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Beyond Perceptions: A Qualitative Exploration of the Realities and Quality of Ph.D. Research Supervision in Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

Doctoral education plays a fundamental role in the quality of the researchers, scholars and academics that are produced as a result of their work in advancing national development through knowledge creation and innovation. PhD supervision is regarded as the foundation of doctoral training, as it affects the level of completion, the quality of research, and the process of formation of a scholarly identity. Effective supervision is associated with motivational support, timely feedback, collaboration in learning and training of critical thinking skills globally. Nevertheless, even with the importance of supervision identified, the reality of supervisory practices is very different depending on the country especially in the developing world where structural and institutional factors undermine the best supervisory practices. The qualitative study has been planned to investigate the ten themes (Nature of supervisor-student relationship, quality and timeliness of feedback, research guidance and academic support, institutional support and infrastructure, workload and time constraints, cultural and social influences, expectations versus realities of supervision, coping strategies and adaptation, supervisor competence and expertise, communication patterns and interaction frequency, timeliness and quality of supervisor feedback and mentoring and the development of critical thinking) for the exploration of these ten themes, the in-dept interviews with 42 participants (12 supervisors and 30 PhD Scholars) were conducted. The thematic analysis demonstrates that the hierarchical norms and respect to authority tended to restrict open communication and critical involvement in the context of Punjab. At times, students did not like to challenge their supervisors, thus impeding intellectual exchange. Some participants (especially female students) were challenged by gender-related issues, which complicated the experience even more. These results indicate that inclusive and supportive academic conditions should be promoted that promote dialogue and equality. The incompatibility of expectations and realities of supervision was another motif in the chapter. Students had high expectations of mentorship and support in the PhD programs and supervisors had high expectations of independence and self-direction. This lack of alignment resulted in a lack of understanding and contentment. The results highlight the importance of communication of roles and expectations clarification early in the supervisory relationship. Lastly, online supervision tools should be encouraged and enhanced to maximize accessibility, communication, and flexibility to supervisor-student interactions particularly in blended or online learning contexts. Focus has been also placed on trust, respect, power dynamics, mentoring, collaboration, mutual expectations, feedback quality, clarity,

responsiveness, revisions, academic development and research design, methodology, publication guidance, intellectual development for improving the quality of research supervision at PhD Level.

Keywords: Perceptions, realities, PhD research supervision, Punjab.

Introduction

Doctoral education is the most advanced form of formal academic education and is essentially based on the supervisory relationship between the PhD scholar and the supervisor of the research (Piantanida & Garman, 1999). In contrast to undergraduate or taught postgraduate courses, doctoral studies are mainly individualized, self-directed, and research-based, and the quality of the supervision is at the core of the intellectual growth of students, their research competence, scholarly identity construction, and successful completion (Burnett, 1999). The supervisor does not just provide methodological direction, but also mentoring, socialization of the profession, emotional support, and assimilation into disciplinary communities. In turn, the supervisory relationship can become a factor that defines the doctoral candidate as either a productive and empowering experience or an experience of isolation and stress. The issue of doctoral attrition, long time-to-degree, dissatisfaction, and supervisory conflicts has been a concern all over the world, and scholarly attention has been given to the nature and quality of research supervision (Frischer & Larsson, 2000). With the growth of doctoral studies in universities in reaction to the knowledge-economy requirements of the global economy, sustainability and efficacy of supervisory systems have grown more urgent.

The conceptualization of doctoral supervision in the international literature assumes that the process comprises of the following components: academic guidance, enculturation into the research communities, development of critical thinking, and management of relationships (Armstrong, 2004). Lack of clarity and effective communication often leads to tensions between the supervisors and students, which influences satisfaction and progress. Likewise, research shows that the quality of feedback, timeliness, and constructiveness of the feedback are important determinants of the motivation and research performance of doctoral students (Rodwell & Neumann, 2007). This relationship is further complicated by the growing supervisory workloads and institutional pressure on performance, which in most cases limits the possibilities of long-term mentoring. The richness and continuity of engagement can be eroded when supervisors have to deal with large groups of doctoral students and at the same time, achieve research delivery goals (Devos & Verhoeven, 2010). These world trends emphasize the significance of looking at structural and relational aspects of supervision as a unit and not looking at supervision as an interpersonal process.

In Pakistan, doctoral education has grown fast due to reformation efforts by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan to boost the productivity of research and to prepare universities in line with international standards. Although these reforms greatly boosted the number of PhD applications and scholarships, they also had an extreme burden on the institutional supervisory capacity (Akram & Ghani, 2018). In some provinces like Punjab where most of the universities, both public and privately owned, are concentrated, issues of unequal research infrastructure, institutional under-support and over-burden of supervisors are recorded. Despite the focus on the importance of quality assurance and standardized procedures used in the supervision process, empirical research on the actual experience of doctoral supervision by students is rather limited (Boud & Costley, 2012). The national discourse has largely been based on expansion and regulatory frameworks as opposed to relational quality, feedback practices, and supervisory engagement.

