

STRUGGLING FOR PhD: A LIFE STORY OF A THAI UNIVERSITY TEACHER

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Abstract

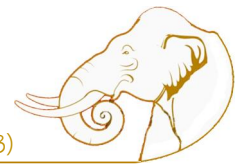
Getting a doctorate degree while teaching at a university has become a norm that most teachers dream about. It might be true that once you become a PhD holder, you will receive higher payment, recognition, position, and self-confidence in return. However, the path towards the degree comes with psychological stress, financial burden, self-isolation, and, in many cases, illnesses. In this study, a PhD student shared her life's story of a six-year-long struggle with all the problems on the path towards her goal. The study utilized a qualitative methodology and collected data through a series of in-depth interviews. The narrative inquiry approach was adopted to report on the subject's life story, reflecting her physical and mental struggles amid the pressures surrounding her during the PhD study. The study also found that miscalculation and lack of readiness can lead a PhD student's life to unbearable despair. It is advised that PhD program management should ensure professionalism and provide measures to assist PhD students in timely graduation.

Keywords: PhD; Thai university; teacher

Introduction

Teaching at the university level in Thailand often requires a teacher to have a PhD. Sandy (pseudonym), a 54-year-old teacher in an aviation business program at a government university in Bangkok, noticed that four of her colleagues had the title 'Dr.' and felt the urge to catch up with them. One of her colleagues is currently pursuing a PhD through weekend classes and is close to finishing. Initially, Sandy thought that a Master's degree would be sufficient to teach at the university, but she soon realized that she needed to pursue a PhD to further her career.

I have known Sandy for 36 years since we enrolled in the same undergraduate program at a university in northeast Thailand. About 10 years ago, I encouraged her to pursue a PhD together at a government university, but she wasn't ready at that time. I completed my degree in 3 years, paying a total tuition fee of 350,000 THB, which was considerably cheaper compared to other universities. At the age of 48, Sandy enrolled in a PhD program in the field of management at another government university not far from mine. However, after six long years, she was still struggling with the program. She depleted her family savings of 700,000 Baht and couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel.



Various problems arose, and Sandy was on the verge of giving up. I sought her permission to write a report on her story so that others can learn from her hard-earned lessons.

Pursuing a PhD is never easy anywhere in the world. One must be prepared to face numerous challenges along the way. Disturbing news related to pursuing a PhD has emerged. In 2021, a 48-year-old Thai university lecturer committed suicide after failing to complete his PhD as planned. His father mentioned that the family couldn't afford to finance his son's PhD, which led to depression and stress (Siamrath, 2021).

Researchers from the universities of Sussex and Westminster in the UK surveyed 1,263 respondents and found that 40% of PhD students are at a high risk of suicide. Chronic stress and acute loneliness were cited as key factors, and 8% of the respondents had attempted suicide (The Tab, 2021).

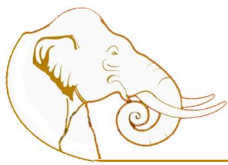
A study in India revealed that 68% of PhD students suffered from depressive disorders, with 27% reporting moderate to severe symptoms (Times of India, 2021).

At my university, I also encountered a teacher who failed to complete her PhD and developed depression. Despite being in her early 40s, she relied on antidepressant medication and struggled to cope with stress. The impact of stress was so overwhelming that her mother had to accompany her to school every day, wait for her until the end of the day, and bring her home as if she were a child. She had difficulty communicating with others and eventually left the school, now under the care of her family.

PhD studies often come with high levels of stress due to the demanding nature of the program. The pressure to produce original research, meet deadlines, and excel academically can create significant stress for students. A survey conducted in Belgium with 3,659 PhD students found that one-third of the respondents were at risk of developing psychiatric disorders, including depression (Levecque et al., 2017). The study emphasized the importance of addressing stress in PhD programs and implementing supportive measures to mitigate its negative impact on students' well-being.

The unique characteristics of PhD studies, such as long working hours and the inherent uncertainty of the research process, contribute to elevated stress levels among students. A study by Evans et al. (2018), which examined the stress experiences of PhD students, found that factors such as work overload, lack of control, and inadequate support systems significantly contribute to stress. The study highlighted the need for universities to provide resources and interventions to promote stress management and support the well-being of PhD students.

In this report, I have adopted the narrative inquiry approach to analyze Sandy's life story. This research methodology focuses on the exploration and interpretation of stories or narratives shared by individuals like Sandy. It recognizes that individuals construct and make meaning of their experiences through storytelling. This approach acknowledges the subjective nature of human experiences and aims to capture the complexities and nuances of lived experiences. Researchers using the narrative inquiry approach collect and analyze narratives to gain insights into individuals' perspectives, emotions, values, and beliefs. By examining personal narratives, researchers can uncover the unique ways in which individuals navigate and make sense of their social and cultural contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).



