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Exploring University Students' Perceptions, Experiences, and Challenges in Learning Qualitative Research: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research has become an essential component of higher education, enabling students to understand human experiences, social issues, and complex phenomena through interpretive inquiry. Despite its growing importance, many university students experience difficulties in learning and applying qualitative research methods. This study explored the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of government university students in learning qualitative research in Sri Lanka. An exploratory qualitative research design was adopted, and data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 30 undergraduate students selected using maximum-variation purposive sampling. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. The findings revealed that students generally held positive perceptions of qualitative research, recognizing its value for understanding people's experiences and developing critical thinking, communication, and analytical skills. However, participants also reported substantial challenges, particularly in understanding qualitative concepts, conducting interviews, coding data, and performing thematic analysis. Practical exposure, lecturer and supervisor support, previous research experience, and peer collaboration emerged as the key factors influencing students' confidence and engagement. The study concludes that qualitative research is best learned through experiential and practice-oriented approaches rather than theoretical instruction alone. It recommends strengthening practical training, coding workshops, continuous academic supervision, peer-learning opportunities, and access to qualitative data-analysis software to enhance qualitative research education in Sri Lankan government universities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the topic

Research has become an essential part of university education in the twenty-first century. Higher education institutions no longer focus solely on transmitting knowledge; they also aim to develop students' ability to think critically, solve problems, and generate new knowledge through systematic inquiry. Regardless of discipline, whether in education, social sciences, business, health sciences, or humanities, students are increasingly expected to conduct independent research as part of their academic journey. Research methodology courses therefore play a vital role in preparing students with the theoretical understanding and practical skills necessary to investigate real-world issues using appropriate scientific methods.

Among the two major research paradigms, qualitative research occupies a unique and increasingly important position. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes numerical measurement, statistical testing, and generalization, qualitative research seeks to understand the meanings people assign to their experiences, beliefs, behaviors, and social interactions. It provides rich, detailed insights into complex human phenomena by collecting non-numerical data through methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations, document analysis, and reflective narratives. As contemporary social and educational problems often involve human experiences that cannot be adequately explained through numbers alone, qualitative research has become an indispensable approach across many academic disciplines.

In recent years, universities have placed greater emphasis on student-centered learning, evidence-based practice, and experiential education. These developments have increased the importance of qualitative research training within undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. Students are encouraged not only to understand qualitative theories but also to design research questions, conduct ethical interviews, analyze textual data, and present meaningful interpretations. Such competencies are valuable beyond academia, as employers increasingly seek graduates who possess critical thinking, communication, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving skills. Consequently, learning qualitative research has become both an academic requirement and a professional asset.

Despite its recognized value, qualitative research is often perceived by students as one of the most demanding components of research methodology. Many learners enter university with greater familiarity with quantitative approaches because mathematics and statistics have traditionally received more structured attention throughout their school education. In contrast, qualitative inquiry introduces concepts that appear less predictable and more interpretive. Rather than following fixed statistical formulas, students must learn how to engage with participants, ask meaningful questions, identify patterns within narratives, and construct credible interpretations from large volumes of textual information. For many students, this shift from numerical certainty to interpretive reasoning creates anxiety and uncertainty.

One of the most common challenges reported by students is understanding the philosophical foundation of qualitative research. Concepts such as interpretivism, constructivism, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative inquiry often appear abstract during the early stages of learning. Students may struggle to distinguish between qualitative designs or understand why different approaches require different methods of data collection and analysis. Without a clear conceptual foundation, qualitative research may appear subjective or less rigorous compared to quantitative methods. This misconception can reduce students' confidence and affect their willingness to adopt qualitative approaches for their own research projects.

Another significant difficulty relates to data collection. Conducting interviews or focus group discussions requires more than simply asking questions; it demands active listening, empathy, effective communication, ethical sensitivity, and the ability to build trust with participants. Students frequently report feeling nervous when interviewing unfamiliar individuals or facilitating discussions among groups. They may worry about asking inappropriate questions, influencing participants' responses, or failing to obtain meaningful data. These concerns become even greater when students have limited opportunities for practical training before undertaking independent research.

Data analysis represents another area where students encounter substantial challenges. Qualitative analysis requires researchers to organize transcripts, identify meaningful codes, develop categories, and generate themes that accurately represent participants' experiences. Unlike statistical software that produces numerical outputs, qualitative analysis relies heavily on the researcher's analytical thinking and interpretive judgment. Many students initially find coding and thematic analysis confusing because there is rarely a single "correct" answer. Learning to move from raw interview transcripts to coherent themes requires practice, reflection, and continuous feedback from supervisors and instructors. Without adequate guidance, students may perceive qualitative analysis as overwhelming and time-consuming.

The credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research also present important learning challenges. Students are often introduced to concepts such as credibility, dependability,

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confirmability, transferability, triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity. While these principles ensure the rigor of qualitative studies, they can appear complicated to novice researchers. Students may question how qualitative findings can be considered reliable without statistical validity or large sample sizes. Understanding that qualitative rigor is achieved through transparency, reflexive practice, and methodological consistency rather than numerical precision is a critical milestone in qualitative research education.

Students' perceptions of qualitative research are not formed in isolation. They are influenced by multiple educational and personal factors, including teaching methods, curriculum design, previous research experience, supervisor support, peer collaboration, and access to learning resources. For example, students who participate in practical interview exercises or analyze real qualitative datasets often develop greater confidence than those who receive only theoretical lectures. Similarly, supportive supervisors who provide constructive feedback during proposal development, interviewing, and thematic analysis can significantly enhance students' learning experiences. Conversely, limited supervision, insufficient practice opportunities, or unclear assessment expectations may reinforce the belief that qualitative research is inherently difficult.