Research supervision at PhD level has gained more and more scholarly interest in the recent decades as the number of doctoral programs is growing worldwide and taking a leading position in the knowledge production (Friedlander & Ward, 1984). Research supervision is largely viewed as a multifaceted academic practice, which entails not only the transmission of knowledge but also the acquisition of critical thinking, research competence and scholarly identity (Sayed et al., 1998). The literature has always emphasized that supervision is a determining factor in the success, satisfaction and prompt completion of a doctoral degree in students (Abiddin et al., 2011). In this respect, understanding the perceptions and facts on the quality of supervision have been a crucial topic of research especially in developing nations such as Pakistan where educational systems in higher education are changing at a very high rate.

An extensive literature conceptualizes doctoral supervision as a complex relationship, which goes beyond academic direction (Binns & Potter, 1989). Along with the other dimensions of supervision, functional support, enculturation into academic communities, the development of critical thinking, the encouragement of independence and the fostering of a supportive relationship between the supervisor and the student are just some of the dimensions of seminal work. These dimensions depict that the supervision process is not only task oriented, but also developmental and relational. Proper supervision should thus be a balance between a structured approach and intellectual freedom so as to allow students to become dependent learners but to become independent researchers (Tannenbaum & Berman, 1990).

The literature also highlights that doctoral supervision exists in two wide domains; technical and social support. Technical support (research design, methodology, and academic writing), social support (motivation, emotional encouragement, and interpersonal communication). Both dimensions are essential, as they have a combined impact on the research experiences and results of students (Afzal, 2018). Research has shown that supervisors who can effectively incorporate these dimensions play a significant role in the academic and welfare of the students. On the other hand, a lack in either of the areas may result in dissatisfaction, delays and in others, attrition.

In the world, studies about doctoral supervision have found that there are a number of factors that determine the quality of supervision. These are style of supervision, frequency of contact, clarity of expectations, and supervisor expertise and student research interests. Even the supervisory relationship is referred to as the key to doctoral education. Good relationships that are based on trust, respect and open communication are linked to increased student satisfaction and productivity (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). Conversely, poor communication, opposing expectations, or power disparity in strained relationships can have adverse impacts on confidence, motivation, and performance of students.

A major theme in the literature is the aspect of expectation-reality mismatch in doctoral supervision. The expectations of doctoral students are usually high guidance, constructive feedback, and effective academic mentorship. Empirical studies however do show that these expectations are not always fulfilled in practice. Supervisors tend to have conflicting demands, such as teaching, administrative, and their own research obligations, which may restrict their time and accessibility to students (Boud & Lee, 2010). This expectancy/reality gap is a significant predictor of student perceptions of quality of supervisees and has been associated with dissatisfaction and slow completion.

Another aspect of quality supervision that is mentioned in the literature is the importance of supervisory training and professional development. Although supervision is crucial, most scholars are designated as PhD supervisors on the basis of their research qualification and not based on their mentoring skills (Ali et al., 2018). Consequently, the supervisors can be based on their experiences as doctoral students, which are not necessarily best practices. Researchers contend that systematic training courses and lifelong learning are necessary to help supervisors with the proficiencies to support different student needs, deliver appropriate feedback, and create positive research climates.

Objectives

The primary objective is to explore the students views, their perceptions and the realities about the quality of research supervision at PhD level. As the study is based upon mixed method approach. In qualitative approach different themes related to the quality of research supervision are explored and phrased in the research objectives as nature of supervisor-student relationship, quality and timeliness of feedback, research guidance and academic support, institutional support and infrastructure, workload and time constraints, cultural and social influences, expectations versus realities of supervision, coping strategies and adaptation, supervisor competence and expertise, communication patterns and interaction frequency, timeliness and quality of supervisor feedback and mentoring and the development of critical thinking.

Methodology

The qualitative study has been conducted in six universities of Punjab namely Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), University of Sargodha, University of Gujrat, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi and University of Punjab Lahore. In this study 10 themes related to PhD research supervision have been framed such as (nature of supervisor student relationship, quality and timeliness of feedback, research guidance and academic support, institutional support and infrastructure, workload and time constraints, cultural and social influences, expectations versus realities of supervision, coping strategies and adaptation, supervisor competence and expertise, communication patterns and interaction frequency, timeliness and quality of supervisor feedback and mentoring and the development of critical thinking). The thematic analysis has been carried out to explore the research objectives. In qualitative research in-dept interviews with 12 supervisors (02 from each university) and 30 PhD scholars (05 PhD scholars from each university) were conducted from the different universities namely Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), University of Sargodha, University of Gujrat, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi and University of Punjab Lahore situated in Punjab, Pakistan.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The qualitative part of the research was evaluated with the help of the thematic analysis as the systematic method that allows the researcher to form a profound and significant picture of the information and retain the diversity of the experiences of the participants. The approach was especially suitable to the aim of finding out the perceptions and reality of what the quality of research supervision is like in the PhD level because it enabled the voices and views of participants to be interpreted and captivated accurately. The thematic analysis process started with familiarizing the data. The researcher read and reread the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups to immerse herself in the data. This step

contributed to comprehending the opinions, phrases and hidden meanings of the participants regarding their experiences of research supervision with both positive and negative sides.

