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Abstract

This study explored the perceptions of supervisors and supervisees regarding postgraduate supervision at Pakistani universities. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was adopted, in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from a sample of 250 participants, including 50 supervisors and 200 postgraduate supervisees. Data collection involved a 42 item structured questionnaire for quantitative data and semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample of 35 respondents. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis of [1]. The descriptive results showed that supervisors gave significantly higher ratings for supervision quality, feedback, and guidance than the supervisees did, and higher ratings for supervision quality and timely guidance and feedback were found to be the best predictors of perceived timely completion of supervision. Qualitative results showed six recurring themes: feedback as a facilitator or bottleneck, balance between autonomy and direction, a relationship as a 'hidden curriculum,' institutional hierarchy, difference in supervising norms between disciplines, and cultural and gendered aspects of supervision. This integration indicated that in the Pakistani context, the timely completion of the tasks is not dependent on a sole factor but on the congruence of supervisory feedback, and relationship trust, and institutional efficiency.

Keywords: postgraduate supervision, supervisory feedback, supervisor-supervisee relationship, thesis completion, institutional support.

Introduction

Since the inception of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2002, Pakistan's postgraduate education has grown exponentially, and research degrees have become an integral part of knowledge production and academic competitiveness [2]. The supervisory relationship (ongoing work partnership between research supervisor and supervisee) is one of the most important and under-researched aspects of higher institutes, with its importance growing with the expansion of MS/MPhil and PhD enrollments in both public- and private-sector universities [3]. Research supervision is among the most consistently cited influences on research students' experience, well-being, and completion [4, 5].

Postgraduate supervision involves regular, more frequent, and less intensive interactions: feedback on drafts, guidance when problems arise in research, quality of the working relationship, and institutional support (ethics approval, appointment of examiner, funding, workspace, administrative turnaround) [6]. In particular, feedback acts as a catalyst for learning when it is clear and transparent in terms of objectives, progress, and next steps [7, 8], while experienced supervisors who are accessible, professionally confident with feedback, and provide timely feedback are linked to better student outcomes [9].

While supervision, feedback, and institutional support have been studied separately, comparatively few studies, both nationally and internationally, have investigated these three aspects simultaneously from a comparative perspective employing mixed methods designs [10]. Supervisors may feel they provide more guidance than students feel they receive [6], and self-reflection and well-being of supervisors are relatively under-researched [11]. In Pakistan, although the completion time and administrative dissatisfaction are reported in the literature [12, 13], limited mixed methods evidence (a) is from multiple disciplines and institutions, (b) samples supervisors and supervisees, and (c) statistically compares perceptions and captures qualitative experiences. This study aims to fill this gap.

The current study builds upon the limited research in the Pakistani context that uses mixed methods to allow for systematic representation of both supervisors and supervisees instead of using one to represent the other. It is a multidisciplinary multi-institution study that extends the scope of previous studies conducted at the single-province or single-institution level and operationalizes constructs such as feedback, guidance, relationship, and institutional support, which are discussed separately, into a single integrated framework. In practice, the findings are meant to be used as the basis for developing supervisor training, feedback systems, and administrative reforms in university research offices, graduate schools, and the Higher Education Commission to minimize the type of delay cited in previous research from Pakistan.

Operational definitions

Postgraduate supervision is the continuous academic and professional leadership and guidance of a specific faculty member (the supervisor) given to a postgraduate student (the supervisee) who is working on a thesis/dissertation. Supervisory feedback is verbal or written input that explains the goals, progress, and next steps in the work of a supervisee [7]. Timely guidance is the sense a supervisee has of a supervisor's prompt and sufficient response to their direction requests. Timely

completion is defined as how likely or supported that a supervisee is in completing the degree within the officially prescribed or expected time. A positive supervisor-supervisee relationship is defined as a relationship that supports trust, respect, access, and positive communication between a supervisor and supervisee [4]. Institutional support is defined as the resources available to a university to support research supervision, including administrative, infrastructural, and policy-based assistance, e.g. ethics review turnaround, examiner appointment, funding, workspace, and supervisor training.