One of the key features of the narrative inquiry approach is the emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the participant, in this case, between myself and Sandy. Researchers engage in a collaborative and dialogic process to elicit and understand the narratives. This approach values the voices and experiences of the participants, recognizing them as active agents in shaping their own stories. Through open-ended interviews, participant observations, and the analysis of personal documents such as diaries or letters, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of human experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Narrative inquiry has found application in various fields, such as psychology, education, sociology, and healthcare. In psychology, it has been used to explore individuals' identity development, experiences of trauma, and mental health journeys. In education, narrative inquiry has been employed to investigate teachers' professional development, students' learning experiences, and the implementation of educational policies. In healthcare, this approach has shed light on patients' illness narratives, healthcare professionals' practices, and the dynamics of doctor-patient relationships. The narrative inquiry approach offers a valuable means of understanding the complex and diverse stories that shape human lives and experiences (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2005).

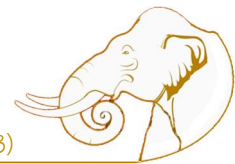
Sandy's narratives of her life story can serve as a valuable example for those planning to enroll in a PhD program, and her life's lessons can help others avoid the same mistakes or at least anticipate and better manage stress levels with proper preparation and strategies.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to: 1) investigate the stress faced by PhD students during their studies, and 2) provide lessons for PhD candidates and suggestions for PhD program management.

Research Methodology

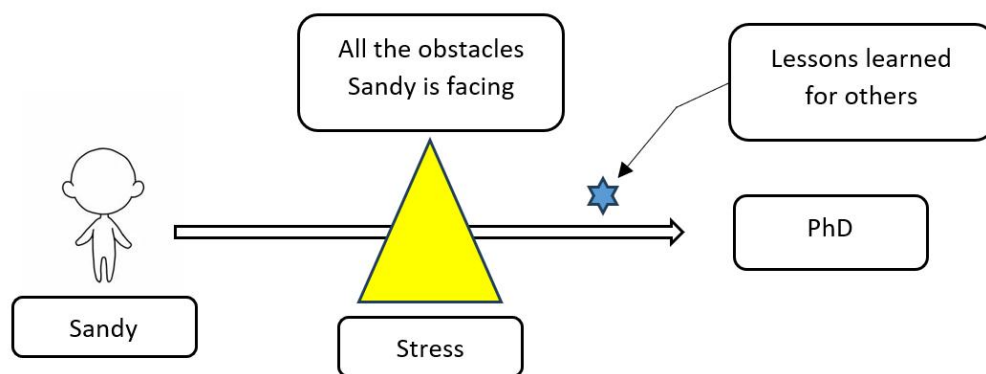
This study utilized qualitative research, employing a narrative inquiry approach (Zhang, 2019). Information was gathered through a series of open-ended, in-depth interviews with Sandy, the PhD student, who served as the sole source of information. In this report, Sandy's personal accounts are narrated by both the researcher and Sandy herself. We met officially six times at different cafes, based on Sandy's convenience around her workplace. I took notes during our meetings and later typed them up. Sandy was not comfortable with her voice being recorded. To protect her identity and avoid any potential repercussions on her job and PhD program, Sandy needed to remain anonymous. Since I personally knew Sandy, I had the opportunity to observe various aspects of her life, including her family members, colleagues, close friends, and even her dogs. I had familiarity with most of the people around Sandy. As a friend, I witnessed her changing emotions and listened to her grievances regarding the problems she faced during her PhD study.



This report also analyzes relevant theories, academic concepts, and research on stress and stress management. As a narrator and a PhD holder myself, I have included accounts of my personal experiences related to academic traditions in Thailand.

Conceptual Framework

Sandy represents students who have the ultimate goal of pursuing a PhD. She is currently encountering various obstacles, including financial constraints, health issues, workplace pressures, and challenges in her relationship with her thesis supervisor, among others. All of these factors contribute to the psychological stress that she must endure.

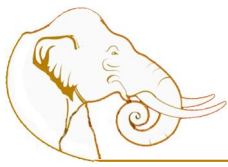


Literature Reviews

A PhD program, or Doctor of Philosophy program, is a rigorous and advanced academic undertaking that typically spans several years and is designed to enable individuals to attain the highest level of expertise in a specific field of study. Students in a PhD program engage in extensive research, scholarship, and critical analysis, often culminating in the completion of a doctoral dissertation or thesis. These programs offer a deep exploration of a particular subject, fostering the development of specialized knowledge and critical thinking skills. PhD candidates work closely with faculty advisors, contribute to the existing body of knowledge in their chosen field, and are expected to make a significant and original contribution to their discipline. Successful completion of a PhD program demonstrates a high level of expertise and the ability to independently contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the chosen field. However, many PhD students experienced tremendous stress on academic and personal problems, like in the case of Sandy.