The rapid growth of digital technologies has further transformed the teaching and learning of qualitative research. Online interviewing platforms, transcription software, qualitative data analysis programs such as NVivo and ATL AS.ti, and artificial intelligence–assisted coding tools have created new opportunities for research education. While these technologies can improve efficiency, they also introduce new learning demands. Students must develop digital literacy alongside methodological competence, understanding both the benefits and limitations of technological tools. Importantly, software cannot replace the critical and interpretive thinking that remains central to qualitative inquiry. Therefore, educators must balance technological innovation with the development of fundamental analytical skills.

Existing literature demonstrates that students generally recognize the importance of research for academic and professional development. Studies have examined attitudes toward research, research anxiety, research self-efficacy, and methodological preferences among university students. However, much of this research has focused broadly on research methods or emphasized quantitative research competence. Comparatively fewer studies have explored students lived experiences of learning qualitative research, particularly how they perceive its relevance, what challenges they encounter during the learning process, and what educational strategies support their success. This gap is particularly important because qualitative research continues to gain prominence within disciplines that address human behavior, education, healthcare, community development, and organizational studies.

Understanding students' perceptions has practical implications for improving higher education. When educators understand how students experience qualitative research, they can redesign courses to become more engaging, experiential, and learner-centered. For instance, integrating mock interviews, collaborative coding workshops, reflective journals, and peer feedback sessions may reduce students' anxiety while strengthening practical competence. Curriculum developers can also ensure that theoretical concepts are connected with authentic research experiences, enabling students to appreciate qualitative research as a systematic and rigorous methodology rather than a purely subjective exercise. Furthermore, universities can strengthen supervisor training and provide greater access to qualitative analysis software and methodological support services.

The significance of this topic extends beyond classroom learning. Graduates who possess strong qualitative research skills are better prepared to work in professions requiring stakeholder consultation, community engagement, policy analysis, customer experience research, program evaluation, and social impact assessment. Government institutions, non-governmental organizations, international development agencies, educational institutions, and private organizations increasingly rely on qualitative evidence to understand people's needs and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Therefore, enhancing students' competence and confidence in qualitative research contributes directly to producing skilled professionals capable of addressing complex societal challenges through evidence-informed decision-making.

This study is grounded in the belief that students are active participants in the learning process whose voices deserve careful attention. Rather than viewing learning difficulties as individual weaknesses, the study recognizes that perceptions and challenges emerge through interactions between learners, educators, curricula, institutional environments, and broader educational practices. Exploring these experiences provides an opportunity to identify both the strengths and limitations of current qualitative research education and to recommend strategies that better support student learning.

Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to explore university students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in learning qualitative research. Specifically, the research seeks to understand how students perceive the value and relevance of qualitative research, examine their experiences while learning qualitative research methods, identify the major academic and practical challenges they encounter, and

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generate recommendations for improving qualitative research education within universities. By giving voice to students' experiences, the study aims to contribute to the advancement of research methodology teaching and the development of more effective, inclusive, and practice-oriented research education in higher education institutions.

Ultimately, qualitative research is more than a methodological technique; it is a way of understanding people and the social world through empathy, interpretation, and critical reflection. Helping students develop confidence in this approach not only improves their academic performance but also prepares them to become thoughtful researchers, reflective professionals, and informed contributors to society. As universities continue to promote research excellence and innovation, understanding students' perspectives on learning qualitative research becomes an important step toward creating meaningful and transformative educational experiences.

1.2 Research Problem

In Sri Lankan government universities, research methodology is a compulsory part of many undergraduate degree programmes. Students are expected to develop the ability to identify research problems, select appropriate methodologies, collect and analyze data, and produce independent academic research. Among these methodological approaches, qualitative research is particularly important because it enables students to explore human experiences, social issues, beliefs, and behaviors in greater depth. As a result, qualitative research has become increasingly relevant in disciplines such as education, social sciences, management, humanities, and public health.

Although qualitative research is widely taught, many students find it difficult to learn and apply in practice. Unlike quantitative research, which follows structured statistical procedures, qualitative research requires students to think critically, conduct meaningful interviews, interpret participants' perspectives, and analyze large amounts of textual data. For many learners, these skills are unfamiliar and often perceived as complex. Students frequently express uncertainty about developing interview guides, conducting ethical data collection, coding transcripts, identifying themes, and ensuring the credibility of their findings. These challenges can reduce their confidence and create anxiety when completing research projects or final-year dissertations.

The learning experience is further influenced by the educational environment within government universities. While research methodology courses provide theoretical knowledge, opportunities for hands-on practice, individual mentoring, and continuous feedback may vary across faculties and institutions. Differences in teaching approaches, supervisor guidance, availability of qualitative research software, and exposure to real research experiences can significantly shape how students perceive qualitative research. Consequently, some students view qualitative inquiry as an engaging and meaningful method of understanding people, whereas others consider it difficult, subjective, and time-consuming.

Despite the growing emphasis on research-based learning in Sri Lanka's higher education sector, limited attention has been given to understanding students' own perspectives on learning qualitative research. Most existing studies focus on research competency or attitudes toward research in general, with relatively little evidence specifically examining the perceptions, experiences, and learning challenges of students in government universities. Without this understanding, it is difficult for educators and curriculum developers to identify the barriers students face and to design more effective teaching and learning strategies.

Therefore, there is a need to explore how students in Sri Lankan government universities perceive qualitative research, what experiences they encounter during the learning process, and what challenges affect their ability to develop qualitative research competencies. Addressing this gap will provide valuable insights for improving research methodology education and creating more supportive learning environments within government universities.