Theoretical framework

Interpersonal model of supervision

The interpersonal approach to the relationship between the supervisor and the doctoral student [4], is the main source for the present study, which is a refinement of the general interpersonal-behavior model [13]. Based on these two axes of distance (cooperation and opposition) and influence (dominance and submission), the model defines eight interpersonal styles: leadership, helping/friendly, understanding, student responsibility/freedom, uncertain, dissatisfied, admonishing, and strict. [4] created the questionnaire on supervisor–doctoral student interaction (QSDI) to operationalize this model and provide supervisors with structured feedback on their interpersonal style of supervision and to assist in more effective supervisory paths.

This model was recently qualitatively applied in Hong Kong [14] who interviewed 50 PhD students and 11 supervisors, and the four most cooperative styles were the most reported, linked to positive outcomes such as speeding up their study progress, developing more positive professional thinking, improved well-being, and better career network for the students, and positive reflection, reputation, and less emotional strain for the supervisors. The remaining four more oppositional or submissive styles—uncertain, dissatisfied, admonishing, and strict—were linked to vague directions, lessened growth, and emotional tensions on the part of both parties. Notably, [14] also identified how the relationship influenced the well-being, reputation, and future criteria for selecting a student of the supervisor, which indicates that supervision is not a one-way process, but rather a process that is shared by both student and supervisor. This bi-directional framing, alongside the model of effective feedback developed by [7] serves as a prism of feedback, guidance, and relationship quality in the present study.

Literature Review

Postgraduate supervision is a multifaceted process that extends beyond monitoring students' research progress and thesis completion. It involves academic guidance, professional socialization, intellectual development, emotional support, and the cultivation of research competencies. Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly challenged traditional understandings of supervision as a simple master–apprentice relationship and have reconceptualized it as a dynamic and relational practice involving shared responsibility between supervisors and supervisees.

Researchers in higher education are interested in the significance of doctoral supervision for students' academic development, productivity, well-being and completion. The doctoral supervision has been studied in terms of supervisory roles and practices [15, 16], supervisory competencies [17], supervisory learning and development [18, 19], processes of feedback [20];

supervisory conceptualization [21, 16], and co-supervision [22], supervisory responsibilities and challenges [23], power relations [24], supervision-related support [25]; and mismatches in expectations between supervisors and supervisees [26, 27] have been addressed in the previous studies. Moreover, there have been some recent studies on supervisors' perspectives, practices and pedagogy [12], supervisors' wellbeing [28], supervisory power [24], and novice supervisors' experiences of the supervisory culture [29].

Doctoral supervision and perceptions

A great deal of research has addressed perceptions of doctoral students about their supervision. For example, [30] examined doctoral students' perceptions of their supervision quantitatively, and [31] studied doctorate students' experiences on the supervisory relationship. Similarly, [32] explored the perceptions of South African doctoral students regarding the enhancement of supervision, and [33] examined the perceptions of supervisees of supervision practices and satisfaction. In more recent studies, students' encounters with the quality of feedback and supervision [34] and students' perceptions of the skills that their supervisors appreciate [17] have also been explored.

Such studies have helped greatly to expand our understanding of doctoral supervision, but studies of supervisors' and supervisees' perspectives of the supervisory process are relatively few. The only comparative studies that have been conducted so far have dealt with supervisory support [25], mismatch between the supervisor and the doctoral researcher [26, 27]. Such studies reveal conflicting expectations for communication, feedback, autonomy, responsibilities, and support between supervisors and supervisees. However, these are generally conducted in higher education institutions from the Western world, Europe, Australia or Africa.

Supervision of post-graduates is a fledgling area in Pakistan. The previous studies have largely focused on the supervisees' experiences as they received academic supervision and feedback [34], or the supervisory practices and satisfaction of supervisees [33]. There has been little empirical study on the perceptions of supervisors and supervisees in Pakistani Universities. Further, no research has taken an integrated approach to explore supervision from varying views including supervisory support and communication, feedback quality, research guidance, autonomy, supervisory relationships, supervisory competencies, and institutional support.

This study addresses the following questions

1. How do supervisors and supervisees agree or disagree about supervision quality, feedback, guidance, relationship quality, institutional support and timely completion?
2. What is the relationship between feedback, timely guidance, relationship quality, and institutional support, related to the perceived timely completion?
3. How do supervisors and supervisees describe and make sense of their supervisory experiences in their own words?