Here are some literature reviews related to stress and stress management.

When people develop stress, it means they perceive a situation as exceeding their available resources to cope effectively. If they do not have appropriate strategies, they will bear all the pains and that may lead to physical and psychological failure. Stress management is a crucial aspect of maintaining overall well-being and coping with the



challenges of daily life. According to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984), stress is viewed as a dynamic process involving the interaction between individuals and their environment. Stress management, therefore, aims to enhance individuals' coping strategies and reduce the negative impact of stress on physical and psychological health.

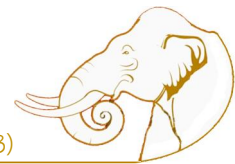
The Lazarus and Folkman's model emphasizes the importance of cognitive appraisal, suggesting that individuals' perceptions and interpretations of stressors play a significant role in determining their stress levels and coping responses. Lazarus and Folkman propose that individuals engage in a two-step appraisal process: primary appraisal (evaluating the significance of the stressor) and secondary appraisal (assessing available resources and potential coping strategies). Stress management strategies based on this model focus on promoting effective coping mechanisms and modifying cognitive appraisals to reduce the negative impact of stress on individuals' well-being.

Another prominent approach to stress management is the cognitive-behavioral theory. Based on the work of Ellis (1962) and Beck (1976), this theory posits that individuals' thoughts, beliefs, and interpretations of stressors significantly influence their emotional and behavioral responses. Cognitive-behavioral stress management techniques focus on identifying and challenging negative thought patterns, modifying maladaptive behaviors, and developing effective problem-solving skills. By addressing cognitive distortions and implementing healthier coping strategies, individuals can better manage stress and improve their overall well-being.

Another key concept in stress management is the general adaptation syndrome proposed by Hans Selye (1956). According to this theory, stress triggers a physiological response involving three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. The initial alarm reaction is characterized by increased physiological arousal as the body mobilizes its resources to cope with the stressor. If the stressor persists, the body enters the resistance stage, where it attempts to adapt and maintain a state of balance. However, prolonged exposure to stress can lead to the exhaustion stage, marked by physical and mental exhaustion, reduced immune function, and increased vulnerability to illness. Stress management techniques aim to prevent or minimize the negative effects of the exhaustion stage by promoting relaxation, self-care, and healthy coping mechanisms.

One effective solution for managing stress is the practice of mindfulness-based techniques. Mindfulness involves bringing one's attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental and accepting manner. Research has shown that mindfulness-based interventions can significantly reduce stress and improve psychological well-being. For instance, a study by Hoge et al. (2017) demonstrated that mindfulness-based stress reduction programs were effective in reducing stress and enhancing resilience in a sample of healthcare professionals. Incorporating mindfulness practices into daily routines, such as mindful breathing exercises or meditation, can help individuals cultivate awareness and develop healthier responses to stress.

Another effective solution for stress management is engaging in regular physical activity. Exercise has been shown to have numerous benefits for both physical and mental



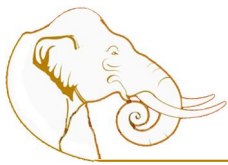
well-being, including stress reduction. Research suggests that exercise can increase the production of endorphins, which are natural mood-boosting chemicals in the brain, and reduce levels of stress hormones such as cortisol. A study by Stults-Kolehmainen and Sinha (2014) found that regular exercise was associated with lower perceived stress levels and improved mental health outcomes. Incorporating activities like walking, jogging, yoga, or other forms of exercise into one's routine can provide a healthy outlet for managing stress.

A third solution for stress management is social support. Seeking support from friends, family, or colleagues can provide a valuable source of comfort, understanding, and encouragement during stressful times. Research has consistently shown the beneficial effects of social support on stress reduction. For instance, a study by Cohen and Wills (1985) found that individuals with strong social support networks experienced lower levels of stress and better overall health outcomes. Actively cultivating and maintaining social connections, whether through regular social activities, joining support groups, or seeking therapy, can contribute to better stress management and overall well-being.

Since Sandy is a university's teacher, it is crucial to elaborate stress management techniques for teachers as well. One solution is the implementation of stress management programs and interventions. These programs can provide teachers with strategies and resources to cope with stress more effectively. For example, a study by Klassen et al. (2009) examined the effectiveness of a stress management program for teachers and found that it led to significant reductions in perceived stress levels and improvements in psychological well-being. The program included components such as stress awareness, relaxation techniques, and time management skills. By equipping teachers with the necessary tools to manage stress, schools and educational institutions can promote a healthier work environment and support teachers' overall well-being.