Initial codes were created based on the data after familiarization. These codes were significant units of information that were based directly on the responses of the participants, including the problem of communicating with supervisors, delays in feedback, academic support, or professional advice. The coding helped to identify common phrases, ideas, and patterns throughout the dataset. In the following step, similar codes were clustered into larger groups depending on their conceptual similarities. These categories were then further divided into broad themes which summed up the major dimensions of PhD supervision experiences.

The themes related to key domains like quality of supervisory relationships, organizational support, research issues, and expectations and realities. Lastly, the themes identified were critically revised, refined, and confirmed to be reflective of the data. Any overlapping or ambiguous themes were edited to be clear and coherent. Final themes were then explicitly defined and labelled in meaningful and easy to understand terms to facilitate interpretation and comprehension. On the whole, such a demanding thematic analysis process made sure that the qualitative results were systematically obtained, contextually-based, and they represented the real experiences of participants in the quality of research supervision at the PhD level.

Result and Discussion

Qualitative nature of the study enabled in-depth understanding of perceptions and life experience of PhD scholars and supervisors regarding quality of research supervision in Punjab, Pakistan. Thematic analysis helped to interpret semi-structured interviews as a source of data and therefore resulted in the determination of several common themes. These themes encompassed what was perceived to be required of research supervision practices and what actually the research supervision practices at the universities were. Results are discussed in more detail below, along with an interpretative discussion of the same, supported by the relevant literature and contextual information.

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Nature of Supervisor–Student Relationship

One of the most common themes that came about due to the data was the quality of the supervisor student relationship. The participants emphasized that the most important parts of effective supervision were mutual respect and trust and open communication. Some PhD students said that they had great experiences when the supervisors were approachable, supportive, and thought-provoking. According to these participants, such relationships increased their motivation, confidence and research productivity (Abiddin et al., 2009). However, there were also some contradictory experiences observed. Some issues cited by some students include; authoritarian attitudes, lack of accessibility and lack of emotional support by their supervisors. In some cases, bosses were perceived as being overbearing thus limiting academic freedom of students. This created a gap between what students expected of a mentoring relationship and what they actually received in terms of the hierarchical academic relationship. The supervisors were appreciative of the need to balance professionally (Barnett et al., 2007). They noted that they were not always able to provide individualized attention because of the number of supervisees, teaching and administrative responsibilities that they were required to do. According to the findings, the quality of the research supervision is grounded on the relationship between the supervisor and the student. Even though ideal supervision is founded on mentorship and collaboration, institutional

pressures and power imbalances are likely to prevail. This is congruent with the current research that successful supervision should entail the provision of academic direction and interpersonal support. This disenfranchisement of perceptions and realities highlights the role of systematic training programs on supervision to build positive relationships.

Theme 2: Quality and Timeliness of Feedback

Another important theme identified was quality and timeliness of feedback provided by supervisors. Many of the respondents noted that positive and timely feedback was essential in the progression of the different stages of the PhD. students receiving detailed and repeated feedback mentioned an improved course of research and grasp of research methods. However, the participants, many of whom, have also complained of not being satisfied with delayed or unclear feedback (Campbell et al., 2020). The rest of the students claimed they had to wait weeks or even months to receive feedback on their work, and it infuriated them, halting their progress. Others claimed that the feedback was often founded on superficial corrections and not in-depth academic advice. Supervisors conversely observed that the challenges that presented them were workload and lack of time which restricted their performance to provide timely feedback. The other reports also indicated that the absence of preparedness or research skills among students was also a cause of delays in the feedback process (Ellis et al., 2014). Quality feedback is a simple quality supervision measure. The findings show a clear gap between the expected and actual practices, particularly in terms of timeliness and completeness. The issue is symptomatic of institutional issues within higher learning institutions including high teacher-to-student ratio, and lack of accountability mechanisms. To improve the feedback practice, the institution must reinforce the practices, including the work load management and effective supervision policies.

Theme 3: Research Guidance and Academic Support

Research guidance and academic support were frequently brought up by the participants in relation to their doctoral studies. Supervisors who were highly active in terms of advising the students on how to design the research, the method to be used, data analysis and writing of academic papers characterized the positive experiences. These tutors were referred to as mentors who played a crucial role in instilling research competencies among students (Carter, 2015). However, many students reported that they had no guidance particularly at an early part of their studies. Others implied that they were to undergo complex research processes without guidance. This absence of advice was more pronounced in students who had non-research based backgrounds. Supervisors acknowledged that they would like to give directions, but at the same time they would like the students to be independent and initiative. They regarded the doctoral training as a self-guided researchers training. The findings show that there is a conflict between guided studies and independent studies, a common problem in doctoral studies (Heyns et al., 2019). As much as one of the major aims of PhD programs is independence, without appropriate guidance, one may end up being confused and lagging behind. The results suggest that there should be a moderate approach where a systematic support would be provided by the supervisors at the very beginning and gradually independence would be encouraged.

