

NAVIGATING THESIS WRITING IN DISTANCE LEARNING: PERSPECTIVES, CHALLENGES, AND INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Thesis writing represents a pivotal academic milestone, embodying postgraduate students' ability to synthesize complex ideas, conduct rigorous research, and contribute novel insights to their fields. However, in the context of distance education, this process is fraught with unique challenges. This study explores the experiences of postgraduate students at Universitas Terbuka (UT) navigating thesis writing in a distance learning environment, focusing on their perspectives, challenges, and adaptive strategies. Employing a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, the research integrates quantitative data from 146 online questionnaire responses and qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with 16 students across seven study programs. Key findings reveal that self-discipline and time management emerge as critical predictors of success, yet many students struggle to maintain consistent progress due to competing personal and professional responsibilities. Access to academic resources and digital tools significantly impacts students' research efficacy, with barriers such as geographical constraints and limited technological proficiency further compounding difficulties. Feelings of isolation and diminished motivation underscore the need for robust support systems, including virtual peer groups and regular, constructive feedback from supervisors. The findings also highlight the crucial role of tailored institutional interventions, such as time management workshops, mentoring sessions, and advanced digital platforms, in mitigating these challenges. This study offers actionable recommendations for enhancing thesis writing support in distance learning contexts. By addressing identified gaps in resource accessibility, supervisory interaction, and community building, educational institutions can foster more inclusive, engaging, and successful academic experiences for distance learners. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on distance education and postgraduate research, providing a foundation for policy enhancements and future investigations into the evolving dynamics of higher education.

Keywords: Distance education, thesis writing, postgraduate students, self-regulated learning, academic support systems, supervisory feedback.

1 INTRODUCTION

Thesis writing is widely recognized as a pivotal capstone in postgraduate education because it evaluates students' abilities to integrate disciplinary knowledge, apply methodological rigor, and produce original scholarly contributions. Beyond its summative function, the thesis serves as a formative developmental journey that fosters students' research identities, scholarly

voice, and analytical competencies (Weaver, 2016; van der Marel et al., 2022). Over the past decade, shifts in pedagogical paradigms, digital transformations, and emergent scholarly expectations have reshaped how students conceptualize and navigate postgraduate research (Bond, 2021; Hodges et al., 2020). Nevertheless, thesis writing remains a high-stakes undertaking, with many postgraduate students reporting stress, uncertainty, and insufficient scaffolding, especially in distance education settings.

The rapid expansion of open and distance learning (ODL), accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has fundamentally altered the landscape of higher education. While digitalization widened access for geographically dispersed learners, it simultaneously exposed gaps in pedagogical design, supervision practices, and technological preparedness (Hodges et al., 2020; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that several emergency remote teaching practices have persisted, shaping postgraduate research environments in ways that do not always align with the demands of long-term academic projects (Bond, 2021; Opesemowo, 2024). Consequently, thesis supervision and writing in ODL contexts cannot merely replicate on-campus models; instead, they require redesigned systems of structured support, communication, and research guidance (Grohnert et al., 2024; Stynes & Pathak, 2022).

Writing a thesis in an ODL environment also presents intensified challenges related to maintaining productive routines, managing time, and balancing academic responsibilities with professional and domestic roles. Self-regulated learning (SRL) has been repeatedly shown to predict academic success in online and blended settings, with a recent meta-analysis confirming strong associations between SRL strategies, particularly goal setting, monitoring, and strategic help-seeking, and academic performance (Zhao et al., 2025). However, the extended, less structured nature of thesis writing magnifies these challenges, resulting in recurrent delays in topic development, inconsistent progress, and difficulty maintaining motivation among distance learners (Rahiem, 2020; Yunus & Bachtiar, 2025).