Teaching is a demanding profession that can be accompanied by significant levels of stress. Teachers face numerous stressors, including heavy workloads, time pressure, administrative demands, student behavior issues, and high-stakes testing. These stressors can take a toll on teachers' mental and physical well-being. Research has shown that high levels of stress among teachers can lead to burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and compromised teaching effectiveness. A study by Kyriacou (2001) examined the sources of stress among teachers and found that workload, student misbehavior, and lack of support from colleagues and administrators were significant contributors to stress levels. Recognizing and addressing these stressors is essential for promoting teacher well-being and maintaining the quality of education.

Building a supportive and positive school culture is another key approach to address stress among teachers. A study by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) highlighted the importance of social and emotional support in reducing teacher stress. Creating a collaborative and respectful work environment, fostering positive relationships among staff members, and promoting a sense of community can help buffer the negative effects of stress. Additionally, providing opportunities for professional development, mentorship programs, and regular check-ins with teachers can contribute to their well-being and



resilience. By prioritizing teacher support and well-being, schools can create conditions that enable teachers to thrive and provide high-quality education to their students.

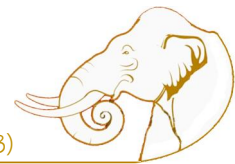
To address the stress experienced by PhD students, universities and academic institutions have recognized the importance of providing support services and resources. A study by Pyhalto et al. (2012) explored the effectiveness of a stress management intervention for doctoral students and found that participation in stress management workshops significantly reduced stress levels and improved well-being. The study highlighted the importance of proactive interventions and support systems to help PhD students navigate the challenges of their program and enhance their overall stress management skills.

Results

The data gathered from my meetings with Sandy at different cafes is as follows. We discussed while enjoying coffee and sometimes indulging in a slice of pie or cake. I prepared semi-structured questions with clear topics for each meeting. Sandy did not allow me to record her voice, and I respected her wishes. I took notes in a notebook and typed them up later to ensure accuracy. Before the publication of this paper, Sandy asked to review and edit certain parts, and I have no objection as it is her story after all.

Miscalculation: I started the interview with the fact that she did not finish the PhD program yet after 6 years of study and spent a lot of her savings with her unknown ending. Three years are the minimum requirement to finish a PhD in Thailand. She said, *"I made several big mistakes related to my study. I didn't follow your advice to enroll in the university that is easier to graduate. ... You finished your PhD within 3 years and now look at me. The fact was that my friends asked me to enroll in this university, and despite knowing nothing about the program, I followed them. I didn't check the statistics of past graduates or the reputation of the program. I just jumped into the darkness blindfolded. I only knew that I simply wanted a PhD. And now I regret it badly."* I shared my own experience, explaining that I had researched my PhD program, visited the institution, and talked to some teachers there. I knew myself and the battle I was entering. However, Sandy said that after one year of study, she still thought she could make it, as the first year was coursework only. The following two years were supposed to be dedicated to thesis writing and completion. She said things turned out to be a nightmare in the second year and the years that followed. She said she *'miscalculated'* it, but the fact is that there was no calculation at all.

Relation with Supervisor: Sandy was assigned to consult one thesis supervisor who would help her through the thesis proposal and the five-chapter writing. The supervisor was the most influential person who could provide the right guidance for Sandy to graduate. She expressed, *"I cannot get along well with my supervisor for some reasons. I tried so many times to show him my proposals in the past 5 years, just to be rejected with the blunt answer NO. All my efforts, all my ideas were tossed back at me like nothing. I felt like I became nothing. I was out of words every time I met him. There were no positive feelings with me after all those meetings. Suddenly, all 5 years have passed. Along with*

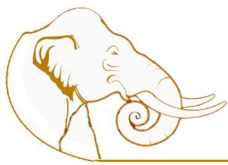


one year of coursework, it has been my painful 6 years. Some of my classmates resigned as they had similar problems with their own supervisors. After these 6 years, none of us have graduated." Out of the 7 classmates she had at the beginning, now only two chose to stay. For how long, she could not tell. The rest have already resigned. At one point, she approached the university president, informing him about all the problems she had encountered. However, nothing changed after that. The complaint to the university management was turned against her after her supervisor learned about it. Sandy expressed her frustration, saying, *"I feel like I am banging my head against a brick wall."* She has experienced all the stress over the past six years, and it has reached a point where she is contemplating whether it is enough.