1.3 Main Working Proposition

University students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in learning qualitative research are influenced by their practical exposure to qualitative research, previous research experience, academic guidance, and confidence in applying qualitative research methods.

1.4 Objectives

1.4.1 Main Objective

To explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of government university students in learning qualitative research.

1.4.2 Specific Objectives

- To examine government university students' perceptions of qualitative research.
- To explore students' experiences in learning qualitative research methods.
- To identify the academic and practical challenges students encounter when learning qualitative research.
- To assess the factors that influence students' confidence and engagement in qualitative research.

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- To propose recommendations for improving the teaching and learning of qualitative research in Sri Lankan government universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Qualitative Research in Higher Education

Qualitative research has become an increasingly important methodology within higher education because it enables students to investigate human experiences, perceptions, behaviors, and social phenomena in depth. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry emphasizes meaning-making, context, and interpretation through methods such as interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that qualitative research is particularly valuable for understanding complex educational and social issues where participants' lived experiences are central. Consequently, universities across many disciplines have integrated qualitative research methods into undergraduate and postgraduate research methodology curricula.

The growing emphasis on research-based learning has also increased the importance of developing students' qualitative research competencies. Rather than simply learning research theory, students are expected to formulate research questions, collect ethical data, analyze narratives, and produce evidence-based interpretations. These competencies contribute not only to academic success but also to professional skills including critical thinking, communication, analytical reasoning, and reflective practice.

2.2 Students' Perceptions of Learning Qualitative Research

Students' perceptions play an important role in determining their engagement and confidence in learning research methods. Hein (2004) found that students initially perceived qualitative research as ambiguous because it lacked the structured procedures commonly associated with quantitative methods. However, the same study demonstrated that students gradually developed appreciation for qualitative inquiry as they gained practical experience and reflected on the research process.

Similarly, Wang (2013) reported that novice researchers frequently experience uncertainty regarding subjectivity, data interpretation, and the presentation of qualitative findings. Students often struggle to understand that qualitative rigor is achieved through credibility, reflexivity, and methodological transparency rather than statistical validity. These findings suggest that perceptions of qualitative research evolve through experience rather than theoretical instruction alone.

2.3 Learning Experiences and Practical Exposure

Experiential learning is widely recognized as an effective approach to research education. Kolb (1984) explains that meaningful learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within qualitative research education, this implies that students develop methodological competence by conducting interviews, analyzing transcripts, practicing coding, and reflecting upon their analytical decisions.

Research by Wagner, Kawulich, and Garner (2019) further supports this perspective by demonstrating that practical activities, collaborative learning, and guided supervision significantly improve students' understanding of qualitative research methods. Their mixed research synthesis concluded that authentic research experiences produce greater confidence than lecture-based instruction alone. Therefore, practice-oriented teaching has become an essential element of effective qualitative research education.

2.4 Academic and Practical Challenges

Despite its educational value, qualitative research presents numerous learning challenges for university students. Sargeant (2012) identifies conceptual complexity, limited classroom time, and difficulties introducing reflexivity as major obstacles in teaching qualitative methods. Students often find it difficult to distinguish among qualitative research designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and narrative inquiry, particularly during the early stages of learning.

Another significant challenge concerns qualitative data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis requires systematic coding, careful interpretation, and continuous comparison between data and emerging themes. Novice researchers frequently experience uncertainty when moving from raw interview transcripts to meaningful analytical themes because there is rarely a single correct interpretation. Consequently, students require repeated practice and constructive feedback to develop analytical confidence.

2.5 Role of Academic Support and Research Self-Efficacy

The quality of supervision and academic guidance strongly influences students' research experiences. Bandura (1997) proposes that self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, social encouragement, and supportive feedback. Applied to research education, students become more confident when lecturers and supervisors provide practical demonstrations, timely feedback, and opportunities to practice research skills in supportive learning environments.

Furthermore, peer collaboration has been shown to reduce research anxiety and enhance methodological understanding. Collaborative coding exercises, mock interviews, and

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reflective discussions encourage students to share interpretations and learn from one another, contributing to stronger engagement with qualitative inquiry.

2.6 Research Gap

Existing literature has extensively examined research anxiety, qualitative pedagogy, and methodological competence among university students. However, comparatively little research has explored the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of government university students in Sri Lanka regarding qualitative research education. Most previous studies have focused on postgraduate students, individual disciplines, or Western educational contexts. Therefore, this study addresses an important contextual gap by exploring how Sri Lankan undergraduate students experience learning qualitative research and identifying educational strategies that can strengthen qualitative research teaching within government universities.

2.7 Theoretical Framework: Experiential Learning Theory

Experiential Learning Theory, developed by Kolb (1984), provides the theoretical foundation for this study. The theory proposes that learning occurs through a continuous cycle consisting of four interconnected stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within the context of qualitative research education, students first gain concrete experience by conducting interviews and engaging in fieldwork. They subsequently reflect on these experiences, develop conceptual understanding of qualitative methods such as coding and thematic analysis, and finally apply their knowledge in independent research projects. This framework is appropriate for the present study because it explains how practical exposure and reflective learning contribute to students' confidence and competence in qualitative research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to explore government university students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges in learning qualitative research. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on understanding students' personal experiences, opinions, feelings, and interpretations rather than measuring their perceptions through numerical indicators. The exploratory design enabled the researcher to obtain detailed information about how students understood qualitative research, how they experienced the learning process, and what difficulties they encountered when applying qualitative research methods.

3.2 Study Population

The study population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in selected government universities in Sri Lanka who had completed or were studying research methodology or qualitative research-related courses**.** Students from different academic disciplines were considered in order to obtain a broader range of experiences. Participants were drawn from disciplines including social sciences, humanities, education, management, and other fields in which qualitative research methods are commonly used.

