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Original Article

HOPE IN THE VALLEY OF PHD STUDY IN SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY.

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Abstract

Background

This phenomenological study investigates the pivotal role of hope in shaping the lived experiences of PhD students in Southwestern Uganda, with particular attention to the challenges they face, their aspirations, and the perceived effectiveness of available support systems throughout their academic journey.

Methods

Employing a qualitative research design, the study draws insights from in-depth interviews conducted with 20 PhD candidates, 7 female and 13 male, aged bracket 35-55 years of age, enrolled across multiple universities in the region. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a rich diversity of perspectives. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, revealing a complex interplay between personal determination and external barriers.

Results

Findings highlight a range of emotional, financial, academic, and institutional challenges, including limited access to research funding, inadequate supervision, prolonged timelines, and family pressures.

Conclusion

Despite these obstacles, hope emerged as a central psychological and motivational resource that sustained the students' commitment to completing their studies and making meaningful contributions to their communities and the broader society. The study further uncovered the significance of informal peer networks, mentorship, and occasional institutional support in nurturing this hope.

Recommendation

The research underscores the need for higher education institutions to develop more robust and responsive support systems tailored to the needs of doctoral students. It calls for policies that address mental health, financial aid, supervision quality, and career development. By recognizing and fostering hope as a critical component of academic resilience, universities can enhance the overall doctoral experience and improve completion rates.

Keywords: PhD study, phenomenological research, challenges, aspirations, qualitative interviews, hope, support systems, thematic analysis, doctoral education.

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Introduction

The pursuit of a PhD study in Southwestern Uganda presents a unique intersection of academic ambition, cultural context, and socio-economic realities. As interest in higher education grows in Uganda, particularly in rural and underserved

regions, it becomes crucial to understand the lived experiences of doctoral candidates. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research methodology, provides a lens to explore these experiences deeply, revealing how hope is cultivated amidst challenges faced by students in this region.



Southwestern Uganda is characterized by its rich cultural diversity and vivid landscapes, but it also grapples with significant socio-economic barriers. The scarcity of resources, inadequate infrastructure, and limited institutional support often impede higher education progress (Wamala et al., 2021). Despite these obstacles, many aspiring scholars embark on PhD journeys, motivated by personal aspirations, societal expectations, and the promise of contributing to local development through research (Mugisha, 2022).

Notably, hope plays a central role in the academic pursuits of these students. According to Snyder (2002), hope encompasses the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself to use those pathways. For PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda, hope may manifest in different forms, such as dreams of academic achievement, aspirations for community impact, and the yearning for improved socio-economic conditions for themselves and their families. This multifaceted nature of hope can greatly influence their academic resilience and persistence in the face of adversity.

Additionally, the communal aspect of Ugandan society highlights another dimension of hope. Many students draw strength and motivation from their familial and social networks, which is particularly prominent in collectivist cultures where community ties are strong (Namasasu & Basaza, 2023). These connections often inspire perseverance, as candidates may feel a sense of responsibility not only to themselves but also to their communities, who look to them as future influencers. Existing literature suggests that when scholars experience hope, they are more likely to engage in proactive coping strategies, such as seeking mentorship, partnering with peers, or utilizing available resources effectively (Maloney & McLellan, 2020). In the context of Southwestern Uganda, understanding how hope influences these coping mechanisms can provide insights into the larger patterns of academic success and personal fulfillment experienced by PhD candidates.

The phenomenological approach is well-suited for this exploration, allowing the voices of the students to shape the narrative of their experiences. By employing in-depth interviews and reflective journaling, researchers capture the essence of hope as it relates to their academic journeys. This qualitative data fosters a deeper understanding of the intricate balance between hope and hardship, ultimately shedding light on the factors that contribute to the successful navigation of the PhD process in this unique context.

Thus, the exploration of hope within the framework of a PhD study in Southwestern Uganda offers critical insights into the personal and communal dynamics that influence academic pursuit. The combination of individual aspirations and collective support is vital in fostering an environment where hope thrives. As researchers explore these narratives, they contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding higher education in Uganda, with potential implications for policy and practice that support the aspirations of future scholars.