Peer Pressure: Sandy has been teaching in the aviation business program for approximately 15 years. There are six teachers responsible for overseeing 200 students who aspire to work in the airline industry after four years of study. The tuition fee for this program is relatively cheaper compared to others as it is partially subsidized by the government using taxpayer's money. Sandy shared, *"Everyone in my team is aiming towards a PhD. Four of them already obtained it a few years ago. Two of us chose to study at different universities. My friend has now graduated after three years of study. I envy her deeply. Now, I am the only one without a PhD, so promotions and other financial benefits never come into my sight. I feel like the black sheep in the team, even though they treat me like their senior sister. After six years of study, I still don't have the degree. I don't want to tell you what they might be thinking of me."* Sandy took a sip of her coffee and glanced out the window, observing the heavy rain and the hundreds of cars stuck on the road. It was the monsoon season in Bangkok. Her facial expression resembled that of someone who has just lost a loved one.

Family Pressure: I was familiar with everyone in Sandy's family. On the day of my PhD graduation, Sandy and her husband brought me a bouquet of flowers. Her husband works as an engineer, and they have a daughter who attends the same school as my son. Sandy shared, *"My husband sometimes compares me to you and constantly asks why I am different. I spent 700,000 Baht, and yet I still don't see any progress. I feel ashamed of myself and often question what went wrong. Then I realized that everything is wrong. Look at me now, at 54 years old, when I should have been saving for our daughter's education, but instead, I spent it on my mistake. I hope my PhD supervisors understand the despair I feel, but it seems like they don't care."* Sandy's husband has already retired and relies on his pension from the company. Their daughter is currently in 9th grade.

Financial Issues: Sandy's university for her PhD is located approximately 20 kilometers away from her house. She has to travel back and forth between her house, her own university, and the university where she enrolled for her PhD. Sandy expressed her concerns, saying, *"Gas requires money. Tuition fees require money. My daughter's school also requires money. The hospital visits require money. My job pays me 26,000 Baht per month. How am I supposed to cover all these daily expenses? I used to earn 80,000 Baht per month when I worked as a cabin crew, but that's long gone in history. Now I find myself begging my husband just for a cup of coffee. Can you imagine what I'm feeling at this*

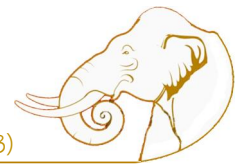


moment?" Sandy mentioned that she had saved up for the PhD study and expected it to last within three years, but it has extended endlessly, and she still has to pay for the tuition fees each semester, even if there is no progress in her study. The stress she experiences is unbearable.

Health Issues: Sandy was not physically strong by birth. She used to be tall and slim when she was working for an airline. The nature of the job may have forced her to maintain a certain shape. As she explained, *"All cabin crew are the same type in my company. It is about the image of the airline."* When she was in her early 20s, her weight was about 50 kgs. Now, due to her illnesses and stress, she has surpassed 80 kgs. Sandy expressed, *"Surprisingly, my weight drastically increased during my PhD study. I was so stressed that I ate all the time, seeking comfort in whatever food was readily available."* The mounting stress took a toll on her health, leading to various issues such as high cholesterol, blood pressure, sugar levels, migraines, and more. She struggled with sleep and often relied on sleeping pills. During a hospital visit, she discovered a small tumor in her womb, currently under examination. The combination of hormonal changes during menopause and the emotional impact of her health issues made her feel like a stranger in her own home, as her husband and daughter observed. Recently, she was diagnosed with thyroid problems. Additionally, Sandy contracted COVID-19 twice and required hospitalization. Sandy believes that her health problems are a result of both her advancing age and the stress she experienced during her PhD study. She expressed, *"At the very least, I want to live long enough to witness my daughter growing up."*

Status Recognition: Sandy emphasized the significance of obtaining a PhD in her university. She expressed that the title of 'Dr.' holds great respect among the faculty and support staff. Without a PhD, one's success as a teacher is not fully recognized. It has become the norm for all teachers to strive for this achievement. She explained, *"They hold those who have the title in high regard. Without it, it's impossible to climb the career ladder. Failing to attain it would be considered a failure. I don't want to be in that category. Even in the list of teachers' names, those without the title are placed at the bottom. Currently, I am always at the bottom. When people see my face and my title, they often inquire, 'Where have you been lately?' or ask in a condescending tone, 'You still don't have a PhD?' This leaves me feeling embarrassed. And now, it's even worse because I have been unable to obtain the degree despite dedicating six years to the program. I can't keep saying 'I'm working on it' forever."* Sandy also mentioned that her university highly values teachers who publish papers in prestigious academic journals. However, she admitted her lack of writing skills and the need to rely on her colleagues to include her name on their papers. She expressed, *"At times, I see myself as a parasite, having to ask my friends to include my name on their papers. The pressure weighs heavily on my shoulders."*

