

## Original Article

**Perceptions of the Masters' students about postgraduate research supervision**

Aisha Liaquat

General Practitioner, MBBS, MHPE, Vienna Austria

**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Postgraduate degrees cause stress and tension for master's students. Many postgraduate masters' students face anxiety and ambiguity when carrying out the research. If these anxieties and ambiguities are not managed well, it could adversely influence the process and the standard of research. Many postgraduate masters' students discontinue their studies or do not finish their postgraduate degrees within the specified time. The type of supervision the student gets is the most significant aspect which determines the timely completion of postgraduate research. The study on the perception of postgraduate master's students can help them to improve the research work in postgraduate studies. It will address many issues of the postgraduate master students.

**Objective:** This study explores the perceptions of postgraduate masters' students about research supervision.

**Method:** This study was conducted using a qualitative approach. Eight postgraduate masters' students were selected using homogenous purposive sampling. The data was gathered by open-ended questions. Thematic analysis was done by framework analysis. An inductive approach was used. The obtained codes were categorized following themes.

**Results:** Findings from postgraduate masters' students have merged into following three themes: knowledge, support and guidance and availability. The first theme is knowledge. According to students the supervisor should be knowledgeable and interested in students' project. The second theme is support and guidance. Different approaches of supervision are required for different postgraduate students. Effective communication of the supervisor with students and timely and thorough feedback can provide students with intellectual and psychological assistance. Third theme is availability of the supervisor which should be as per requirement of the students.

**Conclusion:** Supervisors can assist students in reducing their ambiguity and anxiety in the initial phases of the research journey by helping them in the selection of feasible research topics and by providing the required intellectual and psychological assistance. There is a need for regular communication between the student and supervisor. Feedback should be constructive, timely, and according to the requirements of the students.

**KEYWORDS:** Postgraduate research supervision, master's supervision, uncertainties, perceptions, effective supervision, timely completion

**doi:** <https://doi.org/10.53708/hpej.v4i2.1329>

This is an Open Access article and is licensed under a creative commons attribution (4.0 international License).

**INTRODUCTION**

Pakistan has under-five mortality of 74.9 per 1,000 live births. Research supervision, in the educational context, is a procedure to aid the student in becoming an autonomous and competent researcher in his discipline (Cekiso et al., 2019). The quality of post-graduate research depends on effective supervision. Post-graduate research supervision is a complicated form of instruction that requires educational and interpersonal skills (Agricola et al., 2020). It needs precision, transparency, encouragement, and competencies of both the supervisor and the student. Post-graduate research supervision involves two individuals (student and supervisor) who may have similar or conflicting views about a particular issue. For a positive outcome

of the research, their views should be modified in such a way that they merge into one another and proceed side by side (Mushoriwa & Nyakutse, 2014).

In the case of post-graduate studies, it has been established that post-graduate degrees are identified as a period of anxiety and unpredictability for the students (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021). There are two stimuli of students' anxiety: one about the entire process of research and the other one in the students themselves about their capability to do research. Severe uncertainty is generated when the students have to choose the topic of research in unknown territory. Research is a different learning process that causes uncertainty among the students who do it for the first time. Many postgraduate students have self-doubt about their capability to do research which in turn decreases their self-efficacy. It causes difficulty in engaging with the research which may lead to withdrawal, procrastination, or poor quality of work (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021). Universities quantify

**Correspondence:**

Dr Aisha Liaquat,

Email address: [aishaliaquat6@gmail.com](mailto:aishaliaquat6@gmail.com), Cell: +43 676 3578970