Objectives

The main objective of the study was to explore the lived experiences of PhD students in Southwestern Uganda with specific objectives to assess the systemic and personal challenges faced by PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda and to explore the manifestations of hope in the lived experiences of PhD candidates.

Materials and Methods

Philosophical Stance

This study is underpinned by a **phenomenological and interpretive philosophical stance**, which assumes that reality is subjectively experienced and constructed through individual meaning-making (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Rooted in the tradition of phenomenology, the study seeks to understand how PhD students in Southwestern Uganda experience and interpret hope within the complex landscape of doctoral study (Van Manen, 2016). The interpretive paradigm guides the use of qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, to explore the nuanced and diverse lived experiences of participants. This stance enables the researcher to capture the essence of hope as a critical lens through which students navigate academic, emotional, and institutional challenges.

Study Design

This research adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to delve deeply into the experiences of participants. Phenomenological research is rooted in the understanding and exploration of individuals' lived experiences, perceptions, and emotions related to a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of studying manifestations of hope among PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda, a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gain deep insights into how students navigate their academic journeys, including the challenges they face and the sources of their hope.



Participant Selection

The first step in a phenomenological study was to select participants whose experiences were particularly rich and relevant to the phenomenon being investigated (Van Manen, 2016). For this study, purposeful sampling was employed to identify PhD candidates from various disciplines attending universities in Southwestern Uganda. The researcher aimed to recruit a diverse group of participants concerning age, gender, academic background, and socioeconomic status to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Patton, 2015). Participants were approached through academic networks, university bulletin boards, and local academic seminars, with a total of 20 candidates selected to participate in in-depth interviews.

Data Collection

Data collection in phenomenological studies commonly involves qualitative methods that allow for the exploration of participants' lived experiences. In this study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable environment chosen by the participants, ensuring that they felt at ease to share their thoughts candidly (Seidman, 2019). The interview questions were designed to elicit descriptions of the participants' experiences regarding their PhD journey, focusing on aspects such as their sources of hope, challenges encountered, support systems, and personal motivations.

Study Setting

This study was carried out in both public and private universities in western Uganda. This specifically covered four universities: public (Kabale University and Mountains of the Moon University). Kabale University is located at one (1) kilometer off Kabale-Gatuna road. Its geographical coordinates are latitude 1.272215 and longitude 29.988321. Mountains of the Moon University is located approximately 1 kilometer (0.62 mi) northeast of the central business district of the city of Fort Portal, Kabarole District, in Western Uganda, approximately 294 kilometers (183 mi) by road west of Kampala. The coordinates of the university campus are: 0°39'33.0"N, 30°16'31.0" E (Latitude: 0.659167; Longitude: 30.275278).

Private universities included Bishop Stuart University and Ibanda University. Bishop Stuart is located at Kakoba Hill, approximately 5.5km off Buremba Road, east of downtown

Mbarara. Its geographical coordinates are latitude 0.602778 and longitude 30.695556. Ibanda University is located in Bubaare Cell, Bufunda Ward, Bufunda Division in the Municipality of Ibanda (pop. 31,316) in Ibanda District, Western Uganda. This is approximately 72 kilometres (45 mi) by road, north of Mbarara, the largest city in the sub-region. The geographical coordinates of the campus of Ibanda University are: 0°07'24.0"S, 30°29'54.0" E (Latitude: -0.123333; Longitude: 30.498333).