Job Demanding: Sandy's university has made significant investments in supporting student activities that aim to enhance their skills in various areas such as language training, personality development, ethics, and community service. However, the lack of manpower has resulted in Sandy and her colleagues being overwhelmed with these activities along with their heavy teaching load. Sandy expressed, *"Every month, we have numerous*



activities outside the classroom. There is a lot of paperwork involved before and after each project. Some projects require us to travel to other provinces, so we spend a lot of time on the road with students. Just managing my current workload is suffocating. How can I find time to study for my PhD? I don't have time to read or write anything. I'm constantly on the move like a monkey. We have plans to hire more teachers, but it takes time for the government to allocate the necessary budget for new recruits." Sandy spoke loudly, expressing her frustration, until I cautioned her to lower her tone. She continued, *"My house is a mess because I have failed to be a good housewife. My daughter eats instant noodles every day to the point where she is almost malnourished. My husband spends his time at the golf club, and I hope he isn't seeing someone else there. At work, I cannot focus on one thing for long. I feel like I am constantly racing against time, and I end each day feeling utterly exhausted. How can I find time to study?"*

Sandy also mentioned that there are additional factors contributing to her stress. Her father was an accomplished student who obtained a PhD from a prestigious university. She couldn't help but compare herself to her father and expressed a desire not to disappoint him. Moreover, her father is now 82 years old and in fragile health. Sandy wished to prove her success by obtaining a PhD while her father is still alive. She mentioned that her mother passed away over 10 years ago and that her father holds great importance in her life. With a soft voice and eyes lowered to the floor, she said, *"I want him to be by my side on my graduation day."*

Discussion

I tried to imagine myself in Sandy's shoes and still cannot figure out a way out of her situation. The issues she is facing are beyond what anyone could bear. The question arises: *"What went wrong?" "Why did she let things get worse for so long?"* or *"What options does she have now?"* Sandy repeatedly mentioned that she miscalculated the program and at times she said, *"I didn't calculate anything at all. I just jumped into it without much thought."* Sandy mentioned that she will be terminated from the program if she cannot finish in 6 years, which is the rule for most PhD programs in the country. The program management offered her the option to reapply after her termination, with the possibility of transferring her completed coursework and continuing with her thesis proposal. However, Sandy is uncertain if she is willing to spend more money on the program. The fear of failure and the label of being a failure weigh heavily on her, making her question how she could face her colleagues and students.

The stress Sandy is currently experiencing is immense, as she is dealing with multiple stressors simultaneously. This aligns with the findings of Wang et al. (2019), which suggest that the more stressors one experiences, the higher the level of perceived stress. To summarize, all the stressors Sandy is currently facing are illustrated in Figure 1.

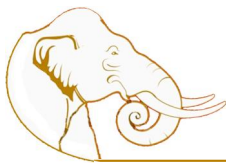
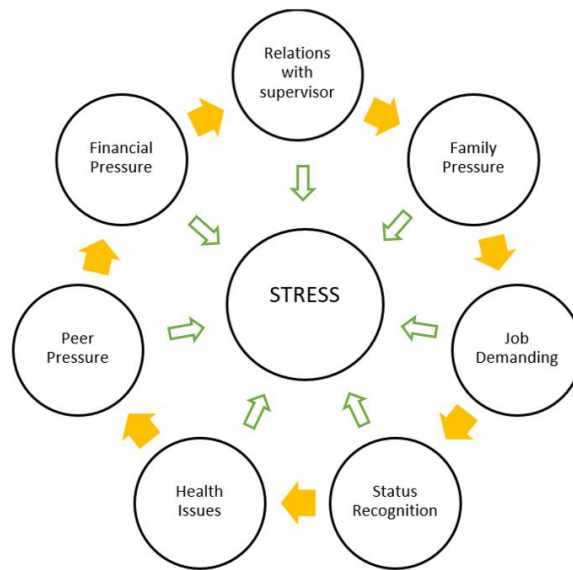
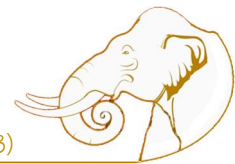


Fig. 1: The stressors Sandy is experiencing



It is common for PhD candidates to have career aspirations and expectations after graduation (Dufty-Jones, 2018). Sandy, being a university teacher, had a clear vision of her career path. However, upon realizing that her dream of completing her PhD was likely to be shattered, she felt a sense of loss in terms of her reputation and 'face' as a quality teacher. This added to her psychological stress. Sandy mentioned that even if her proposal was approved, she would still have to go through the extensive process of writing a thesis, which typically spans over 300 pages. Her plan included conducting interviews with high-ranking supervisors in the aviation industry and arranging focus-group discussions. Furthermore, she would have to undergo a public hearing, a defensive exam, and aim for publication in a highly indexed journal. All of these tasks would require a significant amount of time, ranging from 8 to 15 months. If she followed her supervisors' suggestion to re-enroll in the program, she would potentially spend a total of 8 years or more pursuing her PhD, along with the associated expenses that seemed insurmountable to her. Pain (2017) discovered that academic policies, personal factors, and thesis supervisor guidance are all factors contributing to the stress experienced by PhD students, which aligns with Sandy's experience. Sandy questioned why the duration of the PhD program is not adhered to like the undergraduate program (4 years) or master's degree (2 years). She sometimes blamed the program's management for not providing sufficient support to students.