Theme 4: Institutional Support and Infrastructure

The other theme, which was of significant importance, was that of institutional support and infrastructure. The participants emphasized that individual supervisors were not the only ones that were to decide the quality of supervision but that institutional resources and policies were also involved. The presence of research facilities, online libraries, funding and

administrative support were identified to be significant (Denieffe, 2020). In richly equipped universities students reported a better experience, access to new research instruments and are provided with an academic environment. On the other hand, less-resourced schools found that there were problems with access to journals, low funding of research and bureaucracy (Gardner, 2008). Even supervisors expressed concerns about organizational limitations by stating that scarcity of resources, uncertainty and ambiguity of policies were often the obstacles towards successful supervision. These findings point to the significance of the institutional context in the quality of research supervision. Even the most competent supervisors may not provide good leadership in the resource-constrained environments. Systemic changes, therefore, like investment in research infrastructure and institutional policies, are needed to meet the increased quality of supervision.

Theme 5: Workload and Time Constraints

Workload and time constraint were cited by both students and supervisors as a big challenge. Supervisors frequently had several supervisees and teaching and administrative duties which reduced their time. This led to infrequent meetings and feedback lateness. Students, especially those that worked or had family commitments were also challenged by time. Such limitations had an impact on their capacity to continue with their progress in a consistent manner and be fully involved in their research. The workload problem has been an indication of larger structural problems in higher education systems (Hoque et al., 2020). The absence of workload control and high supervisor/student ratios are also contributing to poor quality of supervision. The institutional policies that would solve this problem are to make the workloads manageable and provide time to supervise the issues. Besides these basic problems, there is also no formal scheduling mechanism that exacerbates the problem. Informally, in most situations, supervision meetings are organized based on the mutual convenience and in some instances, not on academic planning. This usually creates openings in communication and confusion over direction of a research. Moreover, supervisors can focus on pressing administrative or exam-related issues instead of supervising students, thereby inadvertently dismissing the needs of students (Kumar & Johnson, 2017). Part-time work and financial stress on the side of students often decrease the amount of time they have to participate in research. There are also students, who do not have proper time management skills at the start of their PhD career, which adds to the delays in developing the proposal, literature review and collecting data stages. As a result, the research schedules are stretched longer than anticipated leading to stress on both sides. The research offices, doctoral training programs and monitoring committees are some of the institutional support systems that can be instrumental in alleviating these challenges. The consistency may be enhanced by structured supervision plans, periodic progress reviews and workload distribution framework. Finally, to improve the quality of supervision, a balanced ecosystem in which the quality of supervision and the students are complemented by realistic time expectations and institutional accommodation is needed.

Theme 6: Cultural and Social Influences

The qualitative data also showed the impact of cultural and social aspects on research supervision. The supervisor-student relationship was frequently influenced by the hierarchical norms and respect to authority in the context of Punjab. There were times that students were reluctant to confront or challenge their supervisors even when they did not agree with their directions. This cultural respect was deeply rooted in the tradition of academic life as the supervisors are perceived as unquestionable authorities instead of academic mentors who

engage in knowledge production through collaboration (Macfadyen et al., 2020). There were also gender dynamics whereby some female students complained of other problems concerning mobility, communication, and expectations of the society. These are some of the factors that affected their relationship with supervisors and their research experience in general. In other instances, female students were limited in their ability to meet with supervisors regularly or attend academic meetings especially in more traditional family backgrounds. This restricted their academic exposure and networking opportunities, peer discussion and collaboration in research. Also, cultural sensitivity in communication between the male supervisors and the female students at times affected the communication style which might either lead to respectful communication or cause emotional distance. The cultural context is an important factor that influences academic relationships (McCormack et al., 2019). Although respect of authority might lead to discipline, punctuality and observation of academic rules, it might also hinder open discussion, critical thinking, and independent thinking. This imbalance may lead to overreliance by the students on the supervisors hence limiting them to build confidence in their academic judgment. Moreover, the fear of negative assessment or the feeling of disrespect can make students unwilling to clarify or disagree, which eventually can impact the quality of the learning process and research outcomes. The results indicate that more accommodating and welcoming academic settings should be developed with a focus on open communication and equal engagement (McIlroy et al., 2021). Universities ought to explore supervisor-level training on culturally responsive mentoring, and the student level training on academic confidence and effective communication. Hierarchical barriers can also be minimized by creating formal feedback procedures, peer discussion groups and mentoring committees. Institutions can improve the quality of research and satisfaction of students without violating cultural values by fostering a more dialogic and less hierarchical culture of supervision.