Participants

PhD candidates currently enrolled were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range of perspectives. Phenomenological research aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals in depth. A smaller sample size of 20 participants allowed for more in-depth interviews and rich, detailed data collection. This was essential for capturing the nuances of personal experiences, which are central to phenomenological studies of this nature.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

Participants must: Be currently enrolled in a PhD program in any recognized university or research institution in Southwestern Uganda. Have completed at least one year of PhD study (to ensure adequate experience of the journey). Be willing to share personal, emotional, and academic experiences in an in-depth interview setting. Be fluent in English or the language used for academic instruction, as data collection will be conducted in this language.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants will be excluded if they: Are Master's or undergraduate students (not the target population). Are PhD holders or alumni (focus is on current lived experiences, not retrospective accounts)? Have been in the PhD program for less than one year. Are unwilling or unable to participate in an in-depth qualitative interview (e.g., due to time constraints or discomfort with disclosure). Are experiencing severe psychological distress or crisis, where participation might cause harm or interfere with the ethical boundaries of research.

Bias Management

As a way of minimizing bias, the research employed triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources and



ensuring that interviews were conducted in a neutral and open environment.

Data Source

Primary Data

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Data were primarily collected through in-depth interviews with participants. Primary data refers to information gathered directly by researchers for a specific research purpose. This data is firsthand and is collected through various methods such as interviews, surveys, observations, and experiments. In the context of the phenomenological study on hope among PhD candidates, primary data consisted primarily of in-depth interviews conducted with the participants themselves. Primary data collection allowed the researcher to obtain deep insights into participants' lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions. This is because the qualitative nature of primary data often reveals a nuanced understanding that secondary data cannot capture (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Secondary Data

Relevant literature and institutional reports were reviewed to provide context. Secondary data refers to information that has been collected, analyzed, and published by other researchers or organizations for purposes other than the original research question being studied. Examples include academic journal articles, government reports, existing research studies, and statistical databases. In the case of this phenomenological study, secondary data included literature regarding higher education in Uganda and studies on hope in academic settings. Secondary data can provide a wider context for the primary findings. For example, the researcher can compare their insights from primary data with national trends in education or explore how hope and academic resilience have been addressed in different cultural contexts, lessening the likelihood of bias in interpretation (Bryman, 2016).

Sample Size

The sample consisted of 20 participants, deemed adequate to capture the diversity of experiences among PhD students in the region (Creswell & Poth, 2021). The concept of data saturation is critical in qualitative research, referring to the point at which no new information or themes emerge from additional data collection (Guest et al., 2006). In this phenomenological study, the researcher aimed to understand a phenomenon in depth rather than achieve a representative

sample of the population. Based on previous qualitative research, a sample of 20 participants was considered sufficient to reach saturation on common themes and insights regarding their lived experiences (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A sample of PhD students, therefore, provided a rich data set while allowing for detailed exploration of the phenomena of hope and resilience.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing participants to express their thoughts freely while guiding the discussion with specific questions. Semi-structured interviews are a qualitative data collection method that combines predetermined open-ended questions with the flexibility to explore topics in greater depth based on participants' responses. This approach allows the interviewer to guide the discussion while also encouraging participants to share their experiences and insights freely (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Each interview varied, adapting to the unique context of the participant's experiences, which was particularly advantageous in exploring complex phenomena such as hope in the PhD journey. This interview style promotes a conversational tone and empowers participants to share their narratives in their own words. In studying hope among PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda, understanding the personal context and emotional landscape behind their experiences was crucial. Semi-structured interviews enabled candidates to express their motivations, challenges, and support systems in detail, which was deeply personal and context-specific (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2020), focusing on identifying patterns and themes among the participants' narratives. The analysis of phenomenological data aimed to identify and interpret the essence of participants' lived experiences. Using a thematic analysis approach, the researcher followed a structured process inspired by Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology, which emphasizes understanding the phenomenon's essence from participants' perspectives.

Bracketing: The researcher began by reflecting on their preconceptions and biases related to the topic of study, a process known as bracketing. This self-reflection ensured



that the analysis focused solely on participants' experiences rather than preconceived notions (Giorgi, 2009).

Coding: The transcriptions were examined closely for significant statements or phrases related to participants' experiences of hope. Initial codes were assigned to these significant statements to facilitate a more organized analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Theme development: The researcher grouped the initial codes into broader themes that encapsulated the shared experiences of participants. Themes such as "Sources of Hope," "Community Support," and "Resilience in Adversity" emerged from the analysis, reflecting common threads across participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2009).