Sandy's job is so demanding that she hardly has time for her PhD study. This could be a reason why her thesis proposal was rejected several times by her supervisor. She said, *"I have very little time to sleep myself because of the job, how can I spend time for the proposal?"* The fact that she did not pass the quality paper to her supervisor could be the fatal proof that she is doomed to fail. Sandy said one of the requirements for the pay rise in her government job is to publish papers in the indexed journal. She stated, *"I am very bad at academic work, how possible I can produce 15-page writing?"* She said she needed help from her colleagues and mentioned, *"We cannot make quality research in one year*



and publish it as well. We have to grab whatever we have at hand and send it out to the journal quickly."

This is similar to what Decca (2013) found that the good scholars will spend a lot of time to develop significant research. If they are in a hurry, it is likely that the paper is of less quality. Sandy shared her concern, "*I was in the hospitality business all my life, so I am very naïve in academic writing.*" She expressed uncertainty about writing a 300-page thesis if her proposal was approved, saying, "*I'm still not sure if I can write those 300-page thesis if my proposal was approved.*"

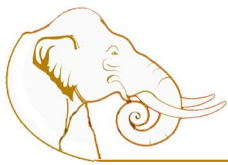
One thing that Sandy and her colleagues feared the most is the decreasing number of students to study in her aviation program. So, they have to work harder to promote the image and reputation of the program to the public in all channels possible, in order to bring in more students. It is quite ironic that some teachers like Sandy still want to have a PhD despite the fact that the number of students for them to teach is getting less each year.

According to the latest data, there are currently around 200 universities and colleges in Thailand, offering 4,100 academic programs for students. However, the survival of these higher educational institutes is in question as the birthrate in the country is sharply dropping (Bangkok Post, 2018). In 2022, there were only 502,000 births compared to over a million 30 years ago. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of students enrolling in universities. In 2020, there were 445,364 seats available for first-year students, but only 370,000 seats were applied for (Thai PBS World, 2022). Sandy and her team have started to observe the declining figures in their classes year after year.

Sandy's poor relationship with her thesis supervisor has had a detrimental impact on the approval of her proposal. She mentioned hearing about the tradition of giving gifts to supervisors as an unspoken rule to facilitate bureaucratic processes. However, she observed that other PhD students who tried to please their supervisors with expensive gifts still chose to leave the program, indicating that the gifts did not provide the desired outcome. Additionally, Sandy's university has implemented a 'no gift policy,' which makes supervisors reluctant to accept expensive gifts to avoid jeopardizing their positions if the news were to be leaked to the public. Cree (2012) supports this notion by emphasizing that doctoral supervisors maintain a respectful practice with all PhD students, focusing on academic excellence rather than accepting special gifts as bribes. Sandy's poor academic background and inadequate effort are likely reasons why her proposal was never accepted.

However, there are norms where PhD students assist in their supervisor's academic work while the supervisors receive all the credit (Wisker, 2014). Unfortunately, some cases involve instances of sexual harassment between PhD students and their supervisors (Lee, 2010). I once heard a professor boasting about publishing over 400 papers toward his professorship, but it was revealed that all those papers were produced by his students, with his name attached in return. It is important to note that different universities may have varying criteria for granting academic titles, and some professors may not have produced any papers in their careers.

What is still driving Sandy to be hopeful is her father, a PhD holder himself, who is now 82 and a regular hospital visitor. Her father was recently in the ICU after contracting



Covid-19. At his age, any illness can be fatal. Despite stating that she is driven by intrinsic motivation and wholeheartedly wants the PhD, all her reasons point to the fact that she does not find it enjoyable. It is the external rewards—such as her father's approval, a pay rise, an administrative position, and higher recognition from her colleagues and students—that motivate her. Without the element of fun and playfulness, it does not align with intrinsic motivation (Habibian, 2012; Khamkhong & Satchapappichit, 2021).