Materials and Methods

This study used a convergent parallel (concurrent triangulation) mixed methods (MM) study design [35] that involved conducting a qualitative interview strand and quantitative survey strand within the same period of data collection, analyzing the data from each strand separately using methods appropriate to each type of data, and then combining them at the interpretation stage by using a display of the data from both strands. This design was chosen because the study was not designed to support the creation of one design for the other, but instead to create a representative comparison numerically (as well as an in-depth account of how both the supervisor and supervisee make sense of their supervisory experience) and to consider the points where these two categories of evidence overlap, complement, or conflict.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of research supervisors and MPhil and PhD supervisees who were actively engaged in thesis/ dissertation research work in Pakistani public and private sector Universities from five broad areas of disciplines (Natural and Physical Sciences and Engineering and Computer Science, Social Sciences and Humanities, Business and Management Sciences and Education). A power analysis was performed a priori using G*Power 3.1 [36] for multiple linear regression with four predictors, $\alpha = .05$, power = .80, and a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$) that yielded a minimum participant sample size of 85. The supervisee sample size of n = 200, suggesting adequate statistical power for the planned analyses.

Participants' informed consent

We declare that prior to conducting this research, we adhered to the institutional and ethical requirements and this study was reviewed and approved by Institutional Ethical Review Committee (Approval No. IERC/136). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation, including permission to audio-record the interviews for research purposes. All participants were assured that their participation or refusal will not impact their academic or professional performance, and all answers were anonymized for analysis to reduce any possible power dynamic.

Stratified random sampling was employed for the quantitative strand; the strata were defined by a combination of discipline cluster, role (supervisor/supervisee), and institutional sector (public/private) and proportionate allocation within each stratum. The targeted distribution by discipline is provided in provided in the table 1.

Table 1. Targeted sample distribution across disciplinary clusters

DISCIPLINE CLUSTER	SUPERVISORS (N)	SUPERVISEES (N)	TOTAL (N)	% OF SAMPLE
SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES	12	48	60	24.0%
NATURAL & PHYSICAL SCIENCES	10	40	50	20.0%
ENGINEERING & COMPUTER SCIENCE	10	42	52	20.8%
BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT SCIENCES	9	36	45	18.0%

EDUCATION	9	34	43	17.2%
TOTAL	50	200	250	100%

Note. Figures represent the targeted sampling.

A purposive maximum variation sampling approach was used to select a sub-sample of 35 participants (15 supervisors and 20 supervisees) from the quantitative survey respondents who indicated they would like to be contacted for an interview, with a particular effort to ensure that the sample contained a variety of disciplines, institutional sector, years of supervisory experience or stage of study, and gender, and continued until thematic saturation was deemed to have been achieved.

Instruments

Quantitative instrument

A structured self-administered questionnaire was used that contained 42 items divided into six sub scales rated on a 5 point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). To facilitate comparison, there were two different versions of the questionnaire: one from the supervisor's point of view and one from the supervisee's point of view, but the content of the items was kept the same. The table 2, shows the theoretical basis for development of the instrument.

Table 2. Theoretical basis of the research instrument

SUBSCALE	NO. OF ITEMS	THEORETICAL / EMPIRICAL BASIS
SUPERVISION QUALITY	7	[37], [14].
SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	7	[7], [9].
TIMELY GUIDANCE	6	[4]
SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	8	[4], [14].
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	8	[4], [37], [14].
TIMELY COMPLETION (PERCEIVED)	6	[4].
TOTAL SCALE ITEMS	42	

Qualitative instrument

Two semi-structured interview guides were created, one for supervisors and the other for supervisees, with each containing 9–10 open-ended questions about: overall supervisory experience; feedback practices; guidance and setting timelines; nature of the working relationship; institutional facilitators and barriers; and recommendations for improving supervision. Follow-up probing questions were employed to obtain definite examples.