Technological infrastructure and access to academic resources further influence thesis progress. Successful research requires stable connectivity, databases, research software, and digital tools for data collection and analysis (Bond, 2021; Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). Studies in ODL contexts show that embedding SRL-oriented features, such as learning dashboards, metacognitive prompts, and analytics-based progress feedback, can enhance student planning, monitoring, and reflection (Cabı et al., 2025; Villa-Torrano et al., 2025). Students in remote

or underserved regions face expanded challenges when such support is limited or absent, thereby exacerbating disparities in postgraduate research outcomes.

Supervision remains central to thesis completion, yet digital and remote supervision requires reimagined approaches. Recent frameworks on effective master's thesis supervision emphasize clear role expectations, structured milestones, and regularized feedback cycles (Grohnert et al., 2024). Parallel research on remote doctoral supervision identifies both opportunities and constraints, highlighting the need for intentional practices to sustain communication, motivation, and academic rigor in online mentoring relationships (Wisker et al., 2021). These insights underscore the importance of designing supervisory systems tailored to the complexities of ODL environments.

Feelings of isolation are common among distance learners engaged in long-term research projects. Reduced opportunities for informal scholarly dialogue, such as spontaneous feedback, peer brainstorming, and collaborative sense-making, can diminish motivation and intellectual engagement (Garrison et al., 2000; Petit et al., 2023). Virtual peer communities, synchronous research circles, and structured discussion forums are among the strategies shown to strengthen social presence and foster a sense of belonging in ODL programmes (Petit et al., 2023).

A growing body of research highlights the importance of situational and emotional triggers in shaping how learners regulate their research processes. According to the trigger-regulation framework, learners' self-regulation is often activated by specific events, such as confusion, setbacks, or unexpected difficulties, that stimulate reflection and adaptive responses (Järvelä & Hadwin, 2024). In thesis writing, these triggers frequently arise during topic selection, methodological execution, data analysis, and drafting. Effective institutional support should therefore incorporate dynamic scaffolding that responds to students' emerging challenges rather than relying solely on static skills training.

Synthesizing these strands of evidence, recent scholarship suggests that the most effective institutional approaches integrate academic, technological, and psychosocial supports into coherent systems. Learning analytics tools, supervision frameworks, structured peer groups, and digital scaffolding all contribute to improving thesis trajectories in distance learning contexts (Cabi et al., 2025; Grohnert et al., 2024; Villa-Torrano et al., 2025). However, despite the growth of ODL programmes in Southeast Asia and Indonesia, mixed-methods studies examining the lived experiences, institutional structures, and supervisory ecologies of

postgraduate thesis writing remain limited (Rahiem, 2020; Yunus & Bachtiar, 2025). Addressing this gap, the present study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to investigate postgraduate students' thesis-writing experiences at Universitas Terbuka. The study aims to generate empirically grounded insights and propose actionable institutional strategies to enhance thesis completion and student success in ODL environments.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design, enabling the collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to capture the complexity of postgraduate students' thesis writing experiences in distance learning. The rationale for using this design lies in its ability to combine the breadth of quantitative evidence with the depth of qualitative insights, thereby providing both generalizable and contextually rich findings. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) emphasise, a convergent design is particularly valuable when researchers seek to integrate complementary forms of evidence to understand multifaceted educational phenomena. Quantitative data offered a wide perspective on the challenges encountered by students, while qualitative narratives illuminated the underlying reasons behind these challenges, enhancing the credibility of the findings through triangulation.

The participants of this study were postgraduate students at Universitas Terbuka (UT) who were actively engaged in thesis writing. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure that only students in thesis-based programs were selected, covering seven distinct study programs in the Postgraduate School of UT. For the quantitative phase, data were gathered from 146 students through an online questionnaire, providing a diverse representation across different academic disciplines and supervisory practices. To further enrich these findings, 16 students were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews, selected based on the diversity of their programs and the variety of their survey responses. This approach ensured both representativeness and depth, consistent with the recommendation of Teddlie and Yu (2007) that purposive sampling in mixed-methods research enhances the richness of data when investigating complex social contexts.