Theme 7: Expectations versus Realities of Supervision

One common theme that came out in interviews was the mismatch between ideas and actualities of research supervision. Most students joined PhD programs with a lot of hope of being mentored, interacting regularly and being thoroughly guided. Nevertheless, their real life experiences were not as good as these expectations. Students in most instances expected a very formal supervisory procedure that will see them meet with their supervisors regularly, get feedback on drafts and have their academic support available to them at every phase of the research process. The failure of these expectations to be met tended to frustrate the students, create uncertainty, as well as less motivation. On the other hand, supervisors were looking to the students to be proactive, independent and self-motivated. This lack of alignment in expectations resulted in confusion and disappointment at other times (Okolie et al., 2021). Supervisors tended to consider the doctoral process as leading to independent scholarship in which the students were expected to increasingly own their research. Consequently, they anticipated that students would take the initiative to make contacts, do the work first and then request feedback where needed as opposed to being directed at all times. This communication difference produced a distance in the communication styles as students thought that supervisors were less helpful and supervisors thought that students were overly dependent or uninitiated. The discrepancies of expectations and realities bring to the fore the importance of effective communication and role clarification early in the supervisory relationship. Conflicts and dissatisfaction can be minimized by setting expectations and creating a mutual agreement with each other either by signing formal agreements or

conducting orientation programs (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). Responsibilities of the supervisors and students can be outlined clearly using such agreements, such as how often meetings will take place, turnaround time on feedback, and the channels preferred. Moreover, institutional orientation programs of incoming PhD students can potentially help in closing this gap. These programs will assist students in learning what doctoral research is like since it is essentially self-directed and highly autonomous. On the same note, training workshops on effective mentoring skills, communication, and student-centered supervision methods can be helpful to supervisors. The other key aspect is that a common understanding is developed over time. Although some pre-flight expectations can be explained, constant communication is needed to adapt to new challenges in the research process. Periodic progress review meetings, written supervision plans and feedback logs may assist in keeping the two parties on track during the degree. In addition, these expectations may also be determined by cultural and institutional contexts. Supervision in certain academic settings is more prescriptive whereas in others it is more cooperative. Differences in academic backgrounds or educational cultures can be further accentuated when there are differences in students and supervisors (Saeed et al., 2018). Finally, a mix of institutional backing, effective communication, and the willingness to adapt to each other is necessary in order to enhance congruity between expectations and realities. As both the supervisors and students participate in the negotiation of expectations and open discussions, the relationship between supervisors and students will develop in a more fruitful, open, and fulfilling way, with more successful research and less conflict.

Theme 8: Coping Strategies and Adaptation

Though it was difficult, several participants were resilient due to adopting different coping mechanisms. To address supervision gaps, students were helped by colleagues, participating in workshops, and using online materials. Others even formed informal circles among other faculty members, which gave them other academic advice and emotional help in the rough times of their research. Such peer-based collaborations tended to enable students to exchange resources, elucidate methodological challenges, and to stay motivated where formal supervision was not adequate. Study groups also came into being in a number of instances where students were able to discuss issues of research collectively and present feedback on drafts to each other. The supervisors said that they adjusted their supervisory styles depending on the needs of the students and limitations of the institutions. They stressed the importance of life-long learning and professional growth in order to be effective as a supervisor (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021). Other supervisors added that over time they have been able to be more flexible in their supervision using directive and facilitative supervision based on the level of competence and confidence of the student. Others emphasized on self-reflection as a means of enhancing their mentoring practices and keeping in touch with the new research methodologies and academic standards. The availability of coping strategies shows the flexibility of both the students and supervisors. Nonetheless, the use of informal mechanisms emphasizes the importance of having more formal support systems in the institutions. Although these informal strategies can offer relief in the short term, it can also result in inconsistency of the quality of supervision, and the unequal access to support by students. Consequently, institutionalized measures like doctoral training systems, well-organized peer mentoring systems, and ready access to research support centres are needed in order to promote equity and consistency (Almusaed & Almssad, 2020). The qualitative results of the study demonstrated the intricate combination of issues, which can affect the

quality of research supervision in the PhD level in Punjab, Pakistan. Although positive experiences were linked to positive relationships, effective feedback, and good institutional support, a variety of challenges were pinpointed, such as workload pressures, inadequate resources, and cultural constraints. The discussion reveals that there is a big difference between the ideal perceptions and the real practices and that the systemic gains improvements are needed (Corner et al., 2015). These consist of training of supervisors, institutional changes, policy, and improvement of communication systems. These can be further improved by strengthening research infrastructure, providing sufficient funding to doctoral research and setting monitoring mechanisms to monitor the quality of supervision. By solving them, higher education institutes can enhance the standards of research supervision and help to produce qualified, independent and competent in the global arena researchers.

