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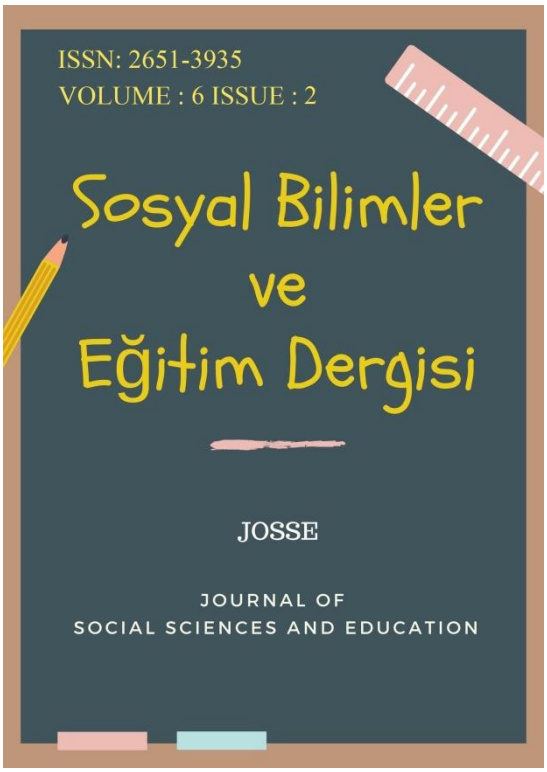

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Difficulties Encountered by Social Studies Graduate Students in the Thesis Preparation Process

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Difficulties Encountered by Social Studies Graduate Students in the Thesis Preparation Process

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Abstract

It is essential to identify the challenges encountered by graduate students who play a significant role in the continuity of higher education during the thesis preparation phase. If students do not cope with the difficulties encountered at this stage, their education may have to end. This study aimed to determine the problems and obstacles encountered by graduate students in the field of social studies education during their thesis work. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 17 students pursuing a graduate degree in social studies education. The data of the study, which is a qualitative research, were analyzed with descriptive analysis and the identified difficulties were thematized. Additionally, the participants were asked to assess the level of difficulty associated with these challenges. Based on the findings, students expressed that they encountered challenges, such as determining the topic of study, selecting appropriate methods and techniques, establishing effective collaboration with their supervisors, encountering conventional obstacles, accessing necessary resources for their theses, gathering information, following university-related procedures, and getting stuck in formal processes in the field study. Given these obstacles, it is imperative for academic institutions and relevant organizations to take preventive measures. It is also crucial to conduct research to offer solutions to these difficulties. Just as highlighting the issues encountered by graduate students sheds light on their difficulties, a similar investigation of the experiences of doctoral students during the thesis preparation process can provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges within graduate education.

Keywords: Graduate, social studies, graduate students, difficulty, thesis

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Introduction

Today, the acquiring of knowledge and lifelong learning have become the fundamental elements of development. This change necessitates high-quality education. However, the concept of quality education has significantly evolved in recent years. In the past, holding a bachelor's degree was deemed sufficient for a well-educated person, but today this perspective has transformed. Presently, individuals require graduate education designed for their specific areas of expertise to be considered to have received quality education. Moreover, the pursuit of advanced knowledge is crucial to career advancement. Consequently, there has been a notable increase in the pursuit of both thesis and non-thesis graduate programs, reflecting the growing demand for such qualifications. The increasing number of applications for these programs underscores the escalating need for qualified education worldwide. Although graduate education offers significant benefits in terms of academic and career advancement for individuals, it also presents various challenges. These challenges involve administrative, program-related, advisor-related, economic, and family related issues depending on the nature of the specific academic pursuit (Arabacı & Akıllı, 2013).

Among the reasons why graduate education has gained significance and the interest in this field has highly increased these reasons can be listed: The fact that universities include research studies among their main functions, graduate programs provide qualified workforce needed at the development level and development of the country, individuals who have completed their graduate education are given priority in being recruited for business life, there is a need for teaching staff due to the increase in the number of universities in our country, and graduate programs offer these opportunities (Karakütük, 1999).