Two instruments were used to collect the data. The first was an online questionnaire developed in Google Forms, designed to elicit demographic information and students' perceptions of the challenges inherent in thesis writing within a distance learning context. It combined Likert-scale items, which measured structured responses on areas such as time

management, motivation, resource access, and supervisory communication, with open-ended questions that allowed students to articulate nuanced reflections. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, which enabled in-depth exploration of themes identified in the survey. This instrument allowed for flexibility while ensuring consistency in data collection, a strength often highlighted in qualitative methodology literature. The interviews offered rich accounts of expectations, challenges, coping strategies, and suggestions for improving institutional support in thesis supervision and research facilitation.

The analysis of data was conducted in two complementary phases. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were processed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to validate the underlying constructs and examine the relationships among variables, a technique well-suited for confirming hypothesised models in educational research (Brown, 2015). Meanwhile, qualitative data from interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2021), provides a flexible yet rigorous method for identifying recurring patterns and themes, making it particularly effective for capturing the lived experiences of postgraduate students. By merging the findings from both strands during the interpretation stage, the study produced robust and multi-dimensional insights into the thesis writing journey of postgraduate students in distance learning at UT.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the principal themes that emerged from the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, offering a comprehensive understanding of postgraduate students' thesis-writing experiences in a distance learning environment. Four interrelated thematic dimensions were identified across the dataset: (1) Personal Regulation and Time Allocation, (2) Resource Accessibility and Digital Competence, (3) Academic Isolation and Motivational Challenges, and (4) Mentorship Quality and Supervisory Support. Each theme is articulated by integrating students' lived experiences with relevant empirical literature, highlighting both parallels and divergences from previous findings. By grounding the interpretation in established theory and prior research, this section not only illuminates the nuanced challenges faced by distance learners but also underscores their implications for institutional policy, supervisory practice, and the design of research support systems.

3.1 Personal Regulation and Time Allocation

The analysis of the data offers significant insights into the strategies of self-discipline and time management adopted by postgraduate students during the process of thesis writing. Table 2 displays the factor loadings, standard errors, T-values, and P-values corresponding to the constructs associated with self-discipline and time management among postgraduate students in a distance learning context.

Table 2. Personal regulation and time allocation items

No	Items	Loading	SE	T-value	P-values
1	I am able to set clear goals for my thesis writing	0.81	0.03	27.00	0.00
2	I consistently adhere to the schedule I set for completing different sections of my thesis	0.78	0.02	39.00	0.00
3	I can prioritize my thesis work over other responsibilities	0.71	0.04	17.75	0.00
4	I often find myself procrastinating on thesis-related tasks	0.79	0.03	26.33	0.00
5	I feel confident in my ability to self-regulate my study habits	0.88	0.04	22.00	0.00
6	I effectively manage my time between thesis writing and other commitments	0.84	0.02	42.00	0.00
7	I regularly reflect on my progress and adjust my plans accordingly	0.71	0.04	17.75	0.00
8	I find it challenging to maintain a consistent study routine	0.81	0.04	20.25	0.00

Table 2 provides the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) analysis that indicates that self-discipline and time management are statistically significant and robust predictors of thesis progress among UT postgraduate students. Key indicators such as goal setting (loading = 0.81, T = 27.00), adherence to schedules (loading = 0.78, T = 39.00), effective time management between commitments (loading = 0.84, T = 42.00), and regular progress reflection (loading = 0.71, T = 17.75) all showed strong loadings with $p < .001$, while items tapping procrastination (loading = 0.79, T = 26.33) and difficulty maintaining routines

(loading = 0.81, $T = 20.25$) further underscored the dual nature of autonomy in distance learning. These results confirm that both positive self-regulatory strategies and vulnerability to procrastination coexist within the sample.