Validity and reliability

Content validity was ensured by five subject-matter experts in higher education and research methodology, who evaluated the clarity of the items, their relevance, and coverage of the items with the construct domains; items were modified as per their inputs. It was then pre-tested with 35 respondents (15 supervisors and 20 supervisees) not part of the main sample and inter-item reliability was determined through Cronbach's alpha level. In the qualitative strand,

trustworthiness was approached by double coding by two researchers, Cohen's Kappa was used to determine inter-rater agreement, preliminary themes were member checked with a small number of interviewees and an audit trail of coding decisions was maintained.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected from the selected Pakistani universities between March and May 2025 using semi-structured Interviews and questionnaire survey with the doctoral supervisors and doctoral students. Before data collection, formal permission was requested from the research or graduate offices of all the universities and ethical approval was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee of the universities. This quantitative questionnaire was distributed over an 8-week period and was administered electronically via an online form (digital completion) or paper (no reliable internet) with completion time estimated at 15-20 minutes. Qualitative interviews were also individually arranged; were by video call or face-to-face with the participants' choice; lasted around 30-45 minutes; and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The details of supervisor and supervisee's demographic information and reliability are presented in the tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Demographic profile of supervisors (n = 50)

CHARACTERISTIC	CATEGORY	N	%
GENDER	Male	33	66.0%
	Female	17	34.0%
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR	Public	38	76.0%
	Private	12	24.0%
YEARS OF SUPERVISORY EXPERIENCE	< 5 years	18	36.0%
	5–10 years	19	38.0%
	> 10 years	13	26.0%
NO. OF STUDENTS CURRENTLY SUPERVISING	1–3	21	42.0%
	4–6	19	38.0%
	7 or more	10	20.0%

Table 4. Demographic profile of supervisees (n = 200)

CHARACTERISTIC	CATEGORY	N	%
GENDER	Male	118	59.0%
	Female	82	41.0%
INSTITUTIONAL SECTOR	Public	152	76.0%
	Private	48	24.0%
DEGREE PROGRAM	MS / MPhil	142	71.0%
	PhD	58	29.0%
STAGE OF RESEARCH	Proposal / Coursework	54	27.0%
	Data Collection	68	34.0%
	Writing / Analysis	52	26.0%
	Submitted / Under External Review	26	13.0%

The table 5 shows the internal consistency scores for each subscale combined across all subjects (N = 250). All subscales exceeded the conventional threshold of α = .70, indicating acceptable to good reliability.

Table 5. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients by subscale

Subscale	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
SUPERVISION QUALITY	7	.84
SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	7	.87
TIMELY GUIDANCE	6	.81
SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	8	.89
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	8	.85
TIMELY COMPLETION (PERCEIVED)	6	.78
OVERALL SCALE	42	.92

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS (version 27). All subscales were calculated using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) separated by role (supervisor and supervisee). Mean scores of supervisors and supervisees were compared using independent-samples t-tests and Cohen's d was reported as effect size. The Pearson product-moment correlations were calculated between feedback, guidance, relationship, institutional support, and perceived timely completion. A standard multiple linear regression was used with perceived timely completion as the outcome variable and feedback, guidance, relationship quality and institutional support as predictors entered simultaneously.

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke [1], comprising the six stages of familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and theme naming, was used to analyze the qualitative data with coding and data management. The quantitative and qualitative findings were then combined in a joint display table (10) guided by [35] convergent mixed-methods design.

Results

In the following sections, the quantitative and qualitative results are presented. Tables from 6 to 8 present mean scores descriptively, Pearson correlation and regression statistics. It is important to mention that correlational and regression analyses were computed on supervisee data only, as perceived timely completion was conceptually most relevant to the supervisee experience.

Table 6. Comparison of supervisor and supervisee mean scores

CONSTRUCT	SUPERVISORS M (SD)	SUPERVISEES M (SD)	T (248)	P	COHEN'S D
SUPERVISION QUALITY	4.21 (0.52)	3.64 (0.71)	5.21	< .001	0.61
SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	4.05 (0.61)	3.31 (0.79)	6.02	< .001	0.71
TIMELY GUIDANCE	3.98 (0.58)	3.27 (0.82)	5.74	< .001	0.68
SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	4.15 (0.55)	3.89 (0.68)	2.41	.017	0.29
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	3.02 (0.74)	2.78 (0.81)	1.92	.056	0.23

PERCEIVED TIMELY COMPLETION	3.45 (0.69)	2.96 (0.88)	3.68	< .001	0.45

Note. Scale range 1–5. df = 248 for all comparisons.