Students were selected because they had direct experience of learning qualitative research and were therefore able to provide relevant information regarding its perceived value, learning experiences, difficulties, and practical application.

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling**,** specifically maximum-variation purposive sampling**,** to select participants who had relevant experience of learning qualitative research. Maximum variation was used to capture differences in students' experiences across academic disciplines, levels of study, and previous research experience.

A total of 30 undergraduate students from selected government universities participated in the study. The sample was considered sufficiently diverse to capture different perspectives while allowing the researcher to conduct detailed and in-depth analysis of the participants' responses.

The participants were selected according to the following criteria:

- They were enrolled in a government university in Sri Lanka.
- They had studied or were studying research methodology.
- They had been exposed to qualitative research methods.
- They were willing to participate voluntarily.
- They were able to provide informed responses based on their learning experiences.

The sample size was also considered in relation to information power and data saturation**.** Data collection was continued until the interviews provided sufficient depth and repetition of information, and additional interviews were no longer producing substantial new themes.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the selected students. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided a balance

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between consistency across participants and flexibility to explore individual experiences in greater depth.

An interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and previous literature. The questions focused on several key areas, including:

1. Students' understanding and perceptions of qualitative research.
2. Their experiences of learning qualitative research methods.
3. Their experiences of conducting interviews, observations, coding, and thematic analysis.
4. Difficulties encountered during the learning process.
5. The influence of lecturers and supervisors on their learning experiences.
6. The availability of practical training and learning resources.
7. Students' confidence in conducting qualitative research.
8. Their perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of qualitative research.
9. Suggestions for improving the teaching and learning of qualitative research.

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes**.** With the participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate representation of their responses. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality of the information they provided.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis**.** Thematic analysis was selected because it provided a systematic approach to identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within the participants' accounts.

The analysis followed a series of stages. First, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts to become familiar with the data. Second, meaningful statements and relevant sections of the transcripts were assigned initial codes. Third, related codes were compared and grouped into broader categories. Fourth, potential themes were developed from the categories. The emerging themes were then reviewed against the original interview data to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences. Finally, the themes were clearly defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the research objectives and existing literature.

The analysis focused particularly on students' perceptions, learning experiences, challenges, confidence, academic support, practical exposure, and perceived relevance of qualitative research.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and quality of this qualitative study, the researcher applied the four criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Credibility: Credibility was enhanced through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and prolonged engagement with the interview data. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the interview transcripts to ensure that the identified themes accurately reflected participants' experiences. Where necessary, participants were asked to clarify their responses during the interview process.

Dependability: A consistent interview guide was used for all participants to maintain methodological consistency. The researcher also documented each stage of the data collection and thematic analysis process, creating an audit trail that supports the reliability of the research procedure.

Confirmability: To minimize researcher bias, the coding and theme development were conducted systematically based on participants' narratives rather than the researcher's personal assumptions. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analysis to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data.

Transferability: Although the findings are specific to undergraduate students in selected Sri Lankan government universities, detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, sampling strategy, and methodology are provided to enable readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before conducting the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any negative consequences. To protect privacy, participants' identities were kept anonymous by using codes instead of names, and all interview recordings and transcripts were treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes. The collected data were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1 Students' Perceptions of Qualitative Research

The analysis of participants' responses revealed that students' perceptions of qualitative research were mixed but generally

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positive. Four major themes emerged from the interview data:

1 Qualitative research as a way of understanding human experiences
2 Perceived difficulty and complexity
3 Perceptions of flexibility and subjectivity
4 Perceived academic and practical value

Theme 1: Qualitative research as a means of understanding human experiences

Many students viewed qualitative research positively because it allowed them to understand people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and perspectives in greater depth. Participants recognized that qualitative methods provide opportunities to interact directly with research participants and obtain information that may not be captured through numerical data.

Students particularly appreciated interviews and focus group discussions because these methods allowed them to ask follow-up questions and explore issues in greater detail. This suggests that students increasingly understood qualitative research as a method that places people and their experiences at the center of the research process.

Theme 2: Qualitative research as difficult and complex

Although students recognized its value, many participants perceived qualitative research as difficult to learn and apply. The greatest difficulties were associated with understanding qualitative research concepts, developing interview questions, conducting interviews, coding data, and identifying themes.

Some students indicated that qualitative research initially appeared confusing because there was no single formula or procedure that could be followed. In contrast to quantitative research, where students often work with clearly defined variables and statistical procedures, qualitative research required them to make interpretive decisions. This created uncertainty, particularly among students who had limited previous research experience.

Theme 3: Perceptions of flexibility and subjectivity

Participants also highlighted the flexibility of qualitative research as both a strength and a challenge. Students appreciated the ability to modify questions, explore unexpected responses, and follow issues that emerged during interviews. This flexibility enabled them to obtain richer information from participants.

However, some students associated this flexibility with subjectivity**.** They questioned whether researchers' personal

opinions could influence data interpretation and whether qualitative findings could be considered sufficiently objective. This indicates that some students were still developing an understanding of concepts such as reflexivity, credibility, and researcher positionality.

Theme 4: Perceived academic and practical value

The majority of participants recognized that learning qualitative research was useful for their academic development. Students reported that qualitative research improved their communication, critical thinking, listening, analytical, and interpersonal skills. They also perceived qualitative research as useful for understanding social and educational issues that cannot easily be explained through numerical information.

Students who had experienced practical research activities appeared to have a more favorable perception of qualitative research. Direct involvement in interviews, fieldwork, transcription, coding, and thematic analysis helped students understand the practical value of the methodology.

Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that government university students did not perceive qualitative research as either entirely positive or entirely negative**.** Rather, their perceptions were shaped by the balance between its perceived value and the difficulties involved in learning it.

Students appreciated qualitative research because it enabled them to understand human experiences in depth and provided flexibility in investigating complex issues. At the same time, they considered qualitative research challenging because of the interpretive nature of data analysis, the need for practical skills, and uncertainty about maintaining objectivity and research rigor.

An important finding was that practical exposure appeared to influence students' perceptions**.** Students who had opportunities to conduct interviews, analyze transcripts, and engage directly with participants generally developed a clearer understanding of qualitative research. This supports the proposition that practical exposure and academic guidance can contribute to more positive perceptions of qualitative research.

4.2 Students' Experiences in Learning Qualitative Research Methods

The participants described their experiences of learning qualitative research as a combination of theoretical learning, practical engagement, methodological difficulties, and gradual development of research confidence. Although

students generally recognized the importance of qualitative research, their experiences varied according to their previous

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exposure to research, opportunities for practical activities, and the level of academic guidance they received.

Theme 1: Theoretical Learning and Classroom Experience

The majority of participants reported that their initial understanding of qualitative research was developed through lectures and classroom discussions. 22 out of 30 students (73.3%) indicated that theoretical teaching helped them understand the basic concepts of qualitative research, including research design, sampling, interviews, data collection, and analysis. However, 18 students (60.0%) felt that classroom-based theoretical learning alone was insufficient for developing confidence in applying qualitative research methods.

Students particularly emphasized the difference between *understanding a research method theoretically* and *being able to apply it in an actual research situation*. Several participants explained that qualitative research initially appeared straightforward when presented in lectures but became more complicated when they were required to conduct interviews, organize transcripts, and analyze actual responses.

Theme 2: Practical Exposure to Qualitative Research

Practical exposure emerged as one of the most important aspects of students' learning experiences. 24 students (80.0%) reported that practical activities such as conducting interviews, observations, transcription, coding, or thematic analysis helped them understand qualitative research more effectively.

Among these participants, 21 students (70.0%) specifically stated that conducting interviews improved their understanding of how qualitative data are generated. Students explained that practical experience allowed them to understand the importance of asking follow-up questions, listening carefully to participants, and exploring unexpected issues that emerged during interviews.

This finding suggests that students' understanding of qualitative research developed more effectively when theoretical knowledge was combined with practical research activities. The experience of conducting actual research helped students move beyond textbook definitions and understand qualitative research as a process of interaction, interpretation, and reflection.

Theme 3: Experiences with Data Analysis

Data analysis was identified as one of the most challenging components of learning qualitative research. **20 students (66.7%)** reported experiencing difficulties with coding, categorizing information, and developing themes from interview transcripts. Students explained that they initially found it difficult to determine which statements were important and how individual responses could be organized into broader themes.

17 students (56.7%) reported that thematic analysis was particularly difficult during their initial learning experience. Some participants expected qualitative analysis to follow a fixed procedure similar to statistical analysis. The absence of a single numerical formula created uncertainty regarding whether their interpretations were appropriate.

However, 19 students (63.3%) indicated that practical coding exercises and examples provided by lecturers or supervisors helped them understand thematic analysis more clearly. This indicates that repeated practice and feedback were important in overcoming students' initial difficulties.

Theme 4: Role of Lecturers and Supervisors

Academic support also played an important role in students' learning experiences. **23** students (76.7%) identified lecturers and supervisors as important sources of guidance during the research process. Students particularly valued assistance with developing interview questions, selecting participants, conducting interviews, coding data, and interpreting findings.

However, 11 students (36.7%) indicated that they experienced some limitations in receiving continuous guidance, particularly during the data-analysis stage. These students reported greater uncertainty about coding and theme development.

The findings therefore suggest that students' experiences are influenced not only by the content of research methodology courses but also by the availability and quality of academic guidance throughout the research process.

Theme 5: Development of Research Confidence

Students' experiences also demonstrated a gradual development of confidence. At the beginning of their exposure to qualitative research, 18 students (60.0%) reported feeling uncertain or lacking confidence in conducting qualitative research independently. After gaining practical experience, however, 22 students (73.3%) reported that their confidence had improved.

Participants associated this improvement with conducting interviews, receiving feedback, practicing coding, and discussing their interpretations with lecturers or peers. This

suggests that confidence develops through repeated engagement with qualitative research rather than through theoretical instruction alone.

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Major Challenges Experienced by Students:

The main challenges reported by participants are summarized below:

Table 1: The main challenges reported by participants

Challenge	Students	Percentage
Understanding qualitative concepts initially	20	66.7%
Coding and thematic analysis	20	66.7%
Conducting interviews confidently	17	56.7%
Managing and organizing large amounts of data	16	53.3%
Limited practical exposure	15	50.0%
Limited academic/supervisory guidance	11	36.7%
Difficulty using qualitative analysis software	10	33.3%

Source: Author's analysis based on field survey data (2026).

These results indicate that the greatest difficulties were related to understanding qualitative concepts and analyzing qualitative data, followed by practical challenges associated with interviewing and managing textual information.

Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that students' experiences of learning qualitative research developed through a gradual process. Many students initially experienced uncertainty and difficulty, particularly in relation to qualitative concepts, interviewing, coding, and thematic analysis. However, practical exposure, academic guidance, and repeated engagement with research activities appeared to improve students' understanding and confidence.

