CHAPTER 4

OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

4.1 Overview

WHO (2014) defined mental health as- “A state of well-being in which the individuals relies their own capabilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. It refers to the vast array of behaviors which are directly or indirectly associated with mental well-being (National Mental Health Policy- India, 2014).

Now-a-day’s, mental health concerns have become a global emergent issue of public health and are majorly contributing to the burden of disease worldwide (Pathak, 2014). Mental health is one of the contributory factors enhancing the well-being of an individual without which it becomes difficult for the individual to excel in their life.

Researches indicate that students suffer from mental health difficulties (Milojevich & Lukowski, 2016; Blanco, Okuda, Wright, Hasin, Grant, Liu, & Olfson, 2008). Moreover, there is research evidence indicating that students experience greater mental health difficulties as compared to the individuals of same age in general population (Roberts et al., 2000; Adlaf, Demers & Gliksman, 2005; Nerdrum, Rustøen, & Rønnestad, 2006; Blanco et al., 2008; Walsh, Feeney, Hussey, & Donnellan, 2010; Moreira & Telzer, 2015). Various factors like rising academic burden, adjustment issues, staying away from home, time constraints such as deadlines for projects, assignments or unhealthy lifestyles adversely affect mental health condition of students. It is these problems which at times become serious issues and lead to discontinuation of studies (Parthi & Rohilla, 2017a).

Research students are an important segment of academic population (Larivie’re, 2012) who are vulnerable to the pressures related with fulfilling the requirements for completing their research in time, publishing research work, teaching and finding appropriate job (Hyun, Quinn, Madon & Lusting, 2006). They often show neglectful attitude towards mental health concern (Turner & Berry, 2000; Wilson,
Mason, & Ewing, 1997). Perceived social support, self-esteem, quality of life, doing recreational activities and satisfaction with one’s financial condition are some of the significant variables which influence mental health of the students. Research students often suffer poor financial conditions that cause mental health concerns among them and various researches have confirmed this finding (Toews, Lockyer, Dobson, & Brownell, 1993; Furr, Westefeld, McConnell & Jenkins, 2001; Nogueira-Martins, Fagnani, Macedo, Citero & Mari, 2004).

Higher education is highly expensive and can cause financial pressure on the students (Deb, Bhanu, Thomasa, Vardhan, Rao & Khawaja, 2016). According to the survey conducted by American College Health Association (2013), thirty five percent of the students reported that their financial condition was “traumatic” or “very difficult” to handle. Trombitas (2012) also reported that out of the top five most common stressors, four were related to their financial conditions. Several researchers observed that students who experience financial difficulty are more likely to obtain high scores on depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts (Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust, & Golberstein, 2009; McPherson, 2012; Parthi & Rohilla, 2017), low self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 2003) and poor academic performance (Ross, Cleland, & Macleod, 2006).

Further, poor mental health conditions like depression, anxiety and stress are also prevalent in student population. Manjari (2016) found that approximately forty percent of the sample in her study exhibit depressive symptoms. Suresh (2016) observed that fourteen percent of the students in the study were suffering from extreme depression. Mualik, Moni, Choudhari, and Bhogale (2016) stated that eighteen percent of the sample in their study met the criteria of extreme depression and anxiety. Raut and Mundada (2016) also found that females show more symptoms of anxiety and stress than males. Sharma and Kirmani (2015) elaborate that female students were higher on depression than male students.

Additionally, students often suffer from poor quality of life, low self esteem and perceive less social support, which also deteriorates their mental health conditions. Ribeiro, Pereira, Freire, Oliveira, Casotti, and Boery (2017) report that stress was negatively related to quality of life among students. Assana,
Laohasiriwong, and Rangseekajee (2017) observe that only thirty six percent of the sample in their study shows better quality of life and it was negatively associated with financial confidence and perception of stress. Bastaminia, Dastoorpoor, Omidipoor and Tomaj (2016) stated similar findings in their investigation. Yarmohammadi, Rahaei, Mirzaeian, Fattahi, Mehr and Sharifi-Rad (2014) found that poor mental health was linked with lower quality of life. A significantly positive relation between self-esteem, social support and mental health can also be observed in number of previous researches (Ali & Malik, 2014; Dalia, Nathalie, & Lucia, 2016; Rezaee, 2016; Demir, 2017; Harandi, Taghinasab & Nayeri, 2017; Harikandei, 2017; Maredepour, 2017).

The above discussed findings indicate that students in higher education are suffering from mental health difficulties. It can also be observed that financial constraints are one of the major causes for poor mental health conditions among them. Studies also show that research students, being one of the vulnerable segment of student’s community often deal with mental health issues. But there are few researches known to explore mental health state in relation to financial conditions along with the positive and negative correlates among doctoral students. Moreover, majority of previous studies have been conducted on foreign students.

In today’s society, monetary and financial security is essential for survival. Increases in social comparisons and materialism have increased the basic financial needs. Moreover, due to increased inflation in Indian economy, the basic needs have become expensive, thereby, increasing the cost of survival. Various studies have identified financial constraints as one of the top rated reasons for stress (Parthi & Rohilla, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). However, research indicates that a handful of students stated fellowship as a reason for pursuing Ph.D. (Locke et al., 2018). This suggests that students are in a state of unrest. It is this contradiction in findings that is another major focus of the present study.