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics and results of the independent-samples t-test comparisons between the mean scores of supervisors and supervisees for all six constructs. Supervisors rated each measure of supervision quality, supervisory feedback, timely guidance, supervisor–supervisee relationship, and perceived timely completion significantly higher than supervisees, with the largest differences occurring on supervisory feedback (d = 0.71) and timely guidance (d = 0.68), both of which are considered medium to large effects. The relationship quality difference was statistically significant (p=.017), while institutional support did not reach conventional significance (p=056).

Table 7. Pearson correlations among predictor variables and perceived timely completion (n = 200)

VARIABLE	1	2	3	4	5
1. SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	—				
2. TIMELY GUIDANCE	.66	—			
3. SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	.49	.44	—		
4. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	.38	.41	.33	—	
5. PERCEIVED TIMELY COMPLETION	.52	.58	.41	.37	—

Note. p < .01, two-tailed.

The correlations between supervisory feedback, timely guidance, relationship quality, institutional support, and perceived timely completion, based on supervisee responses (n = 200). The relationships were positive and statistically significant (p < .01), with the strongest relationships between timely guidance (r = .58), supervisory feedback (r = .52), and perceived timely completion, followed by the relationship with quality (r = .41) and institutional support (r = .37). All predictor variables were also moderately to strongly intercorrelated (rs = .33 to .66), which is consistent with the conceptual framework that regards the variables as related but distinct shown in the table 7.

Table 8. Multiple regression predicting perceived timely completion (n = 200)

PREDICTOR	B	SE	B	T	P
SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	0.27	0.07	0.24	3.86	< .001
TIMELY GUIDANCE	0.32	0.06	0.31	5.33	< .001
SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	0.14	0.07	0.13	2.00	.047
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	0.19	0.06	0.18	3.17	.002

Note. $R^2 = .46$, Adjusted $R^2 = .45$, $F(4, 195) = 41.32$, $p < .001$.

Perceived timely completion was the outcome variable in a standard multiple linear regression analysis, with supervision (supervisee data), timely guidance, relationship quality, and institutional support entered simultaneously as predictors (n = 200). The overall model was statistically significant and accounted for a significant amount of variance in perceived timely completion, $R^2 = .46$, adjusted $R^2 = .45$, $F (4, 195) = 41.32$, $p < .001$. All four predictors had unique relationships

with the outcome with the timely guidance predictor being the strongest $\beta = .31$ $p < .001$, followed by. supervisory feedback $\beta = .24$ $p < .001$, institutional support $\beta = .18$ $p = .002$, and relationship quality $\beta = .13$ $p = .047$, as presented in table, 8).

Qualitative results

The qualitative results indicate emerging themes in the study. The table 9 shows six themes from the 35 semi-structured interviews (15 supervisors and 20 supervisees). The actual verbatim excepts from participants are presented.

Table 9. Summary of qualitative themes

THEME	KEY SUB-THEMES	PRIMARILY RAISED BY
1. FEEDBACK AS A LIFELINE OR A BOTTLENECK	Prompt, specific feedback accelerates progress; vague/delayed feedback stalls work; mismatched sense of feedback adequacy	Both groups
2. BALANCING AUTONOMY AND DIRECTION	Value of independent thinking; risk of feeling adrift without checkpoints; calibrating guidance to competence	Both groups
3. RELATIONSHIP AS A HIDDEN CURRICULUM	Trust/accessibility shape help-seeking; hierarchy and respect norms; relationship affects supervisor well-being	Both groups
4. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	Delays in approvals/examiner appointment; heavy supervisory workload; publication requirements as a bottleneck	Both groups
5. DISCIPLINARY VARIATION IN SUPERVISORY NORMS	Lab-based fields: frequent structured meetings; social science/humanities: more independent contact; differing pacing expectations	Both groups
6. CULTURAL AND GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF SUPERVISION	Hesitancy to challenge supervisors openly; work-family balance and timelines; informal mentorship networks	Primarily supervisees

Theme 1: Feedback as a lifeline or a bottleneck

Supervisors and supervisees both indicated that feedback was the most important point of contact within the supervisory relationship.