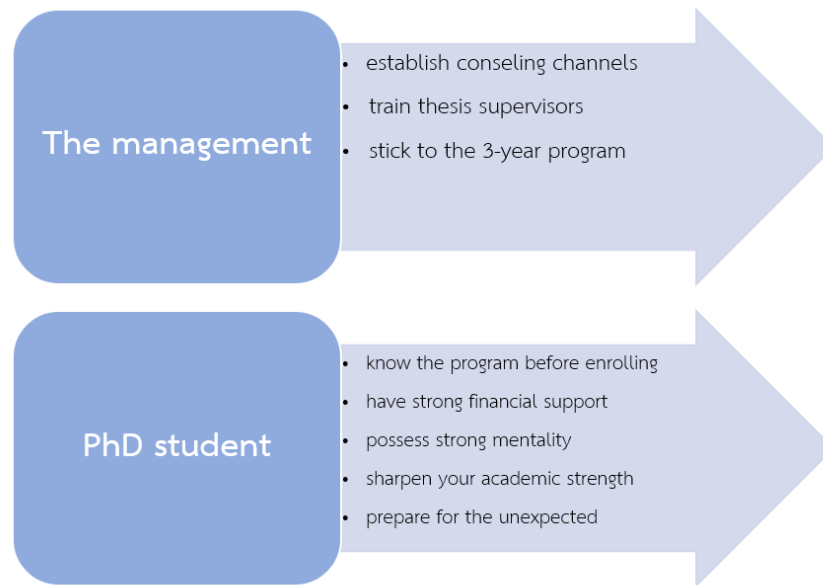


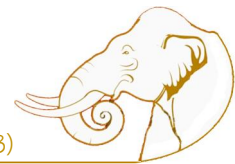
Fig 2: New Body of Knowledge

In conclusion, there are some suggestions for the management of the PhD program:

- 1) Establish a counseling channel to listen to the grievances of PhD students and ensure their voices are heard.
- 2) Provide training for thesis supervisors to maintain professionalism and ethics, ensuring they meet expectations.
- 3) Program management should find ways to assist students in completing their degrees within the regulated timeframe of three years. If students exceed this time, management should seriously address the underlying problems.

For prospective PhD students, here is some advice:

- 1) Gather information about the program, including the number of graduates in recent years. If there are no graduates, it may raise concerns about the program. University rankings may bring pride to you and your family, but consider whether you can handle the associated stresses. Choose a program that matches your abilities. Remember the old Chinese saying: *"Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will win a hundred battles."*
- 2) Ensure you have strong financial support. If you are unable to complete the degree in three years, can you sustain the battle with your savings?
- 3) Develop a strong mentality to climb the ladder of education. In times of trouble, seek mental support from your family, friends, or religion. Prepare your mind for tough times.
- 4) Assess your academic preparedness for graduation. Are you academically capable or just casually entering the PhD program? Take it seriously, as you will be experiencing the toughest academic environment at the university.
- 5) Reflect on what you



will do if you cannot proceed. Continuously banging your head against a wall and losing your sanity is not the solution. Prioritize your health and sanity, and be ready to fight again in a battle you will eventually win.

By this report's publication, there is still no good news about Sandy's new proposal to her supervisor. Sandy appears extremely sad, and she takes pills for her blood pressure and sugar level. Sandy continues to experience trouble sleeping at night. She remains busy with teaching and engaging in extra activities for her students. The paperwork at her office overwhelms her, including endless projects for students, lesson plans, teaching materials, financial reports, students' homework, quality-assurance reports, course-verification reports, annual self-assessment reports, and academic papers she and her friends are struggling to publish. Sandy called me the other day, saying that the lab test of her tumor revealed it to be cancerous. *"My mother died of cancer many years ago, and I am now at about her age,"* she said with a quavering voice.

Conclusion

Studying for a PhD is never easy for anyone, as it is the highest level of education in the university. It certainly consumes time, finances, and various personal resources in order to complete the program. Without adequate preparedness on many fronts, it is likely for a student to fail. However, the completion of the program is not solely the responsibility of the student; the program management should be able to assist their students in achieving timely success if they genuinely care about the program's effectiveness. Sandy's case is one of the countless cases occurring everywhere. This report is meant to provide lessons for both PhD candidates and program management alike.

Suggestion

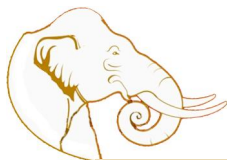
This report is limited in that Sandy was the sole informant. Future research could expand the sampling to include PhD programs from different universities to explore the psychological stress experienced by PhD candidates. Specific topics, such as student-supervisor relationships, could also be further investigated.

Acknowledgement

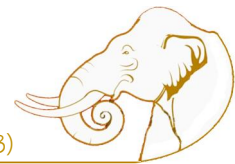
The author expresses gratitude to Sandy, a university teacher, PhD student, and friend, for her valuable input and assistance in editing this paper.

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