

Service Quality Issues in Universities: Challenges for Research Scholars' in Nagaland

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Abstract

The research represents multifaceted progress for the betterment of society. Nonetheless, the research journey is often riddled with obstacles and challenges, starting with the identification of research problems and then extending to the interpretation of findings. In this context, research scholars often encounter significant challenges. The implication of this study underscores the need for universities to ensure a consistent benchmark for delivering quality services among research scholars in universities. This study focuses on exploring the specific service quality issues and challenges encountered by research scholars in universities in Nagaland. The study employed qualitative analysis through interviews and focus group discussions with 54 research scholars. Findings reveal varying key factors behind these issues and challenges and evaluate their impact on the research outcomes. The investigation illuminates the various hurdles that research scholars must overcome in their academic pursuits. The study thus proposes standard service quality practices in universities to enhance the quality of research outcomes in higher education.

Keywords: Service quality, issues, challenges, universities, research scholars

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Introduction

Service quality delivered by the education sector serves as a tool for the growth and development of a nation. Universities must prioritise not only a multifaceted curriculum but also a system for delivering quality services to create a holistic learning environment for students. This comprises building a conducive academic environment provided with necessary infrastructural resources, such as modern and updated libraries, laboratories, research facilities, and research scholars' services, together with recruiting highly qualified faculty to advance teaching and learning, thus leading to research achievements. These important aspects of service quality provided by the universities thus shape today's higher education sector, where connecting quality services and academic knowledge from universities is key to catering to talented individuals and advancing social betterment.

Strong scholarly research drives academic breakthroughs and innovations, and the quality of research that institutions conduct directly affects the standard of higher education. Therefore, to maintain excellence in higher education, substantial and rigorous research is still required. Unfortunately, India continues to lag in producing high-quality research. Sharma & Sharma (2015) emphasised that the quality of research has a significant impact on the quality of higher education. As a result, high-quality research is essential in higher education. Maintaining an institution's competitive position and reputation requires improving service quality. Academic excellence is still based on service quality, especially in the higher education sector (Malik et al., 2010). The necessity of improving the quality of higher education has been repeatedly emphasised since India gained its independence by important policy frameworks, such as the University Education Commission (1948), the Kothari Commission (1964–66), the National Policy on Education (1968–1986), and other later committees. Although educational institutions have

frequently found it difficult to align their practices with the recommendations, these initiatives aimed to improve educational standards in India through systemic reform. As a result, there are still gaps in service delivery and institutional accountability.

A revolutionary plan to build top-notch colleges and universities in India's higher education system is laid out in the National Education Policy (2020). The importance of university-provided services for maintaining consistent quality is emphasised in the document, which encourages government efforts to prioritise systemic changes. Even though the higher education sector is going through a modernisation transition, it still faces a number of problems and obstacles, such as outmoded frameworks, unequal access to resources, and institutional stagnation, all of which seriously impede advancement in the field. The quality of higher education in India continues to be a major concern despite notable quantitative growth. The problem of quality deprivation resulting from systemic barriers is the most urgent issue in Indian higher education, according to research studies (Altbach, 2014).

Nagaland's educational journey continues to be an impressive experience in spite of significant obstacles. The state is in a position to transform education in a way never seen before because of the innate resiliency and group effectiveness of Naga communities. Nonetheless, Nagaland continues to face many obstacles and infrastructure requirements in the field of education, especially in the higher education sector. Expectations of high-quality education in the state are currently growing. Rapid expansion, privatisation, marketing, curriculum reforms, and pedagogical innovations have all occurred in the Indian higher education system. These modifications put Nagaland's colleges and universities in jeopardy of providing high-quality education.

Thus, keeping the above points in view, the importance of exploring the issues and challenges faced by research scholars towards the service quality provided by the universities is essential for shaping effective and progressive quality research in higher education.

Literature Review

Sipayung (2024) conducted a detailed study on the impact of service quality factors on college students' satisfaction. The study highlights several significant challenges in service quality that negatively impact students' satisfaction in higher education, including the quality of academic service delivery, leadership commitment, infrastructural resources, support services, and administrative services provided by the university. The study revealed that the quality of university services provided and the availability of physical resources, such as infrastructural facilities, libraries and laboratories, directly impact the student perceptions.

Hassan (2020) assessed students' perceptions through service quality of private higher education in Bangladesh. Data was collected from 273 students. We performed exploratory factor analysis using SPSS and AMOS. The findings of the study concluded that academic fees, transport services, and physical and medical facilities have a direct impact on students' satisfaction given that internet access, management services and research resources carry secondary relevance.

Singh & Gupta (2019) examine to find out the differences in service quality in students' perceptions in public and private higher education institutions. The results of the study indicate that higher education students' perception of the service quality of their institution was merely average and significant. Findings also revealed that differences have also been observed in perceived service quality between the public and private higher education sectors.

Boruah (2018) highlighted some major challenges of the higher education system of North-East, such as poorly developed infrastructures, unfavourable perceptions towards teachers' dedication and devotion to their services, limited emphasis on establishing high-quality institutions such as Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), student mobility, lack of sufficient high-quality higher education institutions, economic problems, insufficient availability for academic research, and challenges of inefficiency, stagnation and pursuits of profit-driven goals in higher education.

Sheikh (2017) highlights some key factors, challenges and opportunities in higher education in India. The issues highlighted were, including marginally low student enrolment ratio, lack of equity, excellence and high quality, substandard infrastructural facilities, political intervention, limited teaching faculty and inadequate recognition of accreditation of higher educational institutions in India.

Altbach (2014) has stated that higher education in India faces significant challenges in capacity building and excellence, as the mainstream universities are recognised as lacking in quality. The findings also revealed numerous issues and challenges in Indian higher education, such as the fall and rise in the status of the teacher in the education system, inadequate patterns of investment, politics, language barriers, poor strategy in planning, and the wave of averageness in the higher education system. The study examines how these systemic barriers pertaining to bureaucratic control, shortage of teaching faculty, lack of educational innovation, inequitable resource distribution, inflexible governance, and profit-driven educational institutions directly degrade service quality in universities.

Taskeen, Shehzadi, Khan, and Saleem (2014) identified various challenges stressed by emerging researchers in Pakistan such as supervisor's incompetency in understanding research methodology and its use of research statistical tools, lack of assurance in selecting a suitable research topic, inadequate data for research, ineffective library management, plagiarism and overpriced research journals, limited related literature resources, lack of proper help and guidance, inadequate ethical guidelines, inaccessible to Indian scholarly journals, scarcity of competent supervisors, uncooperative behaviour/attitude of librarians, failure to provide documentation from authorities', issues in tool selection, flawed statistical methods, challenges in data collection, time and financial pressures, and withdrawal of study participants from the study.

Sapri, Kaka, & Finch (2009) conducted a study to evaluate the students' perspective regarding the teaching facilities available in higher educational institutions. The findings of the study indicated that students identified educational instruction, teaching methods and learning implementation, students' support services, social provisions for students and social services, academic administrative services, learning support facilities for students, and the learning environment as essential dimensions of service quality. Students identified teaching and learning delivery as the most crucial factor.

Need and Significance of the Study

High-quality research enhances the calibre of humanity, as research is an expedition of social progress. Universities thrive towards high-quality research by offering service quality that includes conducive environments, sufficient funding, and operationally feasible conditions, such as logistical support and infrastructural readiness. Primarily, first-time research scholars pursuing their PhD degree must be provided and supported with comprehensive facilities/resources throughout their research journey. However, in the present context, frequently researchers are seen voicing out their struggles and irritation on social media platforms, such as circulating and sharing countless memes, pictures, quotes and posts that mainly highlight scholars' dissatisfaction, frustration, challenges and difficulties they encounter in their research pursuits. This study aims to investigate the issues and challenges faced by researchers during their on-going research journeys at various universities in the state of Nagaland. This study will be significant in several ways. Firstly, the scholars will be aware of the issues and challenges they face in the research domain. By recognising their struggles, research scholars will gain valuable insights to help them navigate and channel the challenges effectively, focusing on a conducive and collaborative research community. Secondly, supervisors and faculties will be well informed of the issues and challenges faced by the researcher scholars, enabling them to be attentive and respond constructively, fostering the advancement of the overall quality of research. Thirdly, and most importantly, the university authorities can revise and refine their regulatory policies and administrative services to better meet the needs and interests of stakeholders, particularly those of research scholars. By prioritising the researcher scholars' needs and goals, they foster a conducive environment that enhances research progress effectively and efficiently. Fourthly, the study can offer useful advice to the UGC, ICSSR, and other policy-making agencies by unveiling the current status of research in universities. These findings can assist the UGC, ICSSR, and other policy-making agencies in developing better policies and promoting research progress. Moreover, this study will serve as a modest yet relevant contribution to the field of

higher education research. The review of related literature exhibits that depending on the type of institution and its circumstances, the researchers face various issues and challenges. The challenges also vary between individuals and institutions. Hence, it is important to study the issues and challenges faced by researchers at universities in the state of Nagaland.

Objectives

1. To investigate the issues and challenges with regard to service quality provided by the universities to researcher scholars in their research journey.
2. To identify the key factors of service quality influencing the challenges and the quality of the research findings.

Research Questions

1. What are the different issues and challenges with regard to service quality being faced by the researchers in their research journey?
2. What are the key factors of service quality affecting the challenges in research, and how do they influence the quality of the research findings?

Methodology of the Study

The present study is qualitative. The study was delimited to the state of Nagaland. The sample for this study comprises research scholars pursuing PhD degrees in Nagaland. The researcher carried out visits to three universities in Nagaland for data collection and collected primary data via interviews and focus group discussions. A convenient sampling method of 54 research scholars was selected (18 participants per institution) from each of three universities: Nagaland University (Central), St. Joseph University (Private) and Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts of India University, ICFAI University (Private). The non-probability approach was chosen due to time constraints, based on the availability of the research scholars and their willingness to participate. The data collection period for the study was conducted over twelve weeks from January to March 2025, permitting research scholars' academic schedules while allowing time for follow-up interviews and focus group discussions with selected participants. The study thoroughly looked at and talked about the problems and challenges related to the quality of services offered at universities, including things like campus facilities, administrative help, research funding options like scholarships and fellowships, grants, library resources, publishing support, networking opportunities, academic fees, housing, accessibility resources, relationships between scholars and supervisors, programs to boost research, and other important areas. The contribution of all members' inputs in the discussion was highly valued.

Analysis of the Data

Research scholars sincerely extend their heartfelt gratitude to their respective universities for the exceptional facilities and support provided that have made their academic journeys feasible. Alternatively, the issues and challenges enumerated by research scholars of the respective universities are outlined below.

1. **Poor research facilities:** Both research scholars from Nagaland University and private universities, such as St. Joseph University and ICFAI University, reported inadequate access to global or national data repositories due to high subscription fees and sometimes restricted availability. Limited funding for travel allowances, accommodations, or research instruments like audio recorders, video cameras, GPS devices, tracking monitors, etc. makes field studies more expensive and logistically challenging. Research scholars stated that they cannot access statistical software like SPSS, AMOS, Stata, NVivo, etc., due to highly excessive licensing fees. As a result, it hinders the quality of the research scholars' competency in analysing large data sets, restricts the scope of research and also limits them in delivering a comprehensive research outcome.
2. **Administrative Challenges:** Generally research scholars expressed that they often tackle an extensive amount of administrative workloads such as planning and hosting department workshops, seminars or conferences, coordinating with resource speakers and arranging transportation with other logistics along

with managing the ongoing participants' registration, preparing reports for reviews and examination to the department, institution or policymakers etc., mentoring graduate students and engaging in classes regularly, maintaining academic documentation for NAAC inspections, and other non-research related work that pulls away research scholars focus and attention from performing their actual research activities effectively.

3. **Financial Barriers: such as delayed fellowships/scholarships:** many beneficiaries of national fellowships such as JRF, NFHE, NFST, RGNF, MANF, etc., reported that they face delays in the release of fellowship funds that jeopardise their ability to carry out prompt and competent research work, such as postponing their field study or data collection, withdrawing from seminars, workshops or conferences, slowing their research progress and even delaying their degree completion. Other financial barriers also include no provision for non-NET scholarships: according to research scholars from private universities, the universities do not offer provision for non-NET scholarships and other financial support in contrast to central universities.
4. **High-cost fee structure:** Research scholars from private universities revealed that the admission fees, semester fees, hostel fees and semester hostel fees are very costly at their university in comparison with the central university. Subsequently, research scholars from the central university, Nagaland University, reported that admission fees, semester fees, and hostel sub-semester fees were expensive compared to other central universities within northeastern states, for instance, Tezpur University in Assam and NEHU (North Eastern Hill University) in Meghalaya.
5. **Infrastructure Deficiencies:** There is no collective workspace for research scholars. Both central and private universities possess a decent infrastructure. Some departments fail to provide sufficient room space or common rooms for research scholars. Every research scholar needs adequate and sufficient seating to focus and concentrate on their research progress. Due to the lack of adequate room and space in universities, research scholars often use the university's canteens, their supervisor's room, the department office, ICT rooms, or outdoor spaces near the department blocks. And limited hostel accommodation facilities: Research scholars from both the central and private universities disclosed dissatisfaction regarding limited hostel seats in their universities, expressing the challenges faced by outstation research scholars, within or outside the state.
6. **Limited library resources:** research scholars expressed that their university lacks sufficient digital library resources. Research scholars face difficulties in accessing high-profile journals and research articles as the institution fails to maintain proper subscriptions to academic resources. They also highlighted the inability to access digital library resources, such as paper journals, sequential publications, e-books, online journals, the latest print editions, field surveys, and ancients, which are insufficient in their university libraries. Several members also mentioned that doctoral theses relevant to their areas are unavailable in the library. Further, research scholars from private universities also reported that the university fails to access a diverse research repository platform, contrary to the central university. Research scholars from both the central and private universities also reported that computer resources were scarce in the library.
7. **Library open for limited hours:** The operating hours of both the central and private university library services operate starting from 10.00 am to 4.00 pm. Research scholars balancing working professionals and academic commitments find it challenging to adjust their schedules, particularly to visit the library during limited working hours. Moreover, it was also reported that the university library often closes before the scheduled working hours, mainly due to the unavailability of the working staff or some other unforeseen issues. Therefore, research scholars insisted on 24-hour library access at all times in the university.
8. **Absences of supervisors' support:** some research scholars expressed concerns about delays in their research work due to their supervisor's constant absence due to the supervisor's extended leave or unavailability for consistent supervisor's support and guidance, even in distance or virtual mode. As a result, it leads their research work to fall behind the supervisor's tentatively scheduled time, causing their research progress to deviate from the targeted research plan. Out of fifty-four, twenty-two research scholars from both the central and private universities reported that they have a communication gap with their supervisors due to differences in areas of interest. The supervisors' demanding workload often results in minimal support and guidance for their research scholars. Delayed feedback from the supervisors is also

another challenge they're facing. Research scholars often face difficulties in the submission of drafts for review; however, the supervisors take time to provide feedback, resulting in slowing their research progress.

9. **Inadequate organisation of workshops, seminars or conferences:** It was reported that the number of research methodology workshops, seminars, or conferences organised by the private universities is very limited in contrast to the central university.
10. **University pressure to publish culture:** research scholars in general reported that they also face immense pressure to publish research papers in high-impact publications, thus leading to burnout among them. The majority of research scholars have noted that the pressure to publish research papers often negatively impacts their mental health. They are faced with issues like depression, anxiety and even stress. It was also reported that some research scholars were withheld from receiving the degree because of insufficient research publications, as per university rigid publication requirements. Thus, it resulted in a fixation on quantity over quality in research.

Findings and Interpretation

From the analysis of the collected information, the study revealed the issues and challenges faced by the research scholars in the universities of Nagaland. Poor research facilities, administrative burden, high-cost fee structure, no collective workspace for research scholars, limited library resources, library open for limited hours, absence of supervisor support, no provision for non-NET scholarships, limited hostel accommodation facilities, inadequate organisation of workshops, seminars or conferences, university pressure to publish culture, and delayed fellowships/scholarships are identified issues and challenges which are the reasons for dissatisfaction for research scholars of Nagaland in the pursuit of their research journey. The shared issues and challenges faced in all three categories of universities in Nagaland were factors such as poor research facilities, shared administrative workload, absence of supervisors' support, limited library resources, limited university library service hours, university pressure to publish culture, limited hostel accommodation facilities and delays in fellowships/funds/scholarships. As the researcher sought to determine the underlying causes of the issues and challenges, the researcher identified several key factors. Significant potential causes of the research challenges include lack of adequate concern and negligence from the regulatory body, lack of consistent follow-up review by the regulatory council, absence of support and guidance by the respective supervisor, and individual difficulties faced by the research scholars. Issues and challenges being faced by researcher scholars directly affect the research outcome. Several research scholars reported significant issues and challenges they encountered during their research journey, including prolonged delays in selecting and finalising the research topic, failure to complete within the stipulated time due to low motivation and burnout, and incomplete project works failing to complete within the stipulated registered timeframe. Findings also revealed that some research scholars often face hostile mentorship with their supervisors, for instance, the supervisor ignores the researcher scholars by not answering emails, ignores requests to sign the research report until the deadline passes, and then replies, "You should have reminded me sooner", resulting in postponed research progress and uncertainty among the research scholars, research scholars experienced workload even on weekends, without giving rest, dismissing the research scholars opinion by the supervisors, thus, often resulting in conflicts, disagreements with the supervisors, struggling to publish research papers and financial constraints resulting delays in fieldwork or data collection. Emotional and physical exhaustion from burnout, insomnia, frustration, stress, poor physical health, anxiety and various challenges have been noted by the research scholars. In conclusion, multiple research issues and challenges faced by research scholars thus adversely impact the degradation of higher education standards and quality.

Suggestions and Conclusion

The university must address the quality of service it provides, along with the issues and challenges faced by research scholars, to ensure top-tier research progress and promote social development. Thereby,

1. The quality of services supported by universities plays a major factor in enabling research scholars to conduct high-impact research. Universities should promote an environment that supports innovation and excellence in research, eventually sparking ground-breaking research discoveries and expansion of knowledge.

2. The University Grants Commission (UGC) is the regulatory body for higher education; the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) promotes social science research; the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) regulates agricultural research and education; IITs and IIMs with notable research guidelines (CSIR, AICTE, NBA, DST), and the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), as the accreditation body, should consistently strive to address challenges in the research domain by regularly conducting investigations into the research endeavours of universities and other educational institutions. Thus, through this approach, they identify issues and implement solutions to enhance a more impactful research arena in India.
3. As an independent and autonomous institution, the university should create a conducive and supportive research environment for research scholars and strive to offer them the essential research resources and facilities they require. Universities must address the challenges of insufficient fellowships by providing fellowships to deserving research scholars in need.
4. It is significant for supervisors, heads of department (HODs), deans, faculty members and non-academic staff at the university to genuinely understand the difficulties the research scholars face and, therefore, provide necessary assistance and support to navigate their research journey effectively.
5. At a personal level, research scholars should exert their best possible effort to tackle and solve their problems. They must be resilient and prepared to face any challenges that may arise their way, showing determination and flexibility in their research journey.
6. Since research funding directly impacts the quality of research, it is imperative to boost financial aid in the field of research to elevate high-quality research work.
7. Institutions and agencies in higher education should proactively strive to promote national and international research collaborations, enhancing the research scope and creating an impactful research community.

In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for Universities and policymakers to prioritize robust support system for research scholars as a national priority. High quality research is the backbone of innovation, economic growth and societal progress, yet, many academic institutions' fail to provide the necessary infrastructure, funding and administrative services that enable research scholars to thrive and hinders research productivity and discourages talented individuals from pursuing academic careers. Hence, Universities must priorities research-centric reforms such as simplifying research grant processes, boosting infrastructure and research facilities, contributing towards professional development programs and integrating mentorship and well-being initiatives. Synchronously, research support as a national priority must be recognized by the policymakers by elevating research investments through sustainable funding by increasing budgetary allocations for academic research and innovation, implementing policies that reduce administrative burdens on research scholars, and establishing public-private collaborations to expand research opportunities. By addressing these challenges, higher education institutions' can cultivate an environment where research excel, leading to ground-breaking discoveries and long term societal benefits. The choice is clear; empowering research scholars today secures tomorrow's breakthroughs. Hence, by fostering cooperation and committed efforts, we can efficiently address the issues and challenges of Universities' service quality that are faced by research scholars in their research pursuits, resulting in impactful research and meaningful social progress.

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