> As a supervisor, I am bound to provide timely feedback to my supervisee and I do it within one or two weeks. It is reasonable. (Supervisor, Private University).

For supervisees who were given timely and specific feedback, it was reported to promote their progress, whereas for those who did not receive it until later or were given general comments, they said that it delayed their progress weeks by weeks as they struggled to understand what was expected of them.

> When I see my feedback back soon from my supervisor, I continue working. However, if it takes longer time than expected so I forget when I left off. (Supervisee, Public University).

By comparison, some supervisors reported providing them with feedback that they believed they had provided, but did not seem to be aware that their supervisees had received gaps or ambiguity. This was consistent with the international research findings of supervisor - supervisee mismatches reported by the supervisees [14].

Theme 2: Balancing autonomy and direction

Supervisees generally appreciated having the opportunity to think for themselves, but a few identified an undesirable "other end" of the spectrum where their lack of support made them feel unsure if they were going right.

> To be honest, I like my supervisor to tell me if I am on the right track with my research – having some early milestones to check with that. I value his independence and to have had a bit more guidance in my first year. (supervisee, Private University).

Supervisors, in turn, said they would purposefully adjust the amount of direction given, depending on what they thought students were capable of.

> I allow students to make mistakes, and that's how they learn—some students need that and some want me to approve every choice. I try to balance it according to what they need, but it's not always correct. (supervisor, Public University).

The challenge arose when the expectations of the supervisee of the supervisor for guidance and the assumptions of the supervisor about the appropriate level of independence do not match, especially in the beginning of the candidature, when a framework for basic research is still being developed.

Theme 3: Relationship as a hidden curriculum

In terms of postgraduate supervision, interpersonal relationship was identified as influencing both supervisees' willingness to share problems and seek extensions and supervisors' own feelings of doing well and their reputation.

> Never say to the supervisor that I'm behind schedule directly, I always go to a senior student first to find out if I'm behind schedule. (Supervisee, Public University)

> You should not write a complete narrative. You don't have to write a full story. (Supervisee, Public University)

> If my supervisor seems interested in what I am doing, and if she respects me as a person, then I feel comfortable going with a problem. If she doesn't respect me as a person, then I feel like not bothering her. (Supervisee, Private University).

Many supervisees mentioned hierarchical and respectful norms which limited their capacity to challenge a supervisor's directives straightaway, and led them to seek advice informally from senior colleagues.

Theme 4: Institutional Support

Collectively, responses from both supervisor and supervisee demonstrate less satisfactory responses about their institutes role in research supervision.

> I was ready to submit my thesis, but academic approval didn't come in time; then finding examiners was a delay; my supervisor pushed through as much as he could, but the institution takes its own time. (Supervisee, Private University)

> I manage 9 students at the moment, I'm very close to all of them, but do not have any institutional support. I also have the journal requirement, the HEC requirement, students publishing before they have time to think about their work, it's not fair for anybody. (Supervisor, Public University)

Responses from both groups indicate less or no support from their parental department or institutes for exceeding their research journey. For example, slow response to ethics approval, delayed appointment and confirmation of external examiners, and pressures to publish a paper in an HEC recognized 'Y' 'X' or 'W' journals prior to being allowed to graduate were the institutional and administrative delays. These institutional unnecessary procedures and delays were reported to be a source of frustration, which is consistent with the findings of [13]. Waheed et al. (2021). A number of supervisors also reported that heavy workload due to multiple students supervised at the same time restricted attention they could give to each student.

Theme 5: Disciplinary variation in supervisory norms

Participants from laboratory and technical backgrounds found that regular, formal research group meetings were commonplace, whereas those from the social sciences and humanities more commonly worked at the individual level with more sporadic contact at milestones.

> Lab meetings are set up every Tuesday and Thursday morning, and everyone shares their progress on the project or technical problems they may have. It's intense, and everyone knows where they're at and what they have to do. The structure is comforting. (Supervisee, Public University).

> My supervisor and I meet monthly, or when I have a draft I read a lot and think a lot; the freedom to work at your own pace is so important for this kind of work; I can't do this kind of work if I have to report weekly. (Supervisee, Public University).

Variation in disciplines affects meetings with supervisor. The above statements indicate a clear difference in frequency of meetings between supervisor and supervisor. The two patterns were both found to be feasible if expectations were clearly stated.

Theme 6: Cultural and gendered dimension of supervision

Some female supervisees mentioned that having domestic or family commitments affected how well they could keep up with supervisor-imposed deadlines, while several noted that they sought informal support from other female supervisees or mentors (often other women in their department) for the types of feedback or encouragement that they were not comfortable asking for from their (in most cases male) supervisor.

> I have an aging mother to take care of, and 2 school-aged children, and my male colleagues don't have that burden, I explain to my supervisor, but he takes my explanation, but my female colleagues have that burden and they don't need an explanation. (Supervisee, Private University).
>
> I have learned more from my informal learning group of other female scholars in the institute about how to deal with my supervisor than from any orientation. (Supervisee, Private University).

These same trends were not seen in male supervisees. Some supervisors recognized gender issues related to the supervisory relationship, but few were aware of institutionalized structures and processes to formally address the issues.

In all six themes, a similar pattern was observed, supervisors and supervisees lived in different interpretive worlds about what was considered adequate and meaningful in supervision. This was not a result of dishonest motives on either side, but simply the result of unexamined assumptions in the norms of the disciplines, institutional structures, cultural hierarchies, and the experience of the supervisors.

Integration

Table 10 shows the combined quantitative and qualitative results of each of the four predictor constructs. Feedback and guidance proved to be the constructs with the largest gaps between supervisor and supervisee and best quantitative relationships to completion, as well as the constructs most often and vividly discussed in interviews. The pattern of institutional support was more complementary than other patterns: both groups rated the level of institutional support relatively low, but the extensive qualitative description with emotion, which was not captured by the quantitative rating alone, gave an indication of its importance and how it reinforces the impact of feedback and guidance.

Table 10. Joint display: Integration of quantitative and qualitative results.

CONSTRUCT	QUANTITATIVE SIGNAL	RELATED QUALITATIVE THEME(S)	PATTERN
SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK	Largest supervisor-supervisee gap (d = 0.71); strongest correlate of completion (r = .52) and a significant regression predictor (β = .24)	Theme 1 — Feedback as a Lifeline or a Bottleneck	Convergent: both strands identify feedback as central, but disagree on its adequacy
TIMELY GUIDANCE	Large gap (d = 0.68); strongest regression predictor of completion (β = .31)	Theme 2 — Balancing Autonomy and Direction	Convergent: guidance most strongly tied to completion in both strands
SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONSHIP	Smallest significant gap (d = 0.29); weakest, though still significant, regression predictor (β = .13)	Theme 3 — The Relationship as a Hidden Curriculum	Complementary: quantitatively modest, but qualitatively described as

			foundational to the other three constructs
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	Lowest-rated construct for both groups; gap not statistically significant ($p = .056$); significant regression predictor ($\beta = .18$)	Theme 4 — Institutional Bureaucracy as a Silent Obstacle	Convergent: shared dissatisfaction across roles, reinforced strongly in interview data

The results show that supervisors often reported giving adequate feedback, direction and support in their relationships, while supervisees reported gaps, ambiguity and unmet needs in their supervisory relationships. More importantly, supervisor and supervisee rated lowest intuitional support which is very eye-opening for postgraduate supervision in Pakistani universities

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of supervisors and supervisees regarding research supervision, feedback, timely guidance, timely completion, quality of relationship, and institutional support in Pakistani universities and to draw a comprehensive picture of factors that facilitate or impede timely completion based on survey and interview data.

Supervisors reported higher ratings for supervision quality, feedback, and guidance than supervisees did, align with the general literature on supervision that suggests that the perception of guidance received by supervisees is lower than that of their supervisors [14]. This is not to imply that either party is wrong; rather, that the same supervisory activity, whether it be a comment on a draft, brief meeting, or a reply to an email, can be perceived differently depending on the student's level of study, workload, and their need for reassurance, as [9] found, timeliness and quality of feedback to be central to how students judge supervisory adequacy. Notably, the difference between two groups was significantly reduced for the quality of the relationship and eliminated for institutional support, indicating that the discrepancies between supervisor and supervisee do not reflect just a general form of biased self-report but instead lie specifically with the more discretionary, supervisor-controlled behaviors of feedback and guidance, while both groups rate the institutional environment around them as equally constrained.

The results showed that feedback and guidance, and supervisory feedback, were the most significant predictors of timely completion, which supports [7] argument that feedback is most effective when it gives direction and next steps. That relationship quality does not imply unimportance of the relationship, but rather, as the qualitative theme of the relationship as a 'hidden curriculum suggests, it may mediate the relationship with the completion, in that it is possible that the relationship influences the supervisees' willingness to seek out feedback and guidance that is predictive of completion more directly, rather than only through the indirect mediation of their relation with the relationship quality.

The qualitative themes significantly complement the quantitative one. The institutional hierarchy provides some flesh on the substantial bone of quantitative support for institution, which is further echoed by [13] description of doctoral candidates' extended anxiety-inducing external review and publication processes after they finished their own work. As designed, Theme 6 (cultural and

gendered dimensions) brings up a category not captured by the quantitative subscales, which could be useful to include in future versions of the survey instrument, as salient for several supervisees, especially females.

The joint display (see table, 10) suggests that, overall, there is convergence between the two strands, though the signal from institutional support is fairly weak quantitatively, as evidenced by the fact that it was the lowest mean rating of the six constructs for the two groups combined, and by the fact that the supervisor-supervisee gap was not statistically significant. A convergent mixed-methods design is designed to bring to light this type of insight [35]. If the quantitative data indicate that institutional support was the 'least important' construct, given the weakest between-group difference, the qualitative data show that support is a shared, deeply felt constraint, on top of feedback and guidance, rather than independent of them.

The six themes together show that postgraduate supervision in Pakistani universities is situated at a point of intersection between various and sometimes conflicting forces at the systemic level. While also adapting to students' varying needs and situations, supervisors are expected to mentor independent researchers, ensure their publications, deal with large number of students and institutional formalities, and maintain cultural hierarchies. Additional gender-based relational hesitancy stemming from the hierarchy culture and gender-based domestic expectations are especially challenging for female supervisees. The figures do not indicate that any individual supervisor or supervisee is failing; instead, they highlight a system of constraints (ratio of supervisors to supervisees, publication pressures for quantity versus quality, slow institutional approvals, lack of formal pathways to highlight and address gender and disciplinary differences in practice). Realistic change requires attention to the conditions of supervision (structural conditions) as well as attention to supervisor training and orientation.

Conclusion

This study shows that the process of supervision is principally relational and systemic and cannot be limited to individual behaviors or technical fixes. The relationships between supervisors and supervisees did not necessarily correspond with the quantity of interaction or the level of autonomy, but rather with the congruency of expectations. The supervisor's relationship with their supervisee, institutional processes, and the supervisee's circumstances all move in similar directions rather than in conflicting directions that separate the supervisory relationship from its disciplinary, institutional, and socio-cultural context. This study draws attention to the need for institutional reform rather than the development of individual supervisors, as the slow progress of ethics reviews, delayed appointments of examiners, and publication requirements that HEs impose on doctoral students are all-time by-products of institutional inadequacy. Timely completion should not be regarded as a measure of the productivity of the supervisee or the effectiveness of the supervisor, but rather as an indicator of a healthy system—the institution ought to be organized to allow for good scholarship, and the task of supervisors and supervisees should not be impossible within impossible constraints. Future research should explore not only how supervision can be improved, but also what institutional and policy changes are needed to make it a genuinely possible enterprise in Pakistani universities and similar settings throughout the Global South.

Declarations

Competing Interests

Authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author [I.B.] upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval

All methods

The Institutional Ethics Review Committee, University of Sindh, reviewed and approved this study (approval no. IERC/136). This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards approved of by the Committee.

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Participant consent

This study used a Google consent form to collect data and to brief participants about the research and their contribution.

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