The findings can broadly be understood through three stages:

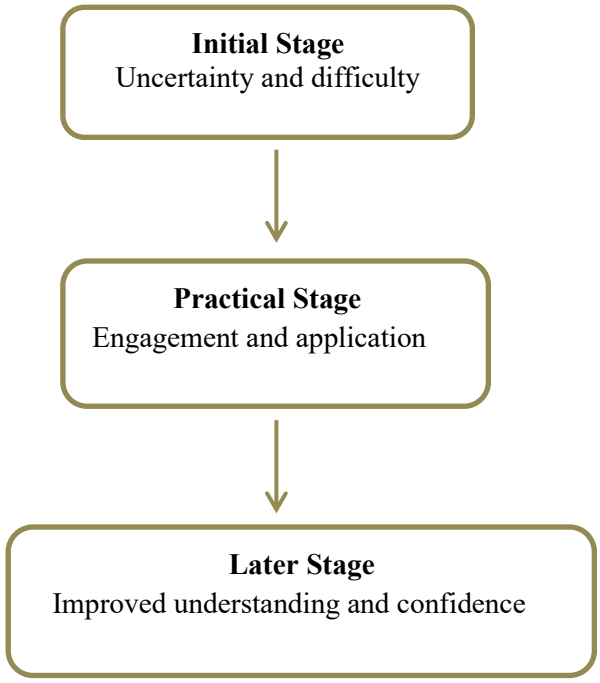


Figure 1: Three Stages

The relatively high proportion of students who identified practical exposure as helpful (80.0%) suggests that learning qualitative research is strongly influenced by opportunities to apply methodological concepts in real or simulated research situations.

Therefore, the findings support the importance of moving beyond predominantly theoretical teaching toward a more practice-oriented approach to qualitative research education**.** Providing students with opportunities to conduct interviews, practice coding, analyze real transcripts, and receive continuous feedback may improve both their learning experiences and confidence in conducting qualitative research.

4.3 Academic and Practical Challenges in Learning Qualitative Research

The analysis of students' responses revealed that government university students encountered a range of academic and practical challenges while learning qualitative research. The challenges were mainly related to understanding qualitative concepts, developing research questions and interview guides, collecting qualitative data, coding and thematic analysis, managing large volumes of information, limited practical exposure, and access to academic and technical support. Based on the analysis of the 30 participants, the major challenges are summarized below.

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Table 2: Major Challenges in Learning Qualitative Research

Major challenge	Students (n=30)	Percentage
Difficulty with coding and thematic analysis	21	70.0%
Difficulty understanding qualitative concepts and research designs	20	66.7%
Difficulty managing and organizing large amounts of textual data	19	63.3%
Difficulty developing effective interview questions/probes	17	56.7%
Lack of sufficient practical training	17	56.7%
Difficulty conducting interviews confidently	16	53.3%
Limited access/familiarity with qualitative analysis software	14	46.7%
Limited academic/supervisory guidance	12	40.0%
Time constraints	11	36.7%
Difficulty maintaining researcher neutrality/reflexivity	10	33.3%

Source: Author's analysis based on field survey data (2026).

4.3.1 Academic Challenges

The most frequently reported academic challenge was understanding and applying qualitative data analysis techniques**.** 21 students (70.0%) reported difficulties with coding, categorizing information, and developing themes from interview transcripts. Students indicated that they were uncertain about how to decide which information should be coded and how individual codes could be developed into meaningful themes.

Similarly, 20 students (66.7%) experienced difficulties in understanding qualitative concepts and research designs. Participants reported that concepts such as phenomenology, grounded theory, interpretivism, reflexivity, credibility, and thematic analysis were initially difficult to distinguish and apply. This suggests that theoretical complexity remains an important barrier for students who are relatively new to qualitative research.

Another important academic challenge was managing and organizing textual data**.** 19 students (63.3%) reported difficulty dealing with lengthy interview transcripts and organizing large amounts of qualitative information. Unlike numerical datasets, qualitative data can contain extensive narratives, repeated ideas, and different interpretations, making the process of identifying relevant information demanding for novice researchers.

The development of appropriate interview questions was also challenging. 17 students (56.7%) reported difficulty formulating questions that were sufficiently open-ended and capable of generating detailed responses. Some students indicated that they initially tended to ask questions that produced short or direct answers rather than encouraging participants to explain their experiences in depth.

4.3.2 Practical Challenges

A major practical issue was insufficient opportunities for hands-on training**.** 17 students (56.7%) reported that they had limited opportunities to practice qualitative research techniques before conducting their own research projects. Students felt that greater exposure to mock interviews, fieldwork, coding exercises, and analysis of sample transcripts would have prepared them more effectively for independent research.

16 students (53.3%) reported difficulty conducting interviews confidently. Students described concerns about approaching participants, maintaining the flow of an interview, asking follow-up questions, and responding appropriately to unexpected answers. Some participants also reported feeling nervous when conducting their first interviews.

The use of qualitative research software was another challenge. 14 students (46.7%) reported limited familiarity with software used for organizing and analyzing qualitative data. Although software was perceived as potentially useful, some students felt that they had not received sufficient training to use such tools effectively.

4.3.3 Academic and Supervisory Support

The 12 students (40.0%) identified limited academic or supervisory guidance as a challenge. Participants particularly referred to difficulties obtaining sufficient feedback during the coding, theme development, and interpretation stages. Some students felt that guidance was more readily available during proposal development but became less frequent during the actual analysis of qualitative data.

This finding is important because qualitative research requires considerable interpretive judgment. Students may therefore require continuous guidance rather than one-time methodological instruction.

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4.3.4 Time-Related Challenges

The 11 students (36.7%) identified time constraints as a significant difficulty. Participants explained that transcription, repeated reading of interviews, coding, categorization, and theme development required considerable time. Students who were simultaneously managing coursework and research projects found it particularly difficult to allocate sufficient time for qualitative analysis.