Qualitative data reinforces and nuances these statistical findings. Respondents repeatedly reported that autonomy requires a high level of self-regulation: "Dividing time between work, family, and studies is difficult and almost impossible. Often, I had to sacrifice my study time for family matters, which ultimately hindered my academic progress and made me feel depressed and unproductive." Such narratives explain why high loadings on goal-setting and monitoring coexist with elevated scores on items reflecting procrastination and inconsistent routines.

These integrated findings align closely with the self-regulated learning (SRL) literature: empirical and meta-analytic studies show consistent positive associations between SRL strategies (including time management, planning, and monitoring) and academic outcomes in online and blended environments (Broadbent, et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). At the same time, the prominence of role conflict (work and family obligations) in participants' accounts echoes research showing that external responsibilities moderate the effectiveness of SRL practices and increase the risk of stalled progress in distance education (Edisherashvili et al., 2022; Gambo & Shakir, 2021).

Practically, students' calls for institutional interventions (time-management workshops, scheduled mentoring, progress trackers) mirror intervention studies that show SRL-focused training and digital scaffolds improve planning and sustained engagement. Thus, the findings substantiate a two-fold conclusion: (1) fostering SRL skills is central to thesis success in ODL, and (2) institutional scaffolds are necessary to offset the impact of competing life roles on students' capacity to enact those skills.

3.2 Resource Accessibility and Digital Competence

As presented in Table 3, access to academic resources, familiarity with digital tools, and the availability of effective IT support are identified as critical factors influencing the successful adaptation to technology in thesis work.

Table 3. Items of resource accessibility and digital competence

No	Items	Loading	SE	T-value	P-values
1	I have adequate access to the academic resources necessary for my research	0.76	0.03	25.33	0.0
2	The online library services of UT meet my research needs	0.72	0.02	36.0	0.0
3	I am comfortable using digital tools and platforms provided by the university for my research	0.8	0.03	26.67	0.0
4	Technical issues often disrupt my thesis writing process	0.7	0.04	17.5	0.0
5	I feel proficient in utilizing reference management software	0.85	0.02	42.5	0.0
6	The university provides sufficient training on using academic databases	0.78	0.03	26.0	0.0
7	I have access to the necessary software for data analysis and thesis writing	0.71	0.03	23.67	0.0
8	The IT support provided by the university effectively resolves technical issues related to my research	0.82	0,03	24.7	0.0

The CFA results in Table 3 demonstrate that access to academic resources and technology adaptation significantly influence thesis progress. Items such as access to necessary research resources (loading = 0.76, T = 25.33), comfort using university digital tools (loading = 0.80, T = 26.67), proficiency with reference management software (loading = 0.85, T = 42.50), and the effectiveness of IT support (loading = 0.82, T = 24.70) all register as salient factors ($p < .001$), whereas technical disruptions (loading = 0.70, T = 17.50) and variable access to analysis software (loading = 0.71, T = 23.67) highlight persistent technical vulnerabilities.

Qualitative responses elaborate these patterns: while many students appreciate the availability of online libraries and platforms, practical barriers, geographical distance from regional offices, underutilization of resources due to insufficient outreach, uneven digital literacy, and unreliable internet, undermine effective uptake. A participant captured this tension: "The distance from the regional office makes it difficult to meet academic staff and supervisors, leaving me feeling isolated."

These empirical observations resonate with scholarship on digital readiness and equitable access in ODL. Studies on SRL and digital support emphasize that while integrated platforms

and SRL-enabled features (goal-setting modules, dashboards) can raise achievement, their effectiveness depends on inclusive infrastructure and targeted training (Edisherashvili et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). Similarly, recent ODL-focused research documents comparable resource- and infrastructure-driven constraints in postgraduate cohorts, arguing for institution-level investment in library services, analytics-ready platforms, and proactive outreach to encourage tool uptake (Yunus & Bachtiar, 2025).

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that availability alone is insufficient: institutions must ensure discoverability, competence-building, and reliable connectivity so that technological affordances translate into genuine research advantage for distance learners.