It is impossible to avoid change, which is making visible progress all over the world and affecting every part of our lives. For both individuals and organizations to adapt to the change process and shape their future, they should develop themselves in this continuity (Hesapçıoğlu, 2010). For individuals to realize themselves and adapt to change, it can be said that they need to keep up with the changes in the perception of qualified education as well as the changes in every field. It is possible to say that once upon a time, being literate was considered qualified, and then it went through a process of gradually becoming a primary education graduate, followed by a secondary education graduate, and a higher education graduate. However, being a graduate of higher education today is not only a bachelor's degree

but also a graduate education. In this sense, today's change and continuity can be said to have reached a position where qualified education now includes postgraduate education.

Advanced education at the graduate level plays a pivotal role in the era of constant development and progress. Consequently, it is crucial to identify and address the challenges faced by the students during this phase. Minimizing these challenges is essential not only for collaboration between students and academic staff but also for the institution, taking into account administrative and program-related issues. Recognizing the vital role that educational institutions play in individual development, the problems encountered in these places cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is imperative for institutions, educators, and students to collaborate effectively to provide high-quality education that meets the demands of contemporary age and individual needs. In cooperation, it is very important for the realization of qualified and high-quality education to eliminate the problems experienced by students in graduate education, especially in the thesis preparation process.

Schools must innovate to provide high-quality and efficient education. Similarly, educational innovations are essential to adapting to current changes. This necessity for innovation has emerged due to changes in the scientific, social, technological, and environmental aspects of the current era of education. It can be stated that change is in the field of education, as in every field (Özdemir, 2013). Maintaining pace with progress and change is achievable through education. Therefore, highlighting the challenges faced by students in this field is crucial. In particular, when graduate education serves as a measure of development, it is essential for students at this level to encounter minimal difficulties and benefit from advancements implemented by educational institutions.

Education before starting a doctoral program is typically a master's degree that can be pursued with or without a thesis. These master's programs serve various purposes. The objective of the thesis-based Master's program is to equip individuals with the skills to access and interpret information through scientific research (Regulation on Graduate Education, Article 9). Conversely, non-thesis master's programs focus on acquiring essential professional knowledge and using existing knowledge in the application phase (Regulation on Graduate Education, Article 14). Examining the impact of education on a nation's development, graduate education plays a significant role, particularly in shaping the future of scientists, academics, and senior leaders crucial for a country's progress (Sevinç, 2001). Universities have the primary responsibility of training scientists, with this task taking place when individuals start graduate education programs following their undergraduate studies, regardless of their field of study (Kurnaz & Alev, 2009).

Academic staff and students are expected to collaborate effectively to accomplish graduate education objectives. The challenges faced by institutes in terms of infrastructure and operations, in line with the growing demand for graduate education, impact both students and academic staff (Çoruk, Çağatay & Öztürk, 2016). Affecting the functions of the institutes will also indirectly influence students. This may cause students to experience challenges in some formal processes or to encounter problems in procedures, especially during the thesis period. These problems may also have negative consequences for graduates. Since the importance of graduate education is recognized today, and its demand is at the highest level, determining the difficulties encountered by students is very important. Therefore, this study was deemed necessary.

It is crucial to determine the academic self-efficacy of graduate students, who play a significant role in the progression of higher education, the quality of their thesis preparation process, and the extent of challenges they encounter. When graduate students studying their theses struggle to overcome the challenges they encounter in the thesis preparation phase, this could result in the discontinuation of their education. It is imperative to explore the specific issues that these students encounter to raise awareness among relevant organizations and individuals. This awareness can help prevent these difficulties and attract the attention necessary to effectively address them. The importance of this study, which aims to map the difficulties experienced by master's degree students in social studies education during the thesis phase, emerges when it is considered that there are not many studies in the relevant field.

Problem Statement

What are the opinions of social studies graduate students about the difficulties they face in the thesis preparation process?

Sub Problems

1. Did you encounter any difficulties in determining your advisor? If yes, what were they?
2. Did you encounter any difficulties with the advisor? If yes, what were they?
3. Did you encounter any difficulties in determining the thesis topic? If yes, what were they?
4. Did you encounter any difficulties in determining the thesis method? If yes, what were they?

5. Did you encounter difficulties in the formal process of your thesis? What were the difficulties you encountered?
6. What were the other difficulties you encountered? Please explain them.
7. Please list these problems according to their degrees of difficulty.
8. Will you be able to complete your graduate education by producing a thesis?

Method

In this section of the study, "study model", "study group", "data collection tool", "data collection" and "data analysis" titles and explanations are given.