4.3.5 Reflexivity and Researcher Subjectivity

A smaller but important group of 10 students (33.3%) reported concerns about maintaining neutrality and avoiding personal influence during data interpretation. Students were uncertain about how their own experiences, assumptions, and opinions might influence the interpretation of participants' responses.

Although this was less frequently mentioned than coding or theoretical difficulties, it represents an important methodological challenge because understanding reflexivity and researcher positionality is central to rigorous qualitative inquiry.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that students' challenges were not limited to theoretical knowledge. They extended across the entire qualitative research process**,** from developing research questions and conducting interviews to managing, coding, and interpreting data.

The most prominent challenges were coding and thematic analysis (70.0%)**,** understanding qualitative concepts and research designs (66.7%) and managing large amounts of textual data (63.3%)**.** These findings suggest that students experience particular difficulty when moving from theoretical understanding to the practical application of qualitative research.

An important pattern emerging from the findings is the relationship between limited practical exposure and students' academic difficulties**.** Students who had fewer opportunities to practice interviews, coding, and thematic analysis were more likely to describe these stages as confusing and demanding. This indicates that some of the challenges may be reduced through more practice-oriented research methodology teaching.

Overall, the findings suggest that government university students would benefit from a learning environment that combines theoretical instruction, practical exercises, continuous supervision, peer learning, and training in qualitative data-analysis techniques**.** Rather than treating qualitative research as a purely theoretical subject, universities could provide students with repeated opportunities to experience the complete research process from developing interview questions to collecting, coding, interpreting, and presenting qualitative data.

4.4 Factors Influencing Students' Confidence and Engagement in Qualitative Research

The analysis of participants' responses identified several factors that influenced their confidence and engagement in learning and applying qualitative research. The findings indicated that students' confidence was not determined by a single factor. Rather, it developed through the interaction of practical exposure, lecturer and supervisor support, previous research experience, peer support, access to learning resources, perceived relevance of qualitative research, and fear or anxiety associated with research activities**.**

Theme 1: Practical Exposure and Hands-on Learning

Practical exposure emerged as the strongest factor influencing students' confidence. 24 students (80.0%) indicated that opportunities to conduct interviews, participate in fieldwork, practice coding, and analyze qualitative data helped them feel more confident.

Students who had opportunities to practice research activities reported that qualitative research became easier to understand after experiencing the process themselves. Practical activities reduced the uncertainty associated with interviewing participants and analyzing textual data.

The findings suggest that learning by doing is particularly important in qualitative research education. Students appeared to become more engaged when they could connect theoretical concepts with actual research situations.

Theme 2: Lecturer and Supervisor Support

The second major factor was academic guidance and supervision**.** 23 students (76.7%) identified lecturers and supervisors as important influences on their confidence.

Students valued explanations, feedback, examples, and guidance during interview preparation, data collection, coding, and thematic analysis. Participants who received constructive feedback appeared more willing to participate actively in research activities.

However, students who experienced limited supervision reported greater uncertainty, particularly during data analysis. This indicates that continuous academic support can play an important role in maintaining students' engagement throughout the research process.

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Theme 3: Previous Research Experience

Previous exposure to research also influenced students' confidence. 19 students (63.3%) indicated that previous experience with research projects, interviews, assignments, or data analysis helped them understand qualitative research more easily.

Students with previous research experience appeared to be more comfortable with research terminology and procedures. In contrast, students encountering research methods for the first time often required more explanation and practical guidance.

This suggests that students' confidence develops progressively as they gain experience with research activities.

Theme 4: Peer Learning and Collaboration

Peer interaction was identified by 17 students (56.7%) as an important factor influencing engagement. Students reported that discussing research problems with classmates, practicing interviews with peers, sharing coding experiences, and receiving informal feedback helped them understand difficult concepts.

Peer collaboration also reduced feelings of isolation and anxiety. Students were more willing to discuss mistakes and uncertainties with classmates before seeking formal guidance from lecturers or supervisors.

This finding suggests that qualitative research education can benefit from collaborative learning activities, rather than relying exclusively on individual assignments and lectures.

Theme 5: Access to Learning Resources and Technology

The 15 students (50.0%) identified access to learning materials and technological resources as an important factor. Participants referred to textbooks, research articles, recorded lectures, sample interview transcripts, qualitative analysis software, and online learning resources as useful for developing their skills.

Students who had access to examples of completed qualitative studies and practical demonstrations reported greater understanding of coding and thematic analysis. Conversely, limited familiarity with qualitative research software created additional uncertainty for some students.

Theme 6: Perceived Relevance and Value of Qualitative Research

Students' perception of the usefulness of qualitative research also influenced their engagement. The 21 students (70.0%) reported that they became more interested in qualitative research when they understood how it could be used to investigate real social, educational, and community issues.

Students were particularly engaged when they believed that qualitative research could help them understand people's experiences rather than simply produce academic requirements. This indicates that demonstrating the real-world relevance of qualitative research may encourage stronger student engagement.

Theme 7: Research Anxiety and Fear of Making Mistakes

A further factor affecting confidence was research-related anxiety**.** The 16 students (53.3%) reported experiencing nervousness or fear, particularly during their first interviews and when analyzing qualitative data.

Students were concerned about asking inappropriate questions, failing to obtain sufficient information, coding data incorrectly, or producing themes that might not be accepted by their supervisors. These concerns sometimes reduced their willingness to participate actively in qualitative research activities.

However, students indicated that anxiety decreased when they received practical experience, feedback, and reassurance from lecturers, supervisors, and peers.

Table 3: Summary of Major Themes

Theme	Students (n=30)	Percentage
Practical exposure and hands-on learning	24	80.0%
Lecturer and supervisor support	23	76.7%
Perceived relevance and value of qualitative research	21	70.0%
Previous research experience	19	63.3%
Peer learning and collaboration	17	56.7%
Research anxiety/fear of mistakes	16	53.3%
Access to learning resources and technology	15	50.0%

Source: Author's analysis based on field survey data (2026).