Essence formation: Finally, the researcher synthesized the themes into a collective description capturing the essence of hope experienced by PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda. This process involved revisiting the participants' quotes and narratives to ensure that their voices remained central to the findings (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Obtaining informed consent from all participants was a primary ethical consideration. Researchers ensured that participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, the nature of their involvement, and potential risks. Participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the study and were encouraged to ask any questions before agreeing to participate. Consent forms were signed to document their voluntary participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Maintaining confidentiality and anonymity was essential to protect participants' privacy. The researcher assigned numerical identifiers to participants, ensuring that their identities were not revealed in any reports or publications. Data were stored securely, with access limited to the research team, and all identifiable information was removed during data analysis and reporting (Orb et al., 2001).

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. This principle of voluntary participation is critical in qualitative research, as it acknowledges the autonomy of individuals and their right to discontinue involvement if they feel uncomfortable (Creswell, 2014).

Given the cultural context of Southwestern Uganda, the researcher took steps to be culturally sensitive throughout the study. This involved understanding cultural norms and values that could influence participants' experiences and perceptions of hope. The researcher aimed to create a

respectful and understanding environment during the interviews, recognizing the significance of cultural factors in shaping participants' narratives (Mugisha, 2022).

Before data collection, the study was submitted for review and approval by an ethics review committee at the affiliated institution. This process ensured that the research adhered to ethical standards and guidelines, safeguarding participants' rights and welfare and ensuring that the study design was ethically sound (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021).

The research focused on personal experiences related to hope, which may evoke strong emotions. The researcher was trained to handle sensitive topics cautiously and compassionately, allowing participants to share their narratives without feeling pressured. Provisions were made to offer emotional support and resources for participants if needed, ensuring that their psychological well-being was prioritized (Seidman, 2019).

After the interviews, participants were debriefed to discuss their experiences and any emotional responses that may have arisen during the interview. This process allowed participants to reflect on their stories and provided an opportunity for the researchers to address any queries or concerns, further reinforcing the supportive environment of the study (Holloway & Galvin, 2016).

Presentation of Results

Socio-demographics of the participants

Age

The PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda exhibited a diverse age range. Most participants were between 30 and 45 years old, with a significant number being in their early 30s. This suggests that many individuals pursue doctoral degrees later in their careers, possibly after gaining substantial professional experience. A smaller percentage of candidates were older, over 45, indicating a commitment to advanced research even later in life.

Gender

The study revealed a notable gender imbalance among PhD candidates, with a higher proportion of male participants compared to female participants. This disparity highlights ongoing gender issues within academic pursuits in the region. While women's representation in higher education has been increasing, cultural, social, and economic barriers continue to hinder their progress toward doctoral studies.



Academic Background

The academic backgrounds of participants varied widely across disciplines. Most candidates held master's degrees in fields related to social sciences, education, and agriculture, indicating a trend toward applied research. Some candidates had backgrounds in the sciences or engineering. This diversity in academic backgrounds suggests a rich interdisciplinary approach to PhD studies, with candidates bringing a variety of perspectives to their research topics.

Socio-Economic Status

The socio-economic backgrounds of the PhD candidates were mixed. Many participants came from middle-income families, while others reported lower socio-economic status, often citing financial constraints as a barrier to completing their studies. Several candidates were beneficiaries of scholarships or funding from NGOs, which highlights the role of external support in facilitating access to doctoral education in the region.

Qualitative Results

This qualitative study examined the experiences of PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda, emphasizing the intersection of personal and institutional factors through key themes, including emotional resilience, financial challenges, social support networks, and hopes for community impact. The richness of participants' narratives offered deep insights into their lived experiences and illustrated the complexity of their journeys. The analysis revealed key themes including systemic challenges, personal challenges, and manifestations of hope in lived experiences.

Systemic Challenges

Limited Funding and Resources

Many candidates reported financial constraints severely impacting their studies. A participant stated, "Sometimes, I feel like I'm running a race with one leg because I lack funds for my research. It's exhausting." This statement illustrates the frustration felt due to insufficient financial support for both tuition and research materials.