Theme 9: Supervisor Competence and Expertise

One of the themes that came into the limelight as a result of the interviews was the perceived competence and subject expertise of supervisors. Numerous PhD scholars stressed that the quality of supervision highly depended on the academic strength, experience of research and publication of supervisors. Supervisors that were actively involved in research and those who published in reputable journals and those who were abreast with current trends were perceived to be more effective mentors. Students enjoyed having supervisors who were methodologically clear, recommended pertinent literature, and helped them in publishing their work. These supervisors were said to be intellectually stimulating since besides correcting their mistakes, they also assisted the students to think critically and to be independent in carrying out research. Their participation in the scholarly conferences and group projects also improved the exposure of students to the latest research practices (Bazrafkan et al., 2019). Conversely, a few respondents complained of supervisors who were either not well informed or even not engaged in research. This disconnect could occasionally lead to out dated advice, lack of exposure to academic work and low standards of research. Students with this supervision often complained that they had to resort to more self-directed learning, web-based or peer-based support to offset a lack of academic guidance. This also contributed to stalling of research in certain instances, as well as, low trust in academic writing and publication endeavors (Ekpoh, 2016). Supervisors themselves admitted that they had to constantly develop professionally. Others pointed out that the high teaching loads and the lack of institutional incentives limited them in terms of their capacity to carry out continuous research. Management workload, presence of examination, and big classes also decreased the time spent on academic work. This in turn led to the difficulty of active research involvement amongst most of the faculty members, especially where institutions faced limited resources. The results emphasize the fact that effective research supervision is based on the competence of the supervisor (Gube et al., 2017). The difference in the level of expertise of supervisors is a demonstration of more system-wide problems, including the lack of research culture, lack of financial resources, and academic development opportunities. It also emphasizes the need to establish a culture at the institution that regards research productivity as well as teaching duties. The institutions should focus on faculty development, promote research outputs, and develop a systematic mentoring program to supervisors so that the quality will remain the same throughout the departments. Supervisory capacity can also be enhanced by regular workshops on new research methods, publication incentives and international collaboration opportunities. Also, the supervision practices as well as performance evaluation mechanisms that are peer-reviewed may be used to sustain the academic standards. Enhancing competence

of supervisors will eventually lead to better student performance not just in general but also the entire culture of sound and long-term research in institutions of higher learning.

Theme 10: Communication Patterns and Interaction Frequency

The other important dimension that was crucial in the qualitative data was the pattern and the frequency of communication between the supervisors and the students. Regular meetings, effective communication channels, and constructive dialogue were attributed to effective supervision. Students with scheduled meetings stated that they felt supported and were confident in their research progress. These formal engagements contributed to them in elucidating research goals, developing methodologies and getting prompt feedback on drafts that consequently enhanced the overall quality and speed of their work (Gyuris, 2018). In several instances, regular communication also led to a more effective academic rapport where it established a sense of trust and had less anxiety due to research uncertainty. Non-regular communication, however, became a common issue. Other students indicated that they rarely met and that their meetings were usually done when there was a deadline. Such a reactive form of supervision resulted in stress, haste revision and lack of academic discussion. Some others remarked that communication was very unilateral and there was a limited scope of discussion or clarification. Students in these situations were reluctant to make repeated calls to supervisors, particularly when there was a delay in these calls or when such calls were short in duration, something that increased the gap in communication (Hindes & Andrews, 2011). Supervisors indicated that communication gap was sometimes because the students lacked initiative or readiness. They stressed that proper communication involved efforts on both sides. Supervisors reported that students who arrived in meetings without proper preparation frequently lowered the productivity of meetings and engagement, resulting in less fruitful interactions. This stresses the need to share the responsibility of ensuring there is an effective supervisory relationship in which both parties play significant roles in ensuring there is meaningful academic engagement. The results indicate the significance of the organized communication in the doctoral supervision. The lack of frequent communication not only slows down the process but also influences their confidence and motivation, which are also essential to students (Johnson & Umphress, 2019). Another consequence of poor communication is misunderstanding of expectations, direction of the research and interpretation of the feedbacks, which can also make the supervisory process even more complex. To fill this gap, it is possible to establish formal communication procedures: regular meetings, written feedback sessions, and regular progress reports. Moreover, accessibility and continuity can be enhanced through the use of digital communication tools including email tracking systems, online virtual meetings, and online workspaces. Minimum supervision requirements can also be established by institutions to make sure that the departments are consistent. Enhancing communication practices will eventually lead to the more effective research development, better academic relations, and better completion rates on the PhD level.

Theme 11: Timeliness and Quality of Supervisor Feedback

The other theme that studied in the context of the in-depth interviews with the PhD supervisors and scholars at the six selected public universities of Punjab, namely Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), University of Gujrat (UOG), University of Sargodha (UOS), University of the Punjab (PU) Lahore and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi provided feedback by the supervisors. Feedback was a recurring theme across these responses, with participants consistently