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that confidence and engagement are strongly connected to students' learning environment and practical experiences**.** Practical exposure was the most

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frequently identified factor, followed by lecturer and supervisor support. Students were also more engaged when they understood the relevance of qualitative research to real-world issues.

An important relationship can be observed between the positive and negative factors. Practical experience, academic support, previous research exposure, and peer collaboration strengthened confidence**,** while limited experience, insufficient guidance, and fear of making mistakes reduced confidence and engagement**.**

The findings therefore suggest that improving students' confidence in qualitative research requires more than increasing theoretical content. Government universities could strengthen students' engagement by providing regular practical exercises, mock interviews, coding workshops, peer-learning activities, examples of real qualitative studies, software training, and continuous academic supervision**.**

Overall, the findings support the proposition that students' confidence and engagement in qualitative research are influenced by their practical exposure, academic support, previous research experience, and perceived relevance of the methodology**.** This also strengthens the argument that qualitative research should be taught as a practical and experiential subject rather than primarily through classroom-based theoretical instruction.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

This study explored how students in Sri Lankan government universities perceive, experience, and learn qualitative research, with particular attention to the difficulties they face during the learning process. The findings show that students generally recognize the value of qualitative research, especially when it comes to understanding people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and social realities in greater depth. Many students appreciated the fact that qualitative research allows them to listen to participants directly and explore issues that cannot always be explained through numbers.

At the same time, the study found that students' experiences of learning qualitative research were not always easy. Many participants initially found qualitative research difficult, particularly when they had to move from theoretical knowledge to actual research practice. The most common difficulties were related to coding and thematic analysis, understanding qualitative concepts and research designs, managing large amounts of textual data, developing appropriate interview questions, and conducting interviews confidently. These difficulties indicate that simply teaching qualitative research concepts in the classroom may not be enough to prepare students for conducting research independently.

One of the clearest findings from the study was the importance of practical experience. Students who had opportunities to conduct interviews, practice coding, analyze transcripts, and participate in fieldwork generally reported greater understanding and confidence. Many students explained that they began to understand qualitative research more clearly only after they had actually tried to conducts research themselves. This suggests that qualitative research is a skill that develops through practice, reflection, and experience rather than through theoretical learning alone.

The study also highlighted the important role played by lecturers and supervisors. Students valued guidance when developing interview questions, collecting data, coding information, and interpreting findings. Where students received regular feedback and encouragement, they appeared to feel more confident about continuing with their research. In contrast, limited guidance sometimes left students uncertain about whether they were conducting the research correctly.

Another important finding was that students' confidence and engagement were influenced by several factors; including previous research experience, peer support, access to learning resources, practical exposure, and their understanding of the relevance of qualitative research. Students were more interested in qualitative research when they could see how it could be used to understand real social, educational, and community issues. On the other hand, fear of making mistakes and uncertainty about data analysis sometimes reduced their willingness to engage actively with the methodology.

Overall, the study suggests that students should not be expected to become confident qualitative researchers simply by attending research methodology lectures. They need opportunities to practice, make mistakes, receive feedback, and try again. Qualitative research education in government universities would therefore benefit from a more practical and student-centered approach that connects classroom theory with actual research experiences.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to improve students' experiences of learning qualitative research.

Provide more practical opportunities: Students should be given more opportunities to practice qualitative research rather than relying mainly on lectures. Activities such as mock interviews, focus group discussions, observation exercises, transcription, coding, and thematic analysis can

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help students become familiar with the research process before they begin their own projects.

Give greater attention to data analysis: Coding and thematic analysis were among the areas that students found most difficult. Universities could organize practical workshops where students work with actual or sample interview transcripts and learn step by step how to move from raw data to codes, categories, and themes.

Strengthen lecturer and supervisor support: Students need guidance throughout the research process, not only when preparing their research proposals. Regular meetings, constructive feedback, and practical guidance during data collection and analysis can help students overcome uncertainty and build confidence.

Introduce qualitative research skills workshops: Universities could organize short workshops focusing on specific skills, such as developing interview questions, conducting effective interviews, transcription, coding, thematic analysis, reflexivity, and presenting qualitative findings.

Improve access to qualitative research software: Students should be introduced to appropriate qualitative data-analysis software and given basic practical training. This would help them organize large amounts of textual information and become more comfortable with digital research tools.

Encourage peer learning: Students can learn a great deal from one another. Small-group activities, peer interviews, collaborative coding exercises, and discussions about research experiences could help students learn from each other's successes and mistakes. This may also reduce the anxiety that some students experience when learning qualitative research.

Make qualitative research more relevant to students: Lecturers should use examples from real social, educational, community, and organizational issues to demonstrate why qualitative research matters. When students understand how qualitative research can be used to address real problems, they are more likely to see its value and become actively engaged.

Provide additional support for students with limited research experience: Not all students enter research courses with the same level of knowledge or experience. Students who are new to research may require additional guidance, introductory sessions, mentoring, or research clinics to help them develop the necessary skills and confidence.

Teach reflexivity through practical activities: Students should be encouraged to reflect on how their own experiences, assumptions, and opinions may influence the research process. Practical reflection exercises can help students develop a better understanding of researcher positionality and improve the quality of their qualitative research.

Allow sufficient time for learning qualitative research: Qualitative research involves several time-consuming stages, including interviewing, transcription, coding, interpretation, and writing. Students therefore need sufficient time to practice these skills. Overloading research methodology courses with too much theoretical content may leave insufficient time for meaningful practical learning.

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