



## Supervision of Research at Higher Education: Perception and Practices of Supervisors in Karachi Pakistan

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this research study was to find the perceptions and practices of researchers who supervised the research scholars at the higher education level. It is the common complaint of the students that their supervisors do not cooperate and resultantly the research study does not complete quite well in time. A quality research approach was adopted for the purpose, and sixteen research supervisors were interviewed. Responses of the supervisors who were included in this research for finding problems the supervisors are facing in the process of research supervision at higher education level, data were collected through open-ended questions which were presented during personal interviews to supervisors from private and government universities, both from social sciences and from applied sciences. While the findings of this research show more than these problems which supervisors are facing. It is recommended that the supervisor's point of view should also take into consideration, and further researches should be conducted to analyses hidden areas of this process.*

**Key Words:** Supervisory, Higher Education, Perception, Practices.

### Introduction

Writing a research dissertation is the final, mandatory, and crucial part of the process of higher education at the MPhil / PhD level. [Skerritt and Ryan \(1994\)](#) discuss the quality of education at the higher education level. Research at this point requires solid academic grounding, personal efforts, and proper guidance from a research supervisor. Guidance and supervision at the early stage of the research process mostly depend on supervisors. Any problem in this process directly impacts the process of research, on the research candidate, and finally on the outcome of research quality. In Pakistan, research culture is not very refined, and there is still a concept that research is only for academic purposes. That is why the person who is involved in research feels helpless and faces many problems during the whole process of conducting research.

In the institutions of higher education, although the demand for quality research is increasing, the pressure of higher education is increasing. [Buttery \(2005\)](#) finds those elements that influence efficiency in postgraduate supervisory practice arrangements. All universities are trying to increase their research production both from teaching faculty as well as from students by increasing the number of Ph.D. students. Good quality research required good faculty, good facilities, and a conducive environment to produce worthwhile and good quality research, which can be useful for the country and be productive for industries.

Universities in Pakistan are facing problems in hiring qualified and experienced supervisors because of brain drain. Those who are in the field are facing different problems because of many factors ([Fatima, Mahmood, & Hashmi, 2004](#)). The research process requires peace of mind, a good supportive, and encouraging environment for good production. The quality of research in Pakistan is always in question, but the reasons behind it also need investigation. There are many dissertations related to the problems of research students; like [Sakurai \(2012\)](#)

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researched factors affecting international doctoral students' academic engagement, simultaneously tried to determine the reasons of drop-out within Pakistan, as well as in other countries, because of the number of affected persons and its importance for the future of students a large number of researches have been done, [Andrew \(2012\)](#) works on supervising doctoral candidates at a distance also highlighted the importance of research for development, but very few researches have been conducted related to problems that supervisors face in the process of supervision. With special reference to Pakistan, there is no work on uncovering the problems and suggestions related to supervision.

The general objective of this research is to highlight the perception and practices of supervisors in Karachi, while the specific objectives are to find out the answers to the following questions:

- What are the hurdles in the process of supervision?
- Which factors and dimensions are responsible for the problems of supervisors and supervision?
- And how these problems can be solved??

[Zarah \(2018\)](#) discusses the importance of conducting research. [Green & Bowden \(2012\)](#) and [Meyer & Land \(2006\)](#), in their work about overcoming the barriers to student's problems, also presented students' viewpoints. Perhaps this research can highlight the factors that can be changed and can bring progress and betterment in the process of supervision [Love \(2001\)](#) highlights new changes in the research process that will indirectly impact the quality of research undertaken. ([Severinsson, 2015](#)). The researcher knows that this topic is very sensitive. Stakeholders like students, administration, and supervisors are reluctant to commit and to provide true information, and this research team shall keep in mind all ethical considerations to develop the confidence of the respondents.

## Review of Literature

Researchers worked on almost all important dimensions of the process of education and highlighted the importance of research at all levels of the educational process, especially in higher education. Research conducted by [Jenssen \(2004\)](#) to find perspectives on quality supervision and the problem students encountered in the process of supervision identified those characteristics which students identified were supervisors being encouraging, mentoring, and who are positive, empowering, motivated, and committed and having expertise in the field of research. She also tried to analyze student's problems in conducting research. A research was conducted at University OTAGO New Zealand Graduate Research School Te Kura Rangahau Taura. Which also covered the student's perception of a good research supervisor and the quality of good supervision.

They said that the supervisor's poor communication skills and personal dislike or disagreement with the research proposal or project, or his lack of up-to-date knowledge, as well as unrealistic expectations, are the main problems in the development and working of valuable research. In the opinion of some other students, the Supervisor is too busy to be effective in his/her role. Many studies have examined student dissatisfaction with supervision. University of Rwanda ([NUR, \(2010\)](#)). *provided a thorough report related to research problems in Rwanda*. However, there is also considerable uneasiness among academic staff about the extent of their supervisory role and functions. [Moses \(2006\)](#) writes that not only in students but there is also considerable uneasiness among academic staff about the expected roles and functions of supervision. In this research, the researchers tried to find those strategies and approaches that they think can be effective in the process of supervision, both experienced and inexperienced; those practices and strategies were explored which can facilitate effective supervision. [Severinsson \(2015\)](#), in her work on Doctoral Education in Nursing and Midwifery in which she interviewed 15 persons for identifying the nature of the research supervisory relationship, findings say that a dynamic, trusting supervisory relationship is a prerequisite for excellence in the supervisory research process. [Kam's \(1997\)](#) study also explored how a student's role expectation of the supervisor interacts with how a supervisor conducts the supervisory process to produce 'quality' supervision". [Sakurai's \(2012\)](#) finding says that Departmental issues had the largest proportion of hindering factors overall, and respondents of this research Considering dropping out in higher education were significantly associated with hindering factors related to their supervision and departmental issues. [Andrew \(2012\)](#) describes the challenges of post-traditional, distance Ph.D. supervision and suggests pedagogical interventions to bridge the distance. The paper investigated the skills and understandings

necessary for mediating the supervisor-supervisee dyad within faceless encounters. [Bowden \(2014\)](#) discussed the need for developing awareness of the multi-faceted nature of the potential problems that arise in doctoral-level education and the requirements to address such problems across all levels – individual, organizational and national.

Research is a tool for building knowledge and for facilitating knowledge Zarah (2018) Research is required not just for students and academics, but for all professionals [Patton \(. 2002\)](#) most of the researches identified problems of researchers, their expectations from supervisors, and institutions but the perception of supervisors and the hurdles they face during this process is a very neglected area of study that requires thorough research to enable this interactive work to bring good results.

## **Methodology**

This research is qualitative and descriptive based on the requirement of the research problem; it is preferred to take in-depth interviews to develop strategies to investigate and probe the supervisors; this method provided their views from different angles or dimensions, which helped in analyzing specific and important angles of the problem under study [Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland, \(2013\)](#) says interviews are especially useful in aiding interview discussion where topics are sensitive and interviewees may feel awkward talking about particular issues and also because filling questionnaires and collecting them from very busy professors and research supervisors was a difficult task. Academicians prefer to give an interview as compared to filling questionnaires.

## **Population**

As the research supervision is mostly at higher education level, and universities are the hubs for conducting and supervising research, university teachers with more than ten years experience of conducting research were selected as population, supervisors from both government and private universities were included from social sciences and applied sciences departments.

## **Sample**

Data comprised of long in-depth interviews of sixteen university teachers who are involved in research supervision at Masters, M.Phil. and the Ph.D. level was selected through purposive than simple random sampling, as taking time to have an interview is a very difficult task because of the very busy schedule of the teachers. Whenever a question is required to answer, it is necessary to look at it from different directions.so, supervisors from both social sciences and applied sciences (N=8+8), where ten males and six females were interviewed. (N=10 M+6F) .

## **Data Collection and Analyses**

Data were collected through open-ended questions through one-hour intensive interviews. Interviews were conducted at respondents working place, and responses were recorded with the consent of the respondents. The data were analyzed using [Charmaz's \(2014\)](#) constructivist grounded theory approach, which encourages to treat research as the construction of knowledge, attending to actions, words, and process ([Bryant, 2002](#))—recording fine details of what, who, and how, identifying the conditions and what had happened. The researcher selected the participants who have firsthand experience, did an in-depth exploration of the participants, reliance on open-ended questions to get detailed responses, understand the respondent's perception, meaning, and experiences, and focused on specific words for finding hidden assumptions of the participants.

## **Results and Discussions**

Responses of the supervisors who were included in this research for finding problems the supervisors are facing in the process of research supervision at higher education level, data were collected through open-ended questions which were presented during personal interviews to supervisors from private and government universities, both from social sciences and from applied sciences. Full opportunity was given to present their

views regarding problem areas, and they were asked to elaborate on those problems. Responses were recorded, thereafter specific similarities and differences were sorted.

### **Administrative and Procedural Difficulties**

Supervisors explained how they face difficulties in the process of research, starting from the intake of students at M Phil or Ph.D. level, all those students who meet minimum marks criteria in admission test or their comprehensive exam get admission, And university associates them with different supervisors without having any preliminary meeting between supervisor and student, if several faculty is less sometimes more students are associated with one supervisor, which proves them, students take admission, and after completing their course work normally join their jobs beyond his capacity, students choose their research topics and supervisors are forced to accept because course work extends up to 4-5 semesters because of a shortage of teaching staff universities do not offer more than two courses in one semester. In this condition, students cannot devote sufficient time to their research work, and the time limit to complete their research is left very short. HEC Pakistan has ranked the national and international journals, i.e., 'W', 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' ('W' is considered the topic category), keeping in view their indexing with indexing agencies and citation, and HEC makes it mandatory to publish a research paper in an 'X' category journal before submitting its Ph.D. thesis. This process increases the responsibility of a supervisor to make efforts for its publication also. After completing a research dissertation, the selection of examiners is also a very long process; if you do not have a good relationship with your HOD, sending your student's work can take years as finding relevant subject foreign experts is a very difficult task since universities do not pay an honorarium to foreign examiners, so few take an interest in doing this work. Respondents from science faculty said that getting a research grant is a very difficult process, and due to a shortage of funds, we cannot provide the chemicals needed for conducting research. It is a very long process, and most supervisors or students have to bear the cost from their pockets.

Supervisors also showed their concerns about frequent changes in research policies by the department. Some showed their concern about delayed approvals from the relevant bodies like BASR (Board of Advance Study and Research; a body approving research projects in Pakistani universities). Some supervisors asserted that there are ghost authors who fulfil the requirement by departmental heads to be authors of all student/faculty papers. This practice discourages genuine research.

### **Supervisor's Problems Related to Students**

Most students in the sciences qualify for employment after completing their M.Sc. Once they obtain employment, students do not take an interest in doing M.Phil. or Ph.D. as they lose motivation. Most girls opt for M.Phil. or Ph.D., but most of them get married and leave the work in the middle, so all the efforts of the research supervisors are wasted; if they try to continue, then they want to change their timings according to their convenience, which in the long run cannot go be sustained. According to [Fitzsimmons, Anderson, McKenzie, Chen, and Turbill \(2003\)](#), most students have very poor academic English language skills, which make them unable to express their concepts, and they lose motivation and leave their work in the middle, [Kam \(2018\)](#), pointed out the supervisor's dependency factor, this research also confirms that they want their supervisor to write their thesis for them or rewrite their whole work. Not only such students lack proper knowledge of research methodology or the subject in which they are conducting research, therefore, so they do not conform to the research timelines (They ask for extensions, do not submit required quality work. Students compare different research supervisors (student bias) - they have different reasons; sometimes they prefer the more qualified ones, and sometimes they want supervisors who will get their task done easily they are not concerned with the quality of their research.

### **Supervision and HEC**

All respondents were very much concerned with the role of HEC in the research process. One respondent said that the present demand of HEC on publication not only developing mental pressure on all teaching faculty but they are more troubling for research supervisors, as they have to maintain their research work as well as they

have to make student's work accepted for publication because, without prior paper publication, students will not get their degree. Respondents from the private university raised the issue of competition of publication and said that this rush pulling everyone towards numbers of researches and this is compromising quality. A participant agreed that in the department of sciences it is required to produce industry-based research, finding and taking industrial-based real problem required good and frequent relationship with the industries and university department of ORIC is responsible for developing association with the industry a government university supervisor reported that in universities this department is not very active, so researchers have to develop personal links with the industries to get research problems or research projects. A participant raised the issue of getting research grants said that this process is time-consuming and difficult with a heavyweight of other teaching responsibilities. One supervisor said that industry-based research projects need a large amount of money to purchase chemical which is not available in the university especially in a government university, which is a severe problem for researchers.

### **Relationship Factors**

It was very unusual when in response to questions about problem areas of the research process, one respondent express his feeling of anger with the persons who are responsible for allocating students to the faculty members and for approval of research proposal said that its common practice that if you do not have a very positive relationship with the head, he or she will not give any student of Ph.D. to you because they do not want the strengthening of your CV or they, force good students of the department to be enrolled with them. Other respondents strongly agreed that heads of the department keep proposal files of the students pending and do not sign, so that time allotted by the BASR should lapse and to avoid the registration of other students; and no one has any remedy for this procrastination under the present rules.

### **Personal Problems**

Respondents also said that their departments do not consider their problems, participants generally agreed that those who undertake supervision should have less classwork, but they are not given this facility or relaxation. And because of the heavy teaching burden, they can take leaves, neither for their work nor for going out to find resources for their student's research work.

### **Gender Discrimination**

Conversely, a senior faculty member from the government university voiced her concern about gender discrimination in giving research supervision to female faculty members, Head of the department pre-assumed that females are not very much competent in scientific methods and statistical methods; it is difficult for them to supervise Ph.D. [Holbrook, A. \(2001\)](#), "About research skills, learning and research supervision research indicated skills needed for research and female respondent said they have these skill and can conduct supervision, another female student strongly showed her concerns related to gender discrimination in assigning students to the supervisors. The authorities avoid assigning female supervisors to male students, another participant generally agreed. Male supervisors answered that going to solve research-related problems, chemicals, equipment is all very difficult for ladies to buy. so they (ladies) pass these types of work to male members of the faculty, so what is the use of supervising them? A male private university supervisor also reported this type of behaviour in educational institutes.

As discussed, there are several types of research related to student's problems in research. [Moses \(2006\)](#), discussed supervision difficulties at the higher education level. [Safdari and Delaram \(2007\)](#), [Fitzsimmons, Anderson, McKenzie, Chen, Turbill \(2003\)](#) discussed fourth-year student's thesis problems in which researchers highlighted so many factors related to supervisors [Dehghani \(2009\)](#) also find the same factors which are problem areas for a research student like Ann (2004) in her research lists these problems:

- The Supervisor Lacks Commitment and Interest.
- Tensions or Conflict in Perspectives from within the Supervisory Panel.
- Poor Communication and Disagreements About the Project.

- Conflicting or Unrealistic Expectations of each other.
- Selfishness and Disrespect.
- The Supervisor is not Up-to-Date in the Field.
- The Supervisor lacks experience in Research and/or Supervision. Personality Clashes.

While the findings of this research show more than these problems which supervisors are facing, it is recommended that the supervisor's point of view should also take into consideration and further researches should be conducted to analyse hidden areas of this process.

### **Recommendations**

When asked to suggest solutions to these problems, the respondents suggested that: While giving admission at M.Phil. or Ph.D. level, proficiency in expressive academic language should be one criterion, as the most frequent reason for abandoning research is this problem. There must be an open meeting with all registered students and all research supervisors, for that department can circulate CVs of supervisors so the student can match their area of research with the area of interest of the supervisors. HOD should not be involved in the early process of research, so students can select their supervisors sharing their areas of interest. A schedule should be given to the department from BASR, for finalizing and signing research proposals to avoid time lapse. Proper funding should be given to the supervisors through an easy process so the research process can be run smoothly. Those conducting and supervising research should have less teaching workload (not more than 9 credit hours). A mechanism should be developed to minimize the interference of the HOD in the research process.

Publication of research paper in the Y category is an unrealistic demand from the students, as there are very few research journals in social sciences with the Y category, and in Pakistan, very few in science disciplines. Process of appointing foreign experts, sending thesis, and receiving research reports also needs modification and improvement. Research supervisors should be given proper allowance per student to maximize motivation towards research. Gender discrimination should be avoided as females are also showing excellent performance in all the fields of education and research.

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