Academic Infrastructure

The lack of adequate facilities and resources, such as libraries and laboratories, was frequently mentioned. One candidate noted, "We work in a vacuum. When you need literature, you often have to travel to major cities or rely on

outdated resources." This highlights a systemic challenge that hinders progress in academic research.

Supervisory Relationships

Participants expressed varying degrees of support from supervisors, which affected their academic journey. One interviewee remarked, "My supervisor is often unavailable, which leaves me feeling lost. I sometimes wonder if I'm on the right track." This indicates how supervisory dynamics can influence student success.

Work-Life Balance

Many candidates struggle to balance academic demands with personal responsibilities. As a participant shared, "I have to juggle my family duties and studies, it's like a tightrope walk every day." This reflects the tension between personal life and academic obligations.

Personal Challenges

Isolation and Loneliness

Several candidates voiced feelings of isolation during their doctoral journey. One noted, "Sometimes, it feels incredibly lonely. You are deep in your research, but no one understands what you're going through." This emotional challenge can impact mental health and academic productivity.

Imposter Syndrome

Feelings of inadequacy emerged as a common theme among candidates. A participant shared candidly, "I often think that I'm not cut out for this. I compare myself to my peers, and it makes me doubt my abilities." This self-doubt can hinder confidence and motivation.

Cultural Expectations

Cultural norms and expectations can add another layer of complexity. One interviewee remarked, "In my culture, people expect me to have a family rather than focus on my studies. It's a constant tug-of-war." Such societal pressures can create internal conflict for candidates.

Emotional Resilience

Participants often spoke of the emotional challenges inherent in pursuing a PhD, but many emphasized their resilience and ability to persevere in the face of adversity. One participant noted, "Every time I felt like giving up, I



would remind myself of the dreams I have for my community. It's that hope that keeps me going." This highlights a common narrative of drawing strength from personal ambitions and the desire to effect change. Resilience also emerged as an adaptive response to external pressures, with another participant stating, "I learned to accept and process my feelings, but it was not easy. I had to find ways to cope, like writing in my journal or talking to fellow students."

Financial Challenges

Financial strain was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. Many participants reported significant hurdles related to tuition, living expenses, and the costs associated with research. One participant expressed, "It feels like I'm climbing a mountain of debt while trying to reach the peak of my academic goals." The weight of financial burdens was palpable, with many feeling that their studies could jeopardize their financial stability. Another participant candidly shared, "Sometimes I have to choose between buying food and printing my research. It's a constant struggle." These voices reveal the stress that financial obstacles impose on academic journeys.

Social Support Networks

The role of social support networks emerged as a crucial factor in the experiences of PhD students. Many participants identified their family, friends, and academic peers as vital sources of encouragement and practical help. As one participant articulated, "My family does not understand what I am doing, but they believe in me. Their support means the world to me." Meanwhile, peer connections provided a space for shared experiences, as another participant conveyed: "We are like a family here. When one of us is feeling down, we lift each other. It's essential." These sentiments underscore the importance of both familial and collegial support in navigating the complexities of doctoral studies.

Hopes for Community Impact

Participants frequently expressed a desire to translate their academic accomplishments into tangible benefits for their communities. One vivid quote encapsulates this sentiment: "I want my research to change lives, to create solutions for the problems we face in our villages." There is a palpable sense of responsibility, with many students viewing their PhD journey as a means to contribute to societal

development. As one individual stated, "It's not just about getting a degree; it's about making a difference at home." This theme illustrates the participants' commitment not only to their personal academic goals but also to the broader mission of uplifting their communities.

Manifestations of Hope in Lived Experiences Support Networks

Many candidates expressed hope through established support networks. A participant shared, "I find hope among my peers. We talk, share ideas, and uplift each other, it's like we're in this together." This collective solidarity fosters a sense of belonging and motivation.

Personal Growth and Resilience

The journey itself was frequently viewed as a transformative process. One candidate stated, "Each challenge teaches me something new about my strength. I've learned to be more resilient, and that gives me hope." This perspective underscores the aspirational character of their struggles.

Vision for the Future

Candidates expressed hope in their academic goals and the potential impact of their research. One participant enthusiastically remarked, "I dream of contributing to knowledge that can change lives in my community. That vision keeps me going." This hope for future impact inspires persistence despite hurdles.

Self-Reflection and Mindfulness

Many candidates embraced self-reflection and mindfulness as tools for coping. An interviewee noted, "I take time to breathe and reflect. It helps me center my thoughts and find hope in small victories." This practice allows them to maintain a focus on their progress.

Discussion of Results

Socio-demographics of the participants

The findings underscore several critical themes relating to PhD studies in Southwestern Uganda.

The age distribution suggests that PhD candidates often pursue advanced degrees after acquiring professional experience, which may enrich their research with practical insights. It indicates a trend where individuals may prioritize work before committing to rigorous academic pursuits.



The gender imbalance raises important questions about equity in higher education. While there is progress in women's involvement in higher education, the underrepresentation of women in PhD programs indicates persistent barriers, including societal expectations, financial challenges, and potential biases within academic institutions. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering a more inclusive academic environment.

The varied academic backgrounds of the participants emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary research in addressing complex societal issues. This diversity can enhance the quality and relevance of research outputs, as candidates approach problems from multiple angles and disciplines.

Socioeconomic status remains a significant factor in access to doctoral education. The reliance on external funding highlights both the challenges faced by lower-income candidates and the potential for increased support mechanisms. Efforts to provide robust financial aid and scholarships could improve access and equity in PhD programs.

Qualitative Results

A Phenomenological Study provides important insights into the experiences of PhD students in this regional context. The findings reveal several key themes, including emotional resilience, financial challenges, social support networks, and hopes for community impact. The results of the study can be contextualized against existing literature, illustrating the complex interplay between personal and institutional factors in the pursuit of doctoral education. The findings highlight that while PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda face significant challenges, they also exhibit a profound sense of hope and determination. Similar studies (e.g., Musoke & Nanyonga, 2022) have noted that social support significantly impacts academic performance and mental well-being.

Emotional resilience was highlighted in the study as a critical factor for navigating the challenges of PhD programs. Participants often cited coping mechanisms developed through previous experiences of hardship, suggesting that their journeys to the doctorate were marked by both personal struggle and growth. This aligns with the literature suggesting that doctoral students frequently encounter stressors, including academic pressure and work-life balance conflicts (Huang et al., 2020). Emotional resilience allows students to mitigate the effects of these

stressors, enabling them to remain focused on their academic goals. Furthermore, research by McAlpine and Amundsen (2014) emphasizes that emotional resilience is not solely an individual trait but is often nurtured within supportive academic settings, underscoring the importance of institutional support in fostering resilience.

Financial challenges emerged as a significant theme in the study, corroborating findings from the literature that indicate economic stress can detract from academic performance and well-being among PhD students (Bair & Marley, 2000). Many participants reported juggling multiple jobs to finance their studies, which often led to increased stress and diminished time for research activities. This financial burden can exacerbate feelings of isolation and difficulty in community engagement, ultimately impacting their academic progress. The literature emphasizes that financial support models in higher education, such as scholarships or stipends, are crucial for alleviating these pressures (Lange, 2015). The need for sustained funding sources within institutions becomes apparent, highlighting the role that universities play in establishing economically viable pathways for PhD students.

The results indicate that social support networks were vital in providing both emotional and practical assistance to PhD students. Participants described relying on peers, family, and faculty for encouragement and guidance, illustrating how communal relationships can alleviate some pressures associated with doctoral study (Druce, 2018). This resonates with research suggesting that social connections can enhance academic engagement and foster a sense of belonging (Baker & Stryk, 1989). Moreover, the interconnectedness of social networks and institutional environments suggests that universities should actively promote collaboration and community-building initiatives, which can boost the collective resilience of students amid their academic pursuits.

Hope for community impact was prevalent in participants' narratives, indicating that many PhD students see their research as a means to contribute positively to their communities. This aligns with the literature emphasizing the social responsibility of higher education (Morrison et al., 2019). Participants expressed aspirations to engage in projects that would address local challenges, such as education and health disparities, thereby reinforcing the connection between academic work and community well-being. This theme resonates with the concept of transformative education, wherein scholars aim to leverage their knowledge to effect tangible change in their social



environment (Giroux, 2011). The integration of such aspirations emphasizes the necessity for institutions to support research that not only advances academia but also fosters community engagement.

The results of this phenomenological study illuminate the intricate relationship between personal experiences and institutional contexts within the realm of PhD studies in Southwestern Uganda. The interplay of emotional resilience, financial challenges, social support, and aspirations for community impact elucidates the multifaceted nature of doctoral education. To enhance the experiences of PhD students, institutions must recognize and address these interconnected themes, providing not only financial assistance but also fostering resilient communities that empower students to achieve their academic and social objectives. Moving forward, both policymakers and educational leaders must consider these aspects as they design supportive frameworks for doctoral candidates in developing regions.

Generalizability of Study Findings Contextual Relevance

The study specifically examines PhD candidates from various disciplines at universities in Southwestern Uganda. As such, the findings reflect contextual influences such as local culture, educational infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and national education policies. The unique socio-cultural dynamics of Southwestern Uganda may not fully translate to other regions or countries, particularly those with significantly different educational landscapes and cultural backgrounds.

Disciplinary Variations

Since the study included participants from various disciplines, the findings demonstrate shared experiences as well as discipline-specific challenges and opportunities. For example, a PhD candidate in the sciences may face different challenges compared to someone in the humanities. Thus, conclusions drawn from this study may only be applicable within similar disciplinary contexts, limiting broader generalizability.

Temporal and Cultural Changes

The time at which the data was collected is critical for generalizability. Changes in educational policy, economic conditions, or societal attitudes toward higher education could alter the relevance of the findings over time. As such,

findings may be more applicable to the period of study rather than future contexts, which may evolve significantly.

Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach itself emphasizes understanding participants' lived experiences, which can be deeply personal and subjective. While this approach yields rich qualitative data providing insights into specific challenges and hopes of PhD candidates, it does not aim for statistical generalization. This inherent limitation means that findings should be interpreted within the context of the participants rather than as representational of all PhD candidates.

While the findings of the study provide valuable insights into the experiences of PhD candidates in Southwestern Uganda, caution should be exercised when considering their generalizability. The unique socio-cultural context, specific participant demographics, and the nature of qualitative research limit the extent to which the findings can be applied to broader populations or different geographical contexts. Future research involving larger, more diverse samples and multiple contexts could enhance understanding and facilitate more substantial comparisons across different settings.

Conclusion

The qualitative results from this phenomenological study reveal a complex interplay between personal attributes and institutional conditions affecting the PhD experience in Southwestern Uganda. Emotional resilience emerges as a vital personal trait that fuels persistence despite financial challenges. Simultaneously, social support networks act as crucial buffers against stress and serve as repositories of shared experience and encouragement.

While participants voiced aspirations for community impact, their journeys are deeply intertwined with the realities of financial pressures and the strength derived from personal and social relationships. The narratives collected in this study offer critical insights into the multifaceted challenges and hopes faced by PhD students in this context, underscoring that their academic endeavors are not merely individual pursuits but collective journeys toward societal advancement.

PhD students in Southwestern Uganda experience a mix of challenges and hopes, significantly influenced by their environment and available support systems. Future research



should explore broader geographical contexts and include quantitative assessments.

understanding the practical implications of these experiences.

Study Limitations

The study was limited by the following limitations;

1. **Subjectivity of interpretation:** Phenomenological studies rely heavily on the subjective experiences of participants. The researcher's interpretations and biases influenced how data were collected and analyzed, potentially leading to a skewed representation of participants' experiences of hope.
2. **Cultural context:** The unique cultural and socio-economic context of Southwestern Uganda may pose challenges in understanding the broader implications of the study. What constitutes "hope" or the experience of pursuing a PhD differs significantly from other contexts, limiting the ability to generalize findings to different geographical and cultural settings.
3. **Temporal limitations:** The experiences of hope among PhD students fluctuated over time. A snapshot of their feelings at a single point could not fully capture their journey, leading to a partial understanding of their experiences. Longitudinal studies are useful for capturing these changes, but were beyond the scope of this research.
4. **External factors:** External influences such as economic conditions, government policies regarding education, or availability of resources affected students' experiences of hope but were not fully accounted for in the study. These factors impacted the context in which students pursued their PhDs and how they perceived their journeys.
5. **Methodological constraints:** Phenomenological research often relies on in-depth interviews or qualitative data collection methods, which limited the availability of rich data from participants who were uncomfortable sharing personal experiences and/or did not have the time to engage deeply due to their academic workloads.
6. **Limited focus on outcomes:** While the study aimed to understand the phenomenological experience of hope, it may not adequately address how this hope translates into academic or career outcomes for PhD students, leaving a gap in

Recommendations

Universities should enhance support structures for PhD students, including mentorship programs and financial assistance.

Enhance institutional support systems by establishing mentorship initiatives that pair PhD students with experienced scholars or alumni who have successfully navigated similar academic paths. This could provide emotional and academic support, fostering a sense of hope. But also provide accessible mental health and counseling services specifically designed for PhD students to address stress and emotional challenges faced during their studies.

Develop a collaborative research culture by promoting interdisciplinary workshops and conferences that allow PhD candidates to share their research, receive feedback, and collaborate with peers from different fields. This can enhance community building and foster a sense of hope through shared academic pursuits. But also encourages the formation of research groups among PhD students, allowing them to collaboratively address challenges in their research, experience shared hope, and celebrate each other's successes.

Increase funds and resource accessibility by advocating for increased funding opportunities, scholarships, and grants specifically targeting PhD students in Southwestern Uganda to alleviate financial pressures that can dampen hope and motivation. But also improve access to research materials, libraries, and technology through university partnerships or community initiatives, enabling students to conduct more effective research.

Strengthen community engagement through developing partnerships with local communities that allow PhD students to engage in community-based research. This can provide real-world relevance to their studies and instill a sense of purpose and hope in their work. But also organize public lectures or community forums where PhD candidates can share their research findings, fostering a connection between academia and the community and promoting the impact of their work.

Promote work-life balance by encouraging the establishment of policies and practices that support work-life balance, focusing on the mental and emotional well-being of PhD students. This could include workshops on time management, stress relief techniques, and the



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importance of personal time. But also provide flexible scheduling options for coursework and research obligations to accommodate students' personal and family responsibilities.

Cultivate a positive academic environment by implementing recognition programs that celebrate the achievements of PhD candidates at various milestones throughout their study, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment and hope.

Open feedback channels by establishing an open feedback mechanism where students can express their concerns and suggestions regarding academic programs and support services, fostering an inclusive and responsive academic culture.

Enhance training and development opportunities by offering workshops on essential skills such as academic writing, presentation skills, grant writing, and publishing, empowering PhD students to enhance their capabilities and pursue their goals with greater confidence. But also provide dedicated career counseling services for PhD students, helping them explore diverse career paths within academia and industry and preparing them for life after their PhD.

Source of funding

There was no any kind of external funding as the study was wholly financed by the researcher from his personal savings.

Conflict of interest

In this study, the author declares no conflict of interest.

Author's Contribution

The author did a unique role in designing the study, determining the methodology, and selecting the appropriate data collection techniques to assess "Hope in the Valley of PhD Study in Southwestern Uganda". The researcher also did data collection, analysis, interpretation of results and interpretation of findings.

Data availability

The availability of data was crucial for transparency and reproducibility in research. The author ensured that the data collected for the study was accessible for review by other researchers or stakeholders.

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