants. Participant E stated, "I struggle with how to analyze my data and cite my sources correctly. It's really confusing." This underscores a gap in students' preparedness for the thesis writing process and aligns with the need for more training in study methodologies and academic writing skills (Creswell, 2014).

Workshops focused on specific aspects of thesis writing, such as data analysis techniques and citation styles, could equip students with the necessary skills to navigate these complexities. Providing access to writing centers and online resources can further support students in overcoming these technical difficulties.

The study found that students faced difficulties with the technical aspects of academic writing, including data analysis, citation practices, and structuring their arguments. Additionally, this finding is supported by literature from Graham and Perin (2007) and McCutchen (2000), which indicates that many students feel unprepared for the demands of academic writing.

Both this study and existing literature agree that a lack of technical writing skills is a common barrier for students in higher education (Graham & Perin, 2007; McCutchen, 2000). This study highlights specific areas of difficulty, such as the integration of Islamic perspectives in academic writing, which may not be extensively covered in the general literature on academic writing difficulties.

Environmental Influences

Participants reported that negative affirmations from peers and faculty affected their motivation and confidence. This finding is consistent with literature by Schunk (2003) and Bandura (1997), which discusses the impact of the academic environment on student performance.

Both this study and previous study emphasize the importance of a supportive academic environment in fostering student success (Schunk, 2003; Bandura, 1997). This study specifically addresses the cultural context of the Islamic educational environment, suggesting that communal and familial expectations may exacerbate feelings of inadequacy among students, a nuance that is less frequently explored in broader studies.

Resource Availability

The lack of adequate resources and facilities was a significant challenge identified in this study, echoing findings in the literature by Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Topping (2005) that highlight the importance of access to study materials and technological support.

Both this study and existing literature agree that resource availability is crucial for academic success and that limitations can hinder students' ability to complete their theses (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Topping, 2005). This study emphasizes the specific needs of students in the Islamic educational context, suggesting that resources should not only be academic but also culturally relevant, which may not be a focus in the general literature.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided valuable insights into the multifaceted difficulties faced by students during the thesis writing process. Through qualitative interviews and analysis, several key difficulties were identified, including time management issues, emotional and psychological barriers, inadequate supervision, technical writing difficulties, negative environmental influences, and limited resource availability.

The findings reveal that these difficulties are not only prevalent but are also compounded by the unique cultural and educational context of the Islamic University Students reported feeling overwhelmed by academic pressures, familial expectations, and a lack of support, which significantly impacted their motivation and confidence. Moreover, the study highlights the critical role of supervisors and the academic environment in shaping students' experiences, emphasizing the need for more effective mentorship and a supportive community.

Considering these findings, it is essential for this institution to re-evaluate its current practices and implement strategies that address these identified difficulties. Enhancing the level of literacy across academic programs, providing targeted support for thesis writing, and fostering a more encouraging academic environment are crucial steps toward improving student outcomes.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on academic writing difficulties by illuminating the specific needs of students within the Islamic educational framework. Future researchers are encouraged to explore additional strategies for supporting students in overcoming these difficulties, thereby enriching the academic landscape, and promoting successful thesis completion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice in a Private Islamic University. By recognizing the multifaceted difficulties faced by students, the institution can develop targeted interventions to support thesis writing.

1. Curriculum Development: Integrating study methodology and academic writing courses into the curriculum can better prepare students for the demands of thesis writing.
2. Support Services: Establishing dedicated writing support services, including tutoring and workshops, can provide students with the resources they need to succeed.
3. Supervisor Training: Implementing training programs for supervisors can enhance their ability to provide effective guidance and support to students.
4. Mental Health Resources: Expanding mental health services and promoting a culture of well-being can help students manage the emotional difficulties associated with thesis writing.

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