identifying it as being a key factor in the successful supervision of a doctorate, either in terms of the quality of the research, how quickly the research was completed, or in strengthening candidate's ability to undertake independent research (Ahmad & Shah, 2018). Although almost everyone recognized the value of giving positive feedback, there were some significant gaps in what actually happens with supervision or feedback at the institutional, departmental, supervisor and relationship levels. The majority of PhD students felt that quality feedback was detailed, timely, constructive and intellectually challenging. They valued supervisors who valued carefully reading their drafts, recognizing methodological problems, referring to the relevant literature, and stimulating reflection, but not just language or formatting corrections. Some scholars say that useful feedback meant more than just pointing out errors; it assisted with comprehension regarding the need for revision and ways that their studies might benefit. These experiences developed their confidence and slowly helped them to be more independent researchers. Supervising students was another core and significant academic role identified (Batool, 2018). A majority of supervisors have indicated that feedback should be systematic, research based and specific to the research needs of the scholar. They highlighted that all the PhD students are in a process of constant intellectual nurturing where the development of originality, critical analysis and scholarly independence are necessary. While there was general consensus that constructive feedback is valuable, there were nevertheless a number of differences in terms of content and quality. Limited and unclear feedback from scholars led to some challenges in understanding expectations and resulted in more revision time for chapters. These divergent accounts suggest that aspects of supervisor feedback, its content, clarity, specificity, and educational value all contributed to its effectiveness. Supervisors who provided feedback in ways that included clarifying both the reason for and the goals of proposed revisions were more successful in getting scholars to agree with them. These connections changed supervising into a mutually instructive experience, and built further belief amongst the supervisors and doctoral researchers. The interviews indicate that constructive feedback from supervisors has a variety of purposes. It enhances the quality of the thesis, enhances methodological skills, and enhances critical thinking, as well as level of intellectual development of the scholar (Han et al., 2022). However, the inconsistency of the feedback given by supervisors raises issues about the feasibility of the supervision process of doctoral scholars at public universities in Punjab. Based on these findings, there is a need to create better information about the standards of supervision, training opportunities for supervisors, and a possibility to encourage frequent, specific, and developmental feedback during the entire period of the doctorate.

Theme 12: Mentoring and the Development of Critical Thinking

The results from the in-depth interviews were striking in that supervisor feedback was seen more as much more than a tool for correcting errors or research progress although seen as such. Feedback, a continuous mentoring process, was described by both supervisors and PhD scholars as a process that gradually immerse the beginning researchers into capable advanced or independent researchers who can create new knowledge. The participants of all the six public universities Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU) Multan, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (IUB), University of Gujrat (UOG), University of Sargodha (UOS), University of the Punjab (PU), Lahore, and PMAS-Arid Agriculture University Rawalpindi repeatedly highlighted the importance of supervisor feedback that had an impact on thesis completion and intellectual, professional and personal growth of the doctoral researchers. The results showed scholars can differentiate between feedback that was just for correcting

technical errors and feedback for development (Afzal, 2018). Feedback for students during development allowed for questioning assumptions, enhancing arguments, investigating alternative viewpoints, and justifying decisions pertaining to methods. This type of interaction developed scholars' capacity to instead think independently rather than relying on their supervisors for all academic choices. Respondents described meaningful supervision as more of a conversation, reflection, and thinking together than as a faultless teaching act. These stories show that good supervisor feedback fostered investigation, not dependency. Collaborating to solve student problems, supervisors taught the scholars to seek out and share their weaknesses and to design solutions (Hamid & Shah, 2018). Participants found that this mentoring style was very important for honing the analytical skills desired by the doctoral graduates. Some supervisors characterized mentoring as a key task in their doctoral supervision. They didn't see themselves as editors and proofreaders they saw as an opportunity to help foster intellectual growth. The supervisors believe that doctoral education sets the standards for scholars to be confident researchers who are able to design a study from ground up, assess evidence and contribute novel knowledge to their disciplines. In these views, supervisors' concerns indicate they perceived mentoring as an educative journey that did not end with the cap and gown (Masood et al., 2023). Their goal was to help develop scholars who could work in national and international research communities. The second common problem was that of feedback in the development of critical thinking. Participants reiterated that doctoral research meant more than just gathering and analysing data it involved the ability to assess other theories, recognise gaps in knowledge, develop sensible arguments, to present research results supported by evidence. Positive comments challenged them and prompted them to think about their claims and the first interpretations in an intellectual way, scholars reported. Feedback served to trigger at higher levels of thinking as revealed in these accounts. The focus on supervisors was not on memorization, but interpretation, synthesis, evaluation and critical reflection (Kelley et al., 2003). Scholars shared that the development process incrementally helped them to improve their self-confidence in analysing research problems, explaining the test result and defending the work during seminars, presentation of research proposals and thesis examination. The interviews also indicated that supervisors purposefully employed probing questions as pedagogical approaches. They did not give solutions but prompted scholars to find more than one to solve a problem. A large number of participants reported that it was a tricky and sometimes difficult method at first but they saw the potential for improving research competence with practice. However, despite these positive experiences, there were differences in mentoring practices cross department and across institutions identified in the interviews. Altogether, these contrasting experiences refer to the difference between feedback that is focused on improving the thesis, and feedback focused on developing the researcher. There does, however, appear to be variation between the six universities, meaning that opportunities for mentoring are not the same for all PhD scholars. These results highlight the need for institutional policies that promote developmental supervision practices, for frequent consultation between learners and supervisors and for supervision development training to provide supervisors with the tools necessary to give developmental feedback that supports the development of the autonomous researcher, rather than simply getting through to write the thesis.

Conclusion

Qualitative study on the perceptions and lived experiences of PhD scholars and supervisors as far as the quality of research supervision in Punjab, Pakistan is concerned was

provided. Based on thematic analysis of data gathered via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the research found a broad spectrum of themes, which when together describe the multi-dimensional and complicated nature of doctoral supervision. The results indicated some positive practices as well as some serious challenges and this gap between expectations and realities remains. The first theme that was among the most noticeable was the character of the supervisor-student relationship. The results highlighted that effective supervision is well-established on mutual respect, trust and open communication. Respondents who had supportive and approachable supervisors said they were more motivated, more confident and productive in the research.

Nevertheless, other experiences were also contrasting and hierarchical relationships along with restricted accessibility and authoritarian attitudes were also barriers to effective supervision. This deviance is representative of the conflict between the ideal mentorship patterns and the actualities that are influenced by institutional forces and cultural traditions. Tightly interconnected with it was the theme of the communication patterns and the frequency of interactions. A frequent and formal communication was found to be a factor in an effective supervision. Those students who had regular meetings with their supervisors felt better directed and encouraged in their research process. On the other hand, un-systematic communication and absence of constructive interaction brought about muddiness, time wastage and dissatisfaction. These results indicate that there should be formal communication patterns in place so as to provide consistency and clarity in the practice of supervision. Quality and timeliness of feedback was another important dimension that was discussed in this chapter. Timely feedback and constructive feedback became a vital part of successful supervision which has a direct impact on academic progress of students. Though a few of the participants claimed that they received extensive and useful feedback, a significant number of them complained about delays and shallow remarks. These problems were commonly because of the overwhelming workloads and competing tasks of supervisors.

The evidence indicates that the enhancement of the feedback systems involves not only the personal commitment but also the institutional one, such as the workload management and responsibility system. The topic of research mentoring and academic support also highlighted the significance of mentorship in the doctoral education. The positive experiences were related to the supervisors who participated in the research design, methodology and writing process. Nevertheless, many students have complained of a lack of support especially at the initial phases of the research. This indicated that there was a severe conflict between the demand to have an independent research and the necessity to have guided instructions. The results indicate that a gradual process of supervision, wherein the assistance is withheld as the students become more competent could be more successful. Institutional support and infrastructure were also found out to determine quality of supervision.

Availability of research materials, financial aid, online libraries and administrative provisions played a great role in the lives of the students. The participants of the institutions with good resources reported higher positive results, whereas those of the environments with fewer resources had to struggle with many difficulties. These results lead to the understanding that the quality of supervision is not only based on the personal level of supervisors but the institutional level on a larger scale. Another key issue that arose and impacted both students and supervisors was workload and time constraints. Supervisors were found to be torn between teaching, administration and supervisory roles and as a result they did not have much time, and their feedback was late. Equally, students had time constraints owing to work and

other personal needs. Such limitations highlight the importance of institutional policies that guarantee workloads that are manageable and sufficient time to supervise. Another aspect of the study that demonstrated the impact of cultural and social factors on supervisory relationships is the role of such factors in this relationship.

The hierarchical norms and respect to authority tended to restrict open communication and critical involvement in the context of Punjab. At times, students did not like to challenge their supervisors, thus impeding intellectual exchange. Some participants (especially female students) were challenged by gender-related issues, which complicated the experience even more. These results indicate that inclusive and supportive academic conditions should be promoted that promote dialogue and equality. The incompatibility of expectations and realities of supervision was another motif in the chapter. Students had high expectations of mentorship and support in the PhD programs and supervisors had high expectations of independence and self-direction. This lack of alignment resulted in a lack of understanding and contentment. The results highlight the importance of communication of roles and expectations clarification early in the supervisory relationship.

Recommendations

- Institutions should develop more powerful feedback mechanisms by stipulating clear and strict schedules within which supervisory feedback should be submitted. This would assist the students to advance in their research in a more organized and timely fashion.
- The necessity to enhance the mechanism of research funding is high. The government and tertiary institutions ought to provide more funding to PhD students to enable them conduct quality research especially in the data collection, fieldwork and publication processes.
- Supervisor workload needs to be enhanced by controlling Supervisor-Student ratio. This would assist in avoiding overwork and making sure that the supervisors are able to pay enough attention and guidance to the individual students.
- Online supervision tools should be encouraged and enhanced to maximize accessibility, communication, and flexibility to supervisor-student interactions particularly in blended or online learning contexts.
- Focus has been also placed on trust, respect, power dynamics, mentoring, collaboration, mutual expectations, feedback quality, clarity, responsiveness, revisions, academic development and research design, methodology, publication guidance, intellectual development for improving the quality of research supervision at PhD Level.

Note: This research article has been derived from my PhD research work titled “Perceptions and Realities about the Quality of Research Supervision at PhD Level in Punjab, Pakistan”.

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