3.3 Academic Isolation and Motivational Challenges

The process of writing a thesis within a distance learning context is often accompanied by academic isolation and motivational challenges. Feelings of disconnection from peers and difficulties in sustaining motivation can significantly influence students' progress and overall learning experience. To examine these issues, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4. The table illustrates the factor loadings, standard errors, T-values, and P-values for items related to students' experiences of isolation and motivation during thesis work.

Table 4. Academic isolation and motivational challenges items

No	Items	Loading	SE	T-value	P-values
1	I often feel isolated while working on my thesis	0.76	0.03	25.33	0.00
2	I struggle with maintaining motivation throughout my thesis	0.78	0.04	19.50	0.01
3	The lack of physical interaction with peers impacts my motivation	0.80	0.03	26.67	0.03
4	I feel that online study groups or forums help me stay motivated	0.72	0.05	14.39	0.01
5	I am able to motivate myself despite the challenges of isolation	0.85	0.02	42.50	0.00
6	I often feel overwhelmed by the solitary nature of my thesis work	0.74	0.04	18.50	0.02

Table 4 shows that isolation and motivation formed a coherent, statistically significant dimension in the CFA, with loadings ranging from 0.72 to 0.85 (e.g., lack of physical

interaction = 0.80, $T = 26.67$; ability to self-motivate = 0.85, $T = 42.50$; all $p < .001$). These indicators capture the dual reality that, for some students, solitude undermines engagement, while others report the capacity to marshal intrinsic motivation despite isolation.

Interview excerpts illustrate this heterogeneity. One student reported, "I feel lonely and disconnected from the academic environment. There are no friends to discuss in person," describing how the absence of informal scholarly exchanges reduced opportunities for iterative critique and idea development. Conversely, a smaller subset of respondents noted that isolation occasionally provided uninterrupted time for deep work, though even these students signalled the need for structured feedback to sustain momentum.

These findings resonate with empirical research indicating that a strong sense of belonging and community can buffer against isolation and support motivation and well-being in online higher education. For example, students in a mixed-method study of first-year clinical health programmes reported diminished sense of belonging after shifts to online learning during COVID-19, highlighting how loss of in-person cohort and campus interaction can undermine motivation and academic integration. Complementary evidence from an online problem-based learning (PBL) intervention in Hong Kong found that PBL significantly enhanced students' feelings of classroom belonging and improved academic performance, demonstrating the potential of structured facilitation to foster community even in virtual settings (Liu, Yang & Ho, 2022). In the Indonesian context, qualitative research documented how sociality and peer networks mediated digital-divide effects and shaped students' sense of connectedness under remote learning, evidencing high heterogeneity in students' social experiences (Hidayah, 2022). Conceptual and practitioner-oriented contributions further suggest that cultivating a "sense of place" through communicative practices, humanised online instruction, and structured interaction can mitigate alienation and strengthen student engagement in distance courses (Mahatmi, 2022; Peacock et al., 2020). These mixed responses in our sample likewise suggest that while many students benefit from cohort-based community support, others may flourish with flexible or individualized arrangements, pointing to a need for institutional programmes that combine cohort building (e.g., synchronous seminars, moderated forums) with personalised check-ins and scaffolded feedback.

Practically, this suggests that institutional programmes should combine cohort-building (synchronous seminars, moderated forums) with personalised check-ins and scaffolded

feedback so that both socially oriented and solitary learners receive context-appropriate support.

3.4 Mentorship Quality and Supervisory Support

Mentorship quality and supervisory support play a pivotal role in shaping postgraduate students' success in thesis writing. Effective supervisory interaction and constructive feedback not only guide students in meeting academic standards but also foster motivation, confidence, and persistence throughout the research process. Recognizing the importance of these elements, this study examined the extent to which supervisory practices influence students' academic experiences. The results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) on supervisory interaction and feedback are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Items of supervisory interaction and feedback

No	Items	Loading	SE	T-value	P-values
1	My supervisor provides timely and constructive feedback on my thesis drafts	0.71	0.04	17.67	0.00
2	I have regular and productive interactions with my thesis supervisor	0.72	0.04	17.91	0.00
3	I feel that my supervisor understands the challenges of distance learning	0.80	0.04	19.93	0.00
4	The feedback I receive from my supervisor significantly improves my thesis	0.90	0.04	22.53	0.00
5	I am satisfied with the level of support and guidance from my supervisor	0.82	0.04	20.55	0.00
6	I find it easy to communicate with my supervisor despite the distance	0.81	0.04	20.21	0.00

Supervisory quality emerged as a decisive domain: CFA loadings were high across items addressing timeliness and usefulness of feedback (feedback improves thesis = 0.90, T = 22.53), supervisor understanding of distance challenges (loading = 0.80, T = 19.93), and ease of communication despite distance (loading = 0.81, T = 20.21), with all associated p-values < .001. These values point to a strong consensus that constructive, timely supervision correlates with perceived thesis improvement and student satisfaction.

The qualitative data problematizes how supervision is enacted in practice: participants described delays in feedback, scheduling difficulties, and the loss of nuance in virtual consultations. One participant reflected, "I once had an experience where I had to wait a long time to get feedback from my supervisor. This delay disrupted my workflow and hindered my thesis progress." Such accounts align with evidence from remote supervision literature that identifies both affordances (flexibility, asynchronous communication) and pitfalls (erosion of informal mentorship and slower feedback cycles) in distance doctoral and master's supervision (Wisker et al., 2021).

Comparatively, our findings reinforce prior recommendations that supervision in ODL must be reconfigured to include clearer milestone protocols, diversified mentorship (peer and co-supervisor networks), and training for supervisors in distance-sensitive pedagogy (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). Digital platforms that support versioning, time-stamped feedback, and synchronous checkpoints can help reduce feedback latency and preserve the dialogic quality of supervision; nonetheless, infrastructural issues (connectivity, scheduling across time zones) remain practical constraints.

Overall, the integrated results and discussion show that thesis success in the UT ODL context depends on the interaction of personal regulation, resource access, social connectedness, and supervisory practice. Interventions that address these domains in combination, SRL training plus accessible digital resources, targeted community-building, and restructured supervisory protocols, are most likely to support timely, high-quality thesis completion.

4 CONCLUSION

This study investigated the multifaceted experiences of postgraduate students at Universitas Terbuka in navigating thesis writing within a distance learning environment, employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to capture both breadth and depth of perspectives. The findings underscore that self-discipline, time management, and effective self-regulated learning strategies are indispensable predictors of thesis progress, yet they are often constrained by competing professional and familial responsibilities. Access to academic resources and digital competence also emerged as pivotal determinants of research efficacy, highlighting the importance of both infrastructural support and skill development. Equally significant were challenges of academic isolation and diminished motivation, which often eroded persistence and engagement, though some students demonstrated resilience through intrinsic motivation. The quality of mentorship and supervisory feedback was found to be a

decisive factor in sustaining momentum, shaping not only the quality of research but also students' confidence and academic identity. Taken together, the study demonstrates that thesis completion in distance learning contexts is contingent upon an interplay of personal regulation, institutional support, and supervisory practices.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, institutions must adopt integrative strategies that simultaneously strengthen students' self-regulation capacities, enhance access to academic resources, and reconfigure supervisory protocols to meet the specific demands of distance education. This includes designing digital platforms with embedded self-regulated learning scaffolds, fostering virtual peer communities, and implementing structured supervisory milestones to mitigate delays in feedback. Second, while the study provides valuable insights, its limitations should be acknowledged: the sample was drawn from a single open and distance learning institution, which may constrain the generalizability of the results; moreover, reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases in representation of experiences. Future research should expand to comparative, cross-institutional studies and explore longitudinal trajectories of postgraduate students to capture the evolving dynamics of thesis writing in open and distance learning.

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