Keeping in view above mentioned gaps in the literature there is a need to explore the mental health of research students in the Indian Context. Further an aim to elicit a relationship of the fellowship and non-fellowship holding research students in
relation to financial support. Finally to understand the gender differences in mental health of research students.

Therefore, with an aim of bridging the gaps, the present investigation aimed toward a comparison between fellowship holder and non-fellowship holder and gender differences in research students in Panjab University, Chandigarh, in relation to depression, anxiety, perceived stress, quality of life, self-esteem and social support.

4.2 Rationale of the Study

Doctoral degree is one of the prestigious academic degrees one can achieve in the field of knowledge. It could be attained only after the completion of Doctorate of Philosophy (Ph.D.) program. It is considered to be an introduction into the field of independent research which enables a researcher to conduct a deep rooted and in depth study to gain the knowledge of a potential area or theme. It endeavors at gaining knowledge, exploring facts and resolving problems in accordance with scientific methods, which involve systematic observation, classification, and interpretation of data (Kumar, 2009).

According to Education Indicators in Focus report by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Work Report (2014), total number of doctoral degree holders raised from 158,000 in the year 2000 to 247000 in the year 2012 in OECD countries which indicate a rise of fifty six percent. A similar picture can be observed in the Indian context. As per All India Survey on Higher Education (2017-18) in year 2014-15 total enrollment of students in Ph.D. program was 117301 which is now 161412 in 2017-18. Apart from enrollments a rise in the number of Ph.D. degrees awarded is also documented. In 2014-15 a total of 21830 doctoral degrees were awarded to the students and 34400 students received degree in 2017-18 at the all India level. This shows the significant enhancement of interest of students in the field of doctoral (Ph.D). research. Indian higher educational institutions are also emerging as the preferred place for doing doctoral research among foreign students. According to the AISHE reports, in 2014-15 there were 1142 foreign candidates enrolled for Ph.D. programs and the number increased to 1493 in 2017-18.
In India, State Universities are the preference of majority of the research students. According to University Grant Commission (2018) there are 392 State Universities in India. Out of all the State universities, Panjab University is the only university in north India which is consistently securing a position in the top thirty three universities from 2016 till date (National Institutional Ranking Framework by MHRD, 2016-17-18). Panjab University has also proved its competence in global rankings. According to the Times Higher Education World Ranking 2014-15, leaving behind India’s top educational institutions like IITs and universities in the year 2014-15, Panjab University was ranked as number one. In Panjab University, from 2015 to 2018 one thousand two hundred thirty doctorate degrees were awarded to the students. It means on an average research students of Panjab University had contributed approximately three hundred seven researches in different fields, and in the same period all the Indian higher educational institutes have collectively contributed 109180 doctoral researches to the world (AISHE, 2018). Quality research was one of the major parameters of the ranking methodology.

However, quality research could only be achieved if the individual is persistently hard working, dedicated and loyal towards his work. A huge investment is needed in terms of time, energy, motivation, and money to complete the research viz. collecting literature review, conducting laboratory or field study, conducting experiments, interpreting results, and framing a research story in preparation for writing the final thesis (Marino, Stefan & Blackford, 2014).

Some Ph.D. programs involve only research work but some also require involvement of the researchers in teaching activities and helping teaching faculties in evaluation of examination papers. Whether in terms of project reports, assignments, examinations, dissertation, or research publications, research students have to show their capabilities at various phases of their tenure.

To fulfill all these tasks and carry out Ph.D. research smoothly, some government organizations governed by Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) provide financial support to the students in terms of stipend, fellowships, grants, contingency to the student. Some of such government organizations are University Grant Commission (UGC) now known as Higher Education Commission
of India (HECI), The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) which provide fellowships to the eligible students. In order to avail fellowship to carry out Ph.D. research, students have to pass a test conducted by National Testing Agency (NTA) known as National Eligibility Test (NET). However, despite an array of funding authorities available to research scholars, some students do not manage any kind of fellowship and have to pay their expenses themselves. This added burden of financial difficulties along with the pressure of regular research work adversely affects students’ mental health.

There are various researches which indicated that doctoral students suffer poor mental health as compared to the other students especially the non-fellowship holders (Parthi & Rohilla, 2017, Parthi & Rohilla, 2017a). Instances of scholars discontinuing their doctoral research due to poor mental health conditions are evident (Patterson et al., 2016). According to various studies students suffer from anxiety, depression and other mental health issues (Bayram & Bilgel 2008). In a study (Huyn, et al., 2006), approximately forty-four percent of the Ph.D. students have reported mental health problems that are significantly affecting the wellbeing and academic performance of the students. In order to find out the relevant measures to protect the mental health of the students it is important to carry out intensive researches to explore the potentially vulnerable aspects and the causes behind the poor mental health of research students.

Limited research evidence is available showcasing the mental health status of research scholars in the Indian context. Thus this study is an attempt to investigate the effect of financial support and gender difference on mental health of research students. Further, the study also aims to investigate the correlates and predictors of mental health of research students.