Received: Feb 27, 2021 Accepted: April 14, 2021

Funding Source: Nil

postgraduate students' success by the timely accomplishment of their degree which is also affected by program capacity issues, policies, strategies, resources, and the teacher-student relationships. However, students have a different opinion and maintain that the main issue with the timely accomplishment of their degree is ineffective supervision (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Many studies reveal that many postgraduate students quit or are unable to complete their degrees within the specified time due to ineffective supervision. The type of supervision the student gets is the most significant aspect which decides the timely completion of postgraduate research (Cekiso et al., 2019). The current issues with the timely accomplishment of the postgraduate degrees have illuminated crucial queries about conventional strategies to research education (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Institutions have been challenged to inspect their strategies, research courses, and educators who supervise the entire process. Practices and procedures have surely improved with the passage of time but the supervisors need to improve further to facilitate the students. Research supervisors should be aware of the different IQ levels of various students. The level of the supervisor's assistance should vary as per the requirements of the students. The idea that one type of supervision is appropriate for all students will not provide the desired results in the present situation (Agricola et al., 2020). Evidence indicates that different and vague expectations from both student and supervisor can produce troubles in the student-supervisor relationship. For an effective supervisory relationship, the roles of the student and supervisor should be understood explicitly (P. A. Ali et al., 2016). Efficient supervisors facilitate their students to generate high-quality research and complete their studies in time.

The students know their educational issues much better as compared to anyone else. The perceptions of the students can be productive in devising the solutions to these issues. However, the views of the students about postgraduate research have not been given due weightage in the existing literature. Perceptions are very significant as they indicate about thinking of people about a particular matter. Perceptions affect a person's belief about how things should be done (Mushoriwa & Nyakutse, 2014). A pilot study is conducted to determine the perceptions of postgraduate master students about research supervision. The study on the perception of students can improve the standard of research work for postgraduate studies. In view of such information, the university can improve the standard of supervision for the researchers and their research work. Numerous studies were done on this topic previously have asked students for responses within the limitations set up by the Likert Scale having predetermined statements. The current study provides an opportunity for students to express their views by allowing them to give a description in their own words about postgraduate research supervision. This study primarily focuses on the perceptions of

master's students about post-graduate research supervision. As masters' students do not have a comprehensive understanding of the subject, so, it is very challenging for them to find a feasible research topic with good scope and gaps in the literature. The recommendations of this pilot study would help to enhance our understanding of how to boost the capacity and well-being of the masters' students so that they can timely accomplish their postgraduate studies.

## METHODS

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. The aim of this study is to obtain an insight into the perceptions of master's students about postgraduate research supervision. A self-developed interview guide with open-ended questions was employed to get the perceptions of the masters' students about postgraduate research supervision. It didn't provide the participants with a fixed set of answers and participants can give responses in their own words.

The selected student number of students for this study are eight. Purposive homogenous sampling was done.

Thematic analysis was done by framework analysis after familiarization and immersion in the data. An inductive approach was used. A thematic framework was developed according to the study objectives and literature review before doing an analysis of the data.

## RESULTS

The following themes and sub themes were identified:

### 1. KNOWLEDGE

The first theme is knowledge which includes the following subthemes:

#### Attributes of an effective supervisor:

The students indicated that a supervisor should be supportive, knowledgeable, interested in the students' research project and enthusiastic the following extract demonstrates the attributes of an effective supervisor:

"A supervisor should be well informed, empathetic and keen"

He should be aware of the differences in IQ level of the students and the level of assistance should be according to the needs of the students.

### 2. ADVICE AND GUIDANCE

The second theme is advice and guidance which includes the following subthemes:

#### Helps in the selection of topic:

The level of his assistance given by the supervisor should be according to the needs of students. Masters' students experience intense uncertainty when they have to choose a topic for research and about the scope of the project. Students indicated that the supervisor should help them in the topic selection which is

very challenging for the postgraduate masters' students. The following extract indicates the student's perception:

"Supervisor should help the student in the selection of a topic which is feasible, worth exploring and is according to the students' interest. To make choices in an unknown area seems very difficult. He should guide me whenever I need help"

It is clear that the supervisor should guide the student in the selection of the topic which is doable for the student. Attention should be paid to the interest of the student to keep him motivated during the entire journey of research. He should help and guide him whