



# Doctoral Thesis Quality from the Perspectives of Award Recipients in Commerce and Management in India: An Empirical Assessment

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**Abstract:** The study assesses the quality of doctoral theses in commerce and management across the university structure, i.e., public, private, deemed, central, and of national importance, based on 141-degree recipients from 55 institutions starting in 2014. A self-structured questionnaire comprising specific demographic contexts, doctoral framework/experience, supervisor credibility, advantages/strengths, and challenges/limitations influencing thesis quality and research outcomes has been introduced. The analysis indicated that there were no notable differences in how scholars viewed the quality of theses across various departments or types of institutions. It also showed that both institutional and disciplinary factors have a minimal impact, while the dynamics of supervisory relationships stand out as a significant factor influencing scholars' experiences with their theses and their perceived quality. The researcher found that perceptions of thesis quality, whether high or low, do not significantly predict a scholar's likelihood of publishing research papers. This study emphasises that even a thesis deemed high-quality does not automatically result in research publications, underscoring the necessity for targeted training in academic publishing.

**Keywords:** Thesis quality, university type, commerce and management discipline, doctoral framework, doctoral experience, and research outcome.

## 1. Statement of the Problem

In India, doctoral research in commerce and management is predominantly quantitative and empirical with a strong concentration in finance, accounting, HR, marketing, and organisational behaviour. While premier institutions like the Indian IIMs and top business schools emphasise rigorous, contemporary, and theory-driven scholarship, many other universities tend to follow a standardised, formulaic thesis structure. The present study focuses on how research in the commerce and management disciplines has transformed over the last 10-12 years across different university structures. Doctoral thesis quality reflects how scholars perceive experiences during the tenure of their research and how independently one can organise research and publish it in the global community. **Feng et al. (2013)** stated that the landscape of academic research and publishing has also undergone significant globalisation, driven by expanding academic networks and broader economic integration. This study primarily focuses on the scholar's own perception of thesis quality as well as their perception of supervisory contribution. Understanding scholars' self-perceived thesis quality is important because it reflects their academic self-efficacy and motivation, which often correlate with actual thesis outcomes and completion success. In doctoral education, effective supervision plays a vital role in shaping scholars' progress and academic confidence (**Bégin and Gérard, 2013**). Doctoral supervisors function much like coastguards, ensuring that candidates meet academic and regulatory requirements, offering timely assistance when difficulties arise, guiding them through complex research decisions, and providing empathetic, humane support

throughout the process (Thani et al., 2023). Similarly, Liu, Hu and Li (2024) also examined the factors that influence research quality, but their investigation focused specifically on the context of postgraduate dissertations. In the context of Commerce and Management scholars, the research work also seeks to examine the factors shaping thesis quality in these disciplines.

## 1.1 Literature Review and Research Gap

Kumar et al. (2023) surveyed 367 Indian business schools and found major quality issues: most lacked research proposals, had no dissertation evaluation rubrics (causing high subjectivity), and showed weak supervisor interactions and progress monitoring. For commerce specifically, Saini et al. (2024) analysed 132 PhD theses from Maharshi Dayanand University (2009-2022), examining 17,176 citations. While this provides detailed citation patterns, it doesn't directly assess quality. The evidence base is limited to business/management disciplines rather than commerce exclusively, and quality assessment relies primarily on one comprehensive institutional survey rather than multiple independent evaluations. Sufi et al. (2023) conducted content analysis of 20 years of management doctoral theses in Indian universities to identify scholarship expectations and deficiencies, while Shah et al. (2021) analysed 10 years of management dissertations in Pakistan, finding that thesis quality improved significantly between 2008-2012 and 2013-2017 (statistically significant difference in mean impact factors), though no qualitative difference existed between public and private university theses. However, neither study specifically examines award recipients' perspectives. Jack et al. (2001) reviewed quality management doctoral research since 1981, noting trends toward more rigorous methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches. Milovanović et al. (2025) study on award-winning medical theses demonstrates methodology for assessing award-winning work but addresses medicine. Kundu et al. (2022) compared 100 Indian doctoral dissertations from top-10 NIRF-ranked universities against 100 from top-10 international universities, finding "stark differences" in topic contemporariness, methodological innovativeness, and dissemination practices. Broader contextual evidence from Singh A.K. (2011) and Chatterjea and Moulik (2006) confirms persistently low research quality in Indian doctoral education. However, literature specifically focused on commerce education remains limited. The evidence base is limited to business/management disciplines rather than commerce exclusively, and quality assessment relies primarily on one comprehensive institutional survey rather than multiple independent evaluations. The present study is expected to prove very significant in filling the gap in deviance identification.

## 1.2 Research Questions

- i. Are there any significant differences in thesis quality between commerce and management disciplines in different types of universities?
- ii. How does the dynamic between strengths/opportunities on one hand and challenges/limitations on the other influence the academic excellence of a thesis?
- iii. Is there any association between doctoral framework (e.g., mode of PhD, topic selection autonomy, interdisciplinarity) and inclusive thesis quality?
- iv. How does perceived thesis quality affect research publication?

## 2. Research Philosophy and Design

The current study examines the cause-and-effect relationship within the post-positivist philosophy (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), which involves studying a particular problem to explain the patterns of relationships among variables collected from a population. The study is quantitative in nature and follows a deductive approach using a cross-sectional design.

### 2.1 Survey Questions, Sampling and Population

A self-structured questionnaire served as the primary research instrument, developed by adapting validated measures from Pal et al. (2014), Unnikrishnan (2019), and Govil et al. (2015), to ensure relevance and robustness for the present study. The questionnaire was designed for doctoral awardees to assess their self-reflections on the thesis they wrote and the research journey they experienced. The questionnaire began with demographic information of respondents and institutions. The main section of the tool comprised doctoral framework and various subjective types of questions/statements regarding

the credibility of supervisors and research output, measured on a five-point Likert scale. Overall, this structured design enabled a comprehensive understanding of the awardee's research experience, doctoral experiences, supervisor relationship, and publication outcomes.

The study's total population comprised doctoral awardees from Central University, State University, Institutions of National Importance (INI), State Private University, Deemed University (to be) of India in commerce and management disciplines. A total sample size of 141 PhD degree holders has been responded from fifty-five institutions based on simple random sampling as per **Zikmund (2011)**. The sample size was determined based on the availability and accessibility of respondents who have contributed their prominent contributions in doctoral theses in the last 10 years (starting from 2014).

## 2.2 Reliability, Normality and Common Method Variance

Reliability, normality, and common method bias are examples of diagnostic statistics (**Table 1**) used to assess the validity and quality of the study's instrument and data. This guarantees that the data satisfies the prerequisites for precise analysis and trustworthy outcomes. The alpha value of 0.66, which indicates moderate reliability and suggests appropriate internal consistency for exploratory research, was obtained from the scale evaluating researchers' personal opinion of thesis quality. The Cronbach's alpha for the supervisory contribution scale among scholars was 0.84, indicating that the values fall within the recommended threshold (**Hair et al., 2019**).

**Table 1: Reliability and Normality Analysis**

| Aggregate Score of Variables                   | Cronbach's Alpha | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------|
| Researcher's self-assessment of thesis quality | 0.66             | -0.983   | 2.701    |
| Scholar's assessment of supervisor involvement | .840             | -0.349   | +0.447   |

**Source:** Compiled by Author

Skewness and kurtosis scores were used to assess whether the study variables were normally distributed. The distribution of scholars' perceptions of thesis quality was left-skewed and leptokurtic, with a negative skewness ( $-0.983 \pm 0.204$ ) and a high positive kurtosis ( $2.701 \pm 0.406$ ), indicating that most scholars ranked their thesis quality on the upper side. The Central Limit Theorem minimises small non-normality effects, even if the variable diverged from perfect normality, the high sample size ( $N = 141$ ) makes it suitable for parametric studies. The scholar's assessment of supervisory contribution, on the other hand, showed near-normal features with a minor positive kurtosis ( $0.447 \pm 0.406$ ) and a mild negative skewness ( $-0.349 \pm 0.204$ ). There was no discernible departure from normality, since both z-values were within the  $\pm 1.96$  range.

## 3 Data Analysis and Discussions

To examine the experiences and responses of the scholars, the researcher has used group comparison tests and regression models to determine how factors such as departmental differences, university type, and other factors influence scholars' perceptions of thesis quality, perceived supervisory support, and overall (inclusive) thesis quality.

### 3.1 Research Question—I: Any Deviance of thesis Quality Discipline and Structure-wise?

In India, commerce and management are structured independently in some institutions, and in most cases, they function jointly. But interestingly, both disciplines follow a similar research protocol from problem identification to policy implications. Several issues of doctoral theses quality like the students' own perceptions and supervisor's attitude and doctoral framework have been considered to address the deviance of theses quality in commerce and management disciplines across the university structure.

To evaluate the perceived quality of theses between the two fields, namely commerce and management, as well as across different university types (Central, State, National Importance, Private, and Deemed), the Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis H test were performed. Although the data were normally distributed, when applying two-way ANOVA, a few assumptions were not met; hence, two different nonparametric tests were applied. **Field (2018)** and **Siegel & Castellan (1988)** suggested that non-parametric tests can be used when data are ordinal or when parametric assumptions are questionable. The mean rank for scholars in Commerce (73.95) was marginally greater than that for scholars in Management (66.90), indicating that Commerce scholars tend to view their thesis quality as somewhat better on average. Nevertheless, the Mann-Whitney U test results indicated that this difference was not statistically significant ( $U = 2177.00$ ,  $Z = -1.01$ ,  $p = .311$ ). Additionally, descriptive analysis showed that mean ranks for Central (MR = 81.06) and National Importance universities (MR = 76.93) were higher than those for State Private (MR = 57.33) and Deemed universities (**Table 2**).

The results suggest that academic discipline does not significantly influence how scholars evaluate their own contributions or those of their supervisors. Doctoral awardees from both the Commerce and Management departments view these aspects similarly, implying that variations in academic discipline do not notably affect these perceptions. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that there is a significant difference in perceived thesis quality between scholars from the commerce and management disciplines is rejected.

**Table 2: Thesis Quality (Commerce and Management) and University Types**

| Test             | Grouping Variable   | N   | Mean Rank (highest → lowest)                                                                 | Inference                        | df | p-value | Remarks         |
|------------------|---------------------|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----|---------|-----------------|
| Mann-Whitney U   | Discipline          | 141 | Commerce (73.95) > Management (66.90)                                                        | $U = 2177.00$<br>( $Z = -1.01$ ) | 1  | .311    | Not significant |
| Kruskal-Wallis H | Types of University | 141 | Central (81.06) > National Importance (76.93) > State Private (57.33) > State Deemed (55.52) | $\chi^2 = 7.986$                 | 4  | .092    | Not significant |

Source: Compiled by Author

### 3.2 Research Question II:

#### A. Any Effect of Challenges/Limitations on Scholar Thesis Quality Perception and Inclusive Thesis Quality?

Across the models (**Table 3**), the challenges and limitations emerge as weak predictors, with minimal ability to explain variation in the outcome variables. With scholars' own perception of thesis quality, the relationship is almost non-existent ( $R = .008$ ), with an  $R^2$  of .000, indicating that the model performs worse than simple mean-based prediction. Whereas the scholars' perception of supervisory contribution indicates a slightly stronger association ( $R = .212$ ;  $R^2 = .045$ ), accounting for about 4.5% of the variance. However, overall thesis quality also showed a relationship, although the association remained weak ( $R = .128$ ;  $R^2 = .016$ ), indicating that challenges and limitations exert only a modest influence on overall thesis quality. Taken together, these results highlight that challenges and limitations contribute little to explaining changes in the dependent variables.

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis (Challenges and Limitations on Thesis Quality)**

| Dependent Variable                             | R     | B      | t      | Std. Error | Sig. (p) | Interpretation  |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Researcher's self-assessment of thesis quality | 0.008 | -0.003 | -0.092 | 0.030      | 0.926    | Not Significant |
| Scholar's assessment of supervisor involvement | 0.212 | -0.078 | -2.564 | 0.032      | 0.011    | Significant     |
| Inclusive Thesis Quality                       | 0.128 | -0.040 | 2.356  | 0.069      | 0.020    | Significant     |

**Predictor Variable:** Challenges and Limitations

**Source:** Compiled by the Author

### B. Any Effect of Advantages/Strengths on Scholar Thesis Quality Perception and Inclusive Thesis Quality?

The model summary results (**Table 4**) show substantial variation in the explanatory power of advantages and strengths across the dependent variables. According to the scholar's own perception, the predictor explained no variance ( $R^2 = 0.002$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = -0.005$ ), indicating that the model has no meaningful predictive value. Conversely, the scholar's perception of supervisor support demonstrated a moderate level of explanatory power, with Advantages and Strengths accounting for 14.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.144$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.137$ ). And for the overall thesis quality, the model accounted for 6.1% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.061$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.054$ ), indicating a small but statistically significant level of explanatory power. Furthermore, the regression results indicate that the advantages and strengths exhibit a negative relationship with all three outcome variables, although the strength and significance of these effects vary across the models. For the first model, the scholar's own perception of the impact was negative, but small and was non-significant ( $\beta = -0.015$ ,  $p = 0.601$ ). However, in the second model, the predictor has a significant negative effect on scholars' perception of supervisor support ( $b = -0.124$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $B = -0.379$ ). A similar pattern was observed in the third model, where the predictor had a significant negative effect on overall quality of the thesis ( $B = -0.069$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ;  $t = 2.723$ ). These findings collectively suggest that while Advantages and Strengths do not affect scholars' internal perceptions, they have a moderate and statistically meaningful negative influence on their perceptions of supervisor support and international academic standards.

**Table 4: Multiple Linear Regression (Advantages and Strengths of Scholar Thesis Quality)**

| Outcome Variable                               | R     | B      | t      | Std. Error | Sig. (p) | Interpretation  |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Researcher's self-assessment of thesis quality | 0.044 | -0.015 | -0.524 | 0.029      | 0.601    | Not Significant |
| Scholar's assessment of supervisor involvement | 0.379 | -0.124 | -4.828 | 0.026      | 0.000    | Significant     |
| Overall Thesis Quality                         | 0.225 | -0.069 | 2.723  | 0.062      | 0.007    | Significant     |

**Predictor Variable:** Advantages and Strengths

**Source:** Compiled by the Author

### 3.3 Research Question-III: Any Relationship between Doctoral Experience and Inclusive Thesis Quality?

#### A. Regular Mode of PhD and Inclusive Thesis Quality

The regression results (**Table 5**) indicated an extremely weak explanatory power ( $R = .008$ ,  $R^2 = .000$ ), suggesting that the mode of PhD contributes virtually nothing to the variance in perceived international standards of the thesis. The coefficient for Regular Mode ( $B = -0.016$ ,  $t = -0.092$ ,  $p = .927$ ) was negative but negligible and statistically non-significant. This implies that pursuing a PhD in regular mode does not influence scholars' perceptions of whether their thesis meets international benchmarks. Overall, the findings indicate that factors other than the mode of PhD are likely responsible for shaping perceptions of international-level thesis standards.

**Table 5: Regression Results for the Regular Mode of PhD on Overall Thesis Quality**

| Causal Variable                      | R     | B      | t      | Std. Error | Sig. (p) | Interpretation  |
|--------------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Mode of PhD                          | 0.008 | 0.016  | -0.092 | 0.171      | 0.927    | Not Significant |
| Topic Selection Autonomy             | 0.158 | -0.160 | -1.887 | 0.085      | 0.061    | Not Significant |
| Interdisciplinary Nature of Research | 0.106 | -0.105 | -1.257 | 0.083      | 0.211    | Not Significant |

**Source:** Compiled by the Author  
**Outcome Variable:** Thesis Quality

### B. Topic Selection Autonomy and Inclusive Thesis Quality

The results (**Table 5**) indicated a small explanatory power ( $R = .158$ ,  $R^2 = .025$ ), meaning that research topic selection accounts for only 2.5% of the variance in perceived international standards. The coefficient for *Research Topic Selection* was negative ( $B = -0.160$ ) but did not reach statistical significance ( $p = .061$ ). This suggests that scholars who select their own thesis topic tend to perceive their work as slightly less aligned with international standards, although the relationship is not statistically significant. Overall, topic selection autonomy shows a weak and non-significant influence on perceived international-level thesis quality.

### C. Interdisciplinary Nature of Research and Inclusive Thesis Quality

The results shown in **Table 5** indicate a very weak relationship ( $R = .106$ ,  $R^2 = .011$ ), meaning that interdisciplinarity explains just 1.1% of the variation in overall thesis quality. The coefficient for interdisciplinarity ( $B = -0.105$ ) was negative and small, and the result was not statistically significant ( $p = .211$ ). This suggests that whether a thesis is interdisciplinary or not does not significantly impact how scholars evaluate its alignment with international benchmarks. Variations in doctoral experience do not meaningfully predict changes in overall thesis quality among doctoral scholars. Thus, the hypothesis that doctoral experience has a significant effect on overall thesis quality is not accepted.

### 3.4: Research Question: IV Any Relationship between Perceived Thesis Quality and Research Outcome (Publication of Paper)?

The correlation between perceived thesis quality and the paper's publication was very weak ( $R = .089$ ). The  $R^2$  showed that only 0.8% of the variance in paper publication is explained by perceived thesis quality, and the adjusted  $R^2$  suggested that the model has almost no explanatory power even after adjusting for sample size. The regression coefficients (**Table 6**) reveal that perceived thesis quality is not a significant predictor of publication output, ( $B = -0.074$ ,  $t = -1.054$ ,  $p = .293$ ). The perceived thesis quality does not meaningfully influence scholars' publication outcomes in this sample. Thus, perceived thesis quality significantly influences the research outcome (Publication of Paper) is not accepted.

**Table 6: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis (Perceived Thesis Quality on Publication of Paper)**

| Dependent Variable    | R     | B      | t      | Std. Error | Sig. (p) | Interpretation  |
|-----------------------|-------|--------|--------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| Publication of Papers | 0.089 | -0.074 | -1.054 | 0.102      | 0.293    | Not significant |

**Predictor Variable:** Perceived Thesis Quality  
**Source:** Compiled by the Author

#### 4. Conclusions and Practical Implications

This paper presents a comprehensive examination of the assessment of the doctoral thesis in view of the research awardee. Initially, the study compares thesis quality across the two disciplines to highlight whether these domains contribute to observable differences in scholarly output. Second, variations in thesis quality across institutional types—central, state, deemed, and private universities are analysed. The analysis revealed no significant differences in scholars' perceptions of thesis quality across departments or university types, as indicated by the non-significant Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis tests, respectively. This suggests that perceptions of thesis quality remain largely consistent, regardless of whether scholars belong to the Commerce or Management field or study in central, state, private, deemed, or national institutions.

The study further identifies the key factors that affect scholars' perceptions of thesis quality, including their evaluation of supervisory contribution and the overall thesis quality. Across the regression models, most predictors showed non-significant effects on scholars' own perception of thesis quality, perceived supervisory support, and overall thesis quality, indicating that demographic or structural characteristics exert minimal influence. Notably, however, scholars' perception of supervisory contribution demonstrated significant effects in two models, and overall thesis quality was significantly associated with certain predictors, highlighting the centrality of supervisory dynamics in shaping thesis outcomes. Overall, the findings suggest that institutional and disciplinary factors play a limited role, while supervisory relationships emerge as a meaningful determinant of scholars' thesis experiences and perceived quality.

Additionally, the study explores how specific doctoral research characteristics—such as the mode of PhD, autonomy in topic selection, and the extent of interdisciplinarity—influence the eventual quality of the thesis. The result indicated that these aspects of doctoral experience do not meaningfully explain variations in thesis quality. Finally, the study assesses how perceived thesis quality affects subsequent research outcomes (publication of a paper), and the results suggest that higher or lower perceptions of thesis quality do not meaningfully predict whether a scholar publishes research papers. Overall, the chapter provides a nuanced understanding of the multi-layered determinants of thesis quality and establishes the empirical foundation for the study's broader discussion on doctoral education effectiveness within the Commerce and Management fields.

#### Suggestive Measures

Since there is no difference in the perception of thesis quality across disciplines and universities, policies regarding quality assurance for doctoral programs, progress evaluations, and thesis standardisation should be consistent. The findings indicate that challenges /limitations diminish scholars' perception of their supervisors' contributions. This suggests that when scholars encounter issues related to methodology, data access, difficulties, and conceptual uncertainties, they tend to assess their supervisors more critically. Therefore, it is crucial for supervisors to proactively identify and alleviate any research obstacles before they adversely affect the scholar's progress. Advantages/strengths play a significant role in how doctoral candidates perceive and assess the support provided by their supervisors. Consequently, it is vital to collect confidential feedback from scholars regarding the effectiveness of their supervisors in facilitating their research development to assess the quality of supervision

Furthermore, the structural components of the doctoral journey do not inherently improve the quality of the thesis. As a result, universities should not depend solely on program design but should focus on enhancing supervisory guidance, research education, and access to resources. Ultimately, a strong and well-supported research setting is what truly contributes to the creation of higher-quality theses. The findings suggest that even a well-crafted thesis does not automatically result in research publications, emphasising the necessity for targeted training in academic publishing. Consequently, universities might need to establish distinct workshops, mentoring programs, or writing support initiatives to assist scholars in transforming their thesis work into publishable articles.

A few more proactive suggestions that may improve the quality of doctoral work, as advocated by Dwivedi et al. (2015), focus on the research problem, demonstrating rigour, and developing a

publication strategy. **Margolin & Mel'nikov, (2019)** recommended enhancing the doctoral student body, increasing scholarship provision and financial incentives, developing academic supervisor mechanisms, and refining dissertation examination procedures for thesis quality. Whereas, **Jones (2013)** suggested doctoral thesis quality in business and commerce requires understanding issues like attrition, supervisor relationship, and social isolation, and fostering positive supervisor relationships and socialisation. A study by **Johnston (1997)** focused on improving doctoral thesis quality by standardising examiner reports and emphasising clarity and readability. However, **Erwee & Perry (2017)** proposed addressing issues such as examiner selection and evaluation criteria to improve thesis quality. Finally, **Chumba (2025)** suggest a need for targeted training for supervisors and examiners, review of grading tools, and structured supervision practices to improve doctoral thesis quality.

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