Model

In this study, "phenomenology design", which is a qualitative research method, was used. Phenomenology can be found in various forms in everyday life; it focuses on phenomena such as perceptions, experiences, concepts and events. Phenomenology design is carried out within the scope of the aim of "investigating in depth what individuals feel, what they think, perceptions, concepts and the ways and means of establishing relationships between them as a result of their experiences" (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). The basis of phenomenology is individual experience. In this way, it was ensured that the data were taken completely from the participants' own words and google forms without controlling their perceptions. From this point of view, the difficulties encountered by students at the thesis stage of their master's degree in social studies were identified in line with their experiences related to the process.

Qualitative research methods aim to define the content of documents, summarize keywords in the texts, explore the process and form of the content presented, and enhance the conceptualization of this content (Drisko & Maschi, 2015, p. 85). Data were collected through interviews and document analysis. The document analysis method involves examining written materials that contain information related to the phenomena and events under investigation (Çepni, 2010). This approach enables a comprehensive examination of documents produced within a specified timeframe or those from various time periods relevant to the research topic (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Document analysis is a systematic evaluation of available written sources of data, and it involves a structured plan and schedule for examining relevant documents to draw conclusions aligned with these materials (Karasar, 2007).

Data Analysis

The data obtained in this study were analyzed using descriptive analysis method. Descriptive analysis is an analysis in which data are presented, defined, shown, explained and communicated as they are (Şentürk et al., 2023). The aim of descriptive analysis is to transform raw data into a format that readers can understand and use if they wish (Sönmez & Alacpınar, 2013). The study not only addressed participants' issues, but also categorized the difficulty levels of these problems. The process of analyzing and predicting the opinions of master's students at the thesis stage regarding the problems experienced by them has gone through many stages in detail. While determining these stages, the relevant studies were utilized and organized into stages added by the researcher. These stages are, respectively, "(1) "examining the google form data"; "(2) eliminating the answer forms that are not suitable for evaluation"; "(3) re-examining and compiling the google form data"; "(4) coding the participants' answer sheets accepted for evaluation from P1 to P17"; "(5) ensuring validity and reliability"; "(6) calculating the frequencies of the codes obtained"; "(7) predicting the data"; "(8) reporting the study" (Armstrong et al, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2007). For the reliability of the data collection tool, Miles and Huberman's (1994) reliability formula; Reliability=.$\left(\frac{\text{Agreement}}{\text{Agreement+Disagreement}}\right) x100$ was used and the average reliability between the coders was found to be 85% .

Data Collection Tool

In this study, a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was used. First, a draft interview form was created. In the process of creating the draft interview form, draft items were determined by reviewing the literature. The determined questions were examined by field experts in terms of content and form, and in line with the results of the examination, some questions were removed from the interview form, and some questions were reorganized in terms of wording and the final form of the interview form was created. The interview form consists of 8 open-ended questions. The interview form consists of 8 open-ended questions. In this study, data were collected online via google form. The data collection process was carried out by sending the forms to the students who voluntarily participated in the research, who are in the thesis stage of their master's degree in social sciences, and receiving their answers. The purpose and importance of the research were explained to the students, who were at the thesis stage of their master's degree in social sciences, and the necessary information about the use of Google form was provided. The data

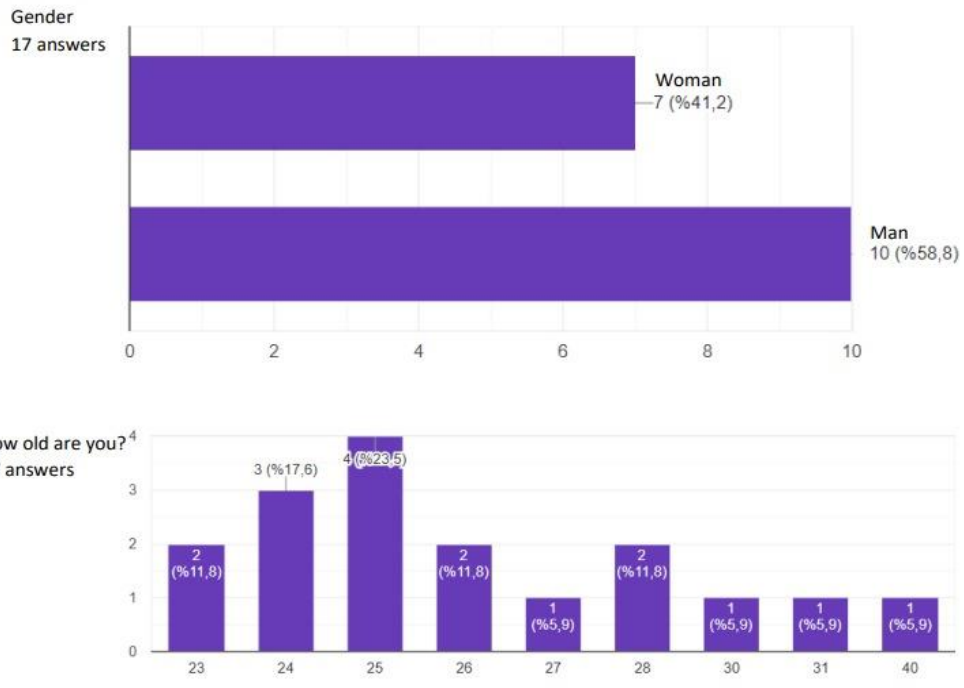
were collected with the participation of 20 students who were doing their master's degree at a state university in Istanbul in 2022, but 17 of them were found appropriate to be evaluated within the scope of the research. 3 students were not included in the scope of the research because their answers were not available in the forms. Görüşme sırasında araştırmanın veri toplama sürecini olumsuz etkileyebilecek durumlardan kaçınılmıştır.

Study Group

The study group comprised 17 graduate students in Istanbul province, who were selected by a convenience sampling method in the 2018-2022 academic year on the basis of volunteerism. The sampling method of the research is purposive sampling. It is a probabilistic and non-random sampling approach. It enables in-depth research by selecting information-rich cases depending on the purpose of the study. The researcher tries to understand natural and social events or phenomena in the context of selected situations and to discover and explain the relationships between them (Büyüköztürk et al., 2013). Subsequently, all participants were interviewed face-to-face and informed about the study, then, the interview questionnaire was distributed electronically through email using Google Forms, and participants submitted their responses via this online form.

Table 1

Gender and Age Information of the Participants



As shown in Table 1, the study participants were 10 male and 7 female students, making a total of 17. The distribution of the ages among them was as follows: four students were 25, three students were 24, and two students each were 23, 26, and 28 years old. Moreover, 1 student each in the 27, 30, 31, and 40 age groups.

Ethical Committee Approval

Approval was obtained from Yıldız Technical University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 15.12.2022 with meeting number 2022/12.

Findings

In this section, the responses to the research questions are organized in accordance with their order, tabulating, and presenting the answers. To support the data, the opinions of the participants were included, using codes such as P1, P2, P3, ..., P61, where "P" stands for "Participant."

Quotations from the documents were included to support the researchers' comments and convey the viewpoints of the study group.

Table 1

Did You Encounter Any Difficulty in Determining Your Advisor? If Yes, What Were They?

Yes/No	Difficulties encountered	*f*	Total
Yes	Too full quotas	3	10
	Not being assigned according to the advisor selection form	10	
	Not being assigned to the desired advisor	10	
	Not being assigned a suitable advisor for the topic of study	8	
	Uncertainty of advisor assignment criteria	6	
No	-	7	7

Table 1 presents an analysis of the challenges encountered by students when selecting their academic counselor in terms of themes, focusing on the types of challenges. The findings indicated that students encountered several obstacles, including the quotas being too full, not being assigned according to the advisor selection form, not being assigned to the desired advisor, not being assigned an advisor suitable for the topic of study, and uncertainty of the criteria for assigning an advisor. According to Table 1, most difficulties experienced by

the students at the stage of determining the counsellor are not assigned according to the counsellor selection form and not being assigned the desired advisor. Notably, seven participants reported no difficulties in this regard. Some of these views are presented below:

P3. "Yes, I have. As too many students were on the advisors and their quotas were too full, we could not work with the counsellors we wished as a class. We were directed to the lecturers who had quotas."

P6. "I encountered challenges while selecting my advisor. Professor I desired to work with a full number of students. Some of his students were almost in the completion phase of their thesis, while others had not even begun and were considering dropping out. This situation made me wait for some students to graduate or be dismissed from their academic lives before I secured the desired advisor. Unfortunately, there were no individuals within the faculty or institute who had comprehensive information about these issues."

P7. "In the selection of the advisor, the counsellor was assigned according to the topic, it was suitable for me by chance, but then there were those who had problems from my friends whose topic changed."

P9. "I could not select the advisor whom I desired."

P11. "The most important issue is the failure to assign advisors according to the advisor selection forms given to the students. Although students are requested to rank their preferred advisors, the assignment process does not consider these rankings. The applied distribution criterion in the assignment process, is not explained to the student."

P15. "I was assigned to the counseling of another advisor, not the one I wanted to work with, and when I submitted my request for change, which was my legal right, to the advisor, he almost did not accept it."

P16." I did not have any problems during the advisor selection phase, because the one I wanted and selected in my preferences became my advisor."

Table 2

Did You Encounter Any Difficulties with the Advisor? If Yes, What Were They?

Yes/No	**Difficulties encountered**	*f*	**Total**
Yes	Advisor's being busy/not allocating time	11	12
	Communication issues	7	
	Thesis topic selection	5	
	Lack of guidance (Conventionalism)	7	

	Insufficient expertise in the thesis topic	4	
No	-	5	5

Table 2 focuses on the issues faced by students due to their advisors and the types of problems encountered. Among the students, 12 mentioned experiencing problems, while 5 reported having no issues related to their advisors. Once the students shared the challenges they encountered, themes emerged, including the advisor being busy or lacking time allocation, communication issues, thesis topic selection, lack of guidance (conventionalism), and insufficient expertise in the thesis topic. According to the table, 11 of the 12 students who encountered difficulties pointed out that their advisors being busy and not allocating time constituted the most prevalent challenge. Some of the students' statements regarding the difficulties they encountered with their advisors are provided below.

P6. "Busyness, uncertainty about the thesis topic, indifference of the advisor and communication problems."

P11. "I had a advisor assigned out of my preference. We did not obtain a connection. I couldn't communicate, a advisor I couldn't reach."

P9. "My advisor determined my thesis topic and, although I was not interested in this topic, I came to the end of the thesis. But it was not a pleasant process for me."

P15. "During the course period, I was assigned to a counsellor whose course I did not take, so I felt unfamiliar."

Table 3

Did You Encounter Any Difficulties in Determining The Thesis Topic? If Yes, What Were They?

Yes/No	**Difficulties encountered**	*f*	**Total**
Yes	Inability to find interesting topics that have not already been studied	8	9
	Selecting a topic from the advisor's field of study	4	
	Lack of knowledge in the field/literature	7	
	Methodological knowledge's affecting the choice of topic	2	
	Being a non-major student	2	
No	Determination the topic with the advisor's guidance	8	8

In Table 3, whether the students had problems determining the thesis topic and what kind of problems they encountered were thematized. According to this, 9 of the students stated that they had difficulties in different topics while determining the thesis topic. The difficulties experienced were given in the themes of not having a good command of the field/literature, selecting a topic from the advisor's field of study, methodological knowledge affecting topic selection, and being a non-major student, with the greatest difficulty being the inability to find an interesting topic that has not been studied. Below are some of the problems encountered in determining the thesis topic and some of the statements of students who did not experience any difficulties.

P1. "The biggest problem I had while determining the thesis topic was the fact that I did my graduate education out-of-the field. It took me a lot of time to choose a thesis topic with an interdisciplinary approach between my professor's field and my own field."

P2. "Economical issues. These problems prevented me from selecting topics that might not allow me to access places that demand research."

P3. "Yes, in fact, the biggest problem is that no matter who we choose as a advisor, we are expected to choose a topic within their fields of study, and we even receive feedback such as 'You should study this topic.'"

P4. "Without the guidance of my supervisor, I would have had difficulty finding my thesis. I had difficulty in choosing a topic myself because I did not have enough knowledge in the field and literature during the topic determination process."

P5. "Yes. I hesitate to find interesting topics."

P6. "Yes. We had trouble finding enough resources for the first topic we chose, so we had to change the topic."

P7. "Yes, I had some problems. First, I had a problem determining the topic; unfortunately, I was drowned in the options. The second problem was that I was undecided about qualitative and quantitative studies, which affected my choice of topic."

P8. "The topics to be studied were selected. The necessity to search for very specific aspects of the topics."

P9. "While determining the thesis topic, I had a common opinion with my supervisor and we did not have any problems."

P10. "I did not have any problems. I just wanted to choose an important topic. We determined my topic in consultation with my teacher."

P11. "There were no problems with the selection of the topic or the decision process. However, I had to limit the topic to certain areas thinking that the jury's view on the topic could be different."

Table 4

Did You Encounter Any Difficulties in Determining The Thesis Method? If Yes, What Were They?

Yes/No	**Difficulties encountered**	*f*	**Total**
Yes	Lack of knowledge about methods	7	*9*
	Struggles with quantitative methods	3	
	Inability to choose an appropriate method for the thesis topic	4	
	Inability to select an appropriate study group	2	
No	Choosing an appropriate method for the topic	8	8

Table 4 presents an analysis of the challenges faced by the students when determining the method for their theses. The findings revealed that students encountered difficulties in determining the thesis method. The issues identified included lack of knowledge about methods, struggles with quantitative methods, inability to choose an appropriate method for the thesis topic, and inability to select an appropriate study group. The primary source of these problems appears to be students' unfamiliarity with the various methods. Conversely, students who successfully chose the methods attributed this to the adaptation between the methods and their research topics. Stating that the topic of the study affected the method, one student stated that he did not have problems with it. Some students' opinions are quoted below:

P1. "Frankly speaking, I could not decide for a long time which qualitative or quantitative studies would be more useful for my thesis. It was a difficult process for me."

P2. "I did not have any problems in determining the method, since my field is history, I used the historical method."

P3. "I had difficulties because we were not fully informed about the thesis method during the course period. It is still not completely clear."

P4. "Following the determination of the topic, the application was made in accordance with the method, and no problem was experienced."

P5. "When I want to conduct action research, the issue of getting permission from a school and conducting the study without interruption makes me think."

P6. "I was conducting a scientific study for the first time, so I did not know which method to use and how to use it. I could not distinguish between these methods. My advisor's guidance on this topic is incomplete. The process was difficult for me, alone."

P7. "I was undecided in choosing the method. I had problems such as if it would be suitable for the topic I chose or if it would serve the purpose."

P8. "This is the most important challenge for me. Although there is a standard template for my thesis, I struggled to specify the methodology. I am not sure about which method to use for my thesis topic."

P9. "I had problems in determining the group I would study. Other than that, I had no problems with the method."

Table 5

Did You Encounter Any Difficulties in The Formal Process of Your Thesis? If Yes, What Were They?

Yes/No	**Difficulties encountered**	*f*	**Total**
Yes	Problems originating from the Institute	8	*10*
	Conventional procedures	8	
	Ethical committee approval	7	
	Being in a different city	5	
	Late announcement of the academic calendar	4	
	Approval of practice schools	3	
No	Being at the beginning of this process	4	7
	Failure to initiate formal processes	3	

Table 5 displays the challenges faced by students in the formal thesis processes, detailing the nature of these difficulties. Of the participants, ten encountered issues in official procedures derived from institute-related problems, conventional protocols, ethical committee approvals, being in a different city, delayed academic calendar announcements, and approvals from practice schools. Four students, whose formal processes had recently started, reported no problems, while three others noted that they did not experience any problems due to the incomplete start of the formal procedures despite being in the thesis process. Below are quotations from the student statements.

P1. "When it comes to obtaining research permissions, both the academic institute and various governmental institutions create some obstacles. Even in this digital age, dealing

with bureaucratic processes and extensive paperwork unfortunately undermine the progress of many researches."

P2. "Since I am at the beginning of the process, no problems appear at the moment."

P3. "I was able to obtain the approvals of the Ministry of National Education and the ethical committee on my second attempt. It is difficult to gather the documents required of the ethics committee, especially for students who continue their graduate education in another city. There was a challenging procedure, such as uploading the documents required for the ethical committee application on a CD, and submitting them by hand. Later, when I switched to the online application, the requirement of uploading the documents on a CD was removed, and then I was able to apply more easily."

P4. "Yes, they announce the deadline for the submission of the thesis very late, for example, they announce the date when students who want to do the thesis defense in the spring semester of 2022 should make the first submission of the thesis a month earlier, although this is something that should be clear when the spring academic calendar is determined."

P5. "I have not started the formal procedures yet."

P6. "There are some forms requested by the Institute and there were problems because they did not update those forms."

P7. "Although there was still time before the thesis deadline, the appointments were all full. We had to start the process via e-mail."

P8. "My thesis was uploaded 5-6 months after I submitted my thesis proposal to the school's own student information system. In this respect, the information-processing process is extremely slow. Apart from that, there was no other problem."

P9. "Specially, in cases where approval is required, the relevant authorities may be indifferent or slow to act."

P10. "Yes, I did. I had a hard time getting the paperwork together."

Table 6

What Were the Other Difficulties You Encountered? Please Explain Them

Yes/No	**Difficulties encountered**	*f*	**Total**
Evet	Not being in the same city with the university	5	*6*
	Economic problems	3	
	Lack of volunteerism of practice schools	3	

	Family-related difficulties	1	
Hayır	I did not encounter any difficulties other than the questions posed	11	11

Table 6 presents whether the students faced additional challenges beyond those directed by the researchers and what these problems were. As shown in table, six students reported encountering other difficulties and described their nature. Specifically, five students experienced challenges related to not residing in the same city as the university, three students encountered economic obstacles, and three students faced issues related to lack of volunteer opportunities in practice schools. In contrast, 11 students did not report any problems beyond the questions posed.

Table 7

Please List these Problems according to their Degrees of Difficulty

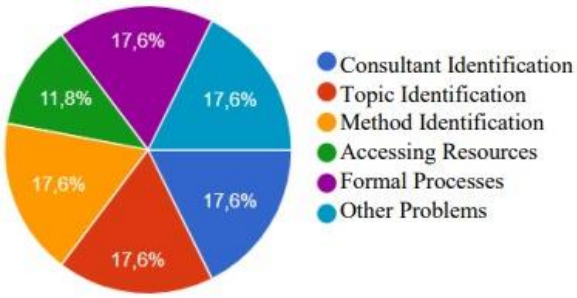


Table 7 shows the degree of difficulty experienced by students according to their ratio. Accordingly, the students ranked the difficulties as determining the advisor, determining the topic, determining the method, accessing resources, formal processes, and other problems.

Table 8

Do You be able to Complete Your Graduate Education by Producing Your Thesis?

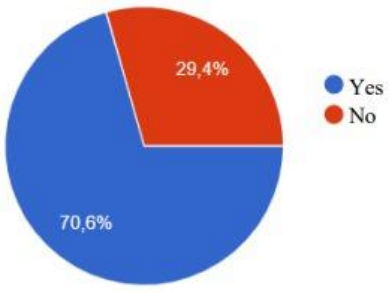


Table 8 presents students' opinions on whether they could complete their graduate education, that is, their theses, despite these difficulties. According to this, 70.6% (12 students) of the participants thought that they could complete their graduate program, while 29.4% (five students) thought that they could not.

Discussion and Results

Based on the research findings, it was evident that in the process of preparing their theses, students typically encountered challenges related to their research topic, the selection of an advisor, their interactions with him/her, the methodology for their thesis, accessing necessary resources, dealing with formal procedures, and a range of specific issues. Interestingly, students who reported having no difficulties were often individuals who had not yet decided on a research topic despite having completed their coursework. In this case, it is thought that students who state that they have no problems will encounter similar problems when they reach the thesis stage.

It has been determined that not being assigned to the desired advisor can lead to various issues including miscommunication, difficulties in working cohesively, selection of a suitable thesis topic within the advisor's field of expertise, advisors' busyness, and inadequate guidance. As a result, students often encounter challenges, such as facing full quotas, not being assigned their preferred advisor as per their selection form, not securing their desired advisor, failing to find an advisor suitable for their research topic, and experiencing uncertainty regarding the advisor assignment criteria. In the context of graduate education, academic counseling plays a crucial role since advisors are responsible for shaping the future of scientists. During this educational journey, students expected their advisors to convey their wisdom and provide guidance, thereby helping them navigate the correct path. The primary objective of student-centered academic counseling is to enhance the productivity and quality of this process (Köser & Mercanlıoğlu, 2010).

Bakioğlu and Gürdal (2011) assert that academic advising has not only sustained its significance but has also seen an increase since its inception in the United States. Particularly, it has been pointed out that among the responsibilities assigned to faculty members, the most challenging and intricate is offering academic guidance for theses. Consequently, it can be argued that any complications arising during the selection of an advisor by both faculty members and students can further complicate the process for all parties involved. Hence, the

issues encountered in the stage of determining a thesis advisor represent a significant challenge for students.

In addition to the challenges encountered in selecting or determining an advisor, students also face difficulties with their own advisors. These challenges include advisors being busy and not allocating enough time, communication issues, struggles in determining the thesis topic, lack of proper guidance (owing to conventional practices), and advisors not having a strong command of the thesis topic. Throughout this process, it was identified that the primary issue faced by students was that their advisors were too busy to spare time for them. Similarly, Arabacı and Akıllı (2013) discovered that the major problems students face with their advisors during graduate education are related to communication and guidance issues. As stated in Arabacı and Akıllı's 2013 research, it is expected that advisors who are responsible for guiding students during their thesis phase will offer assistance and support to students in this process. In our country, academic staff typically fulfill this expectation to a significant degree. Effective communication between students and supervisors is vital during this stage. Nonetheless, although this communication and the expected support from the advisor are crucial, some conflicts may occasionally emerge in this context. These conflicts might be due to the differences in opinion between the advisor and the student, potentially deriving from the student's behavior or the advisor's approach.

Observations indicated that the students encountered challenges when selecting their thesis topics. Difficulties in choosing a thesis topic were found to be associated with several factors, including a lack of knowledge of the field/literature, the need to choose a topic in the advisor's field of expertise, the impact of methodological knowledge on topic selection, and being a non-major student. This situation suggests that although the students have reached the thesis stage, the concern that they will have problems due to the method has an effect on determining the thesis topic. In addition, it can be said that students are in a vicious circle in choosing or determining the subject due to reasons such as not being able to master the literature review. In general, it can be stated that students have problems in topic selection for different reasons.

Another important issue was the challenges encountered in the process of determining the thesis method. Accordingly, it was revealed that the challnegs were derived from factors such as their lack of knowledge of different methods, their inability to select the appropriate method for their thesis topic, their difficulties with quantitative methods, and their challenges in determining a suitable study group. In fact, the students had the most problems due to a lack of knowledge of their methodology. On the other hand, students who stated that they did

not have difficulty with methodology had no difficulty in this regard because they were able to determine methods suitable for their study topics. The fact that the topic of the thesis directly required some methods ensured that they did not have difficulties with methodology. However, it is notable that the difficulties experienced by students who have started the thesis stage in terms of methods lack knowledge about the methods and have difficulty in quantitative methods.

In this research, focusing on students in the thesis phase, it became evident that despite having completed their coursework, they encountered challenges due to their limited understanding of research methods and insufficient familiarity with the literature and academic field, which caused problems in their thesis preparation process.

The study revealed that 10 of 17 participants encountered challenges in formal procedures. Those who reported no issues were either in the first stage of the process or had not yet initiated formal procedures. This finding underscores the obstacles posed by formal processes to students. These challenges include institute-related difficulties, conventional procedures, ethical committee approvals, issues related to being in a different city, delayed announcements of academic calendars, and approval for practical training locations. Evidently, these challenges are primarily related to institutional problems.

In the section titled “Other Difficulties, if Any,” which was not structured by the research data collection tool, it was revealed that the students encountered various obstacles. These include issues related to obtaining research approval in secondary schools, economic challenges, and difficulties stemming from a lack of family support. Arabacı and Akıllı’s 2013 study similarly identified that graduate students faced similar issues, such as administrative, program-related, advisor-related, economic, and family related challenges, contingent upon the focus of the study.

The study found that the most difficult problems faced by students included determining their advisors, selecting a topic and method, accessing resources, dealing with formal processes, and other related problems. Additionally, among the 17 participants in the study, five students expressed doubts about their ability to complete their graduate education and successfully conducted the thesis writing process due to these difficulties. This underscores the importance of addressing these challenges to prevent potential student dropouts. Considering the issues revealed by this research, it is essential to conduct research aimed at reducing and minimizing the challenges faced by graduate students.

Recommendations

- Based on these challenges, academics, universities, and other relevant institutions can conduct studies to minimize these obstacles. It is also important to conduct studies that offer solutions to these difficulties. The population and sample groups of this study can be expanded and analyzed based on universities and provinces.
- Similar to the challenges faced by master-degree students, the experiences of doctoral students during the thesis preparation process can also be explored. Research can be conducted to reveal both similarities and distinctions in the challenges experienced by master's and doctoral students during their graduate journeys.
- To enhance the effectiveness of graduate education, it is suggested to establish improved coordination between educational institutions and their affiliated departments, while also ensuring that essential information is readily available within the student information system. To prevent these challenges, applications can be created to connect individuals pursuing academic studies with field experts on a digital platform.

Ethical Committee Approval

Approval was obtained from Yıldız Technical University Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 15.12.2022 with meeting number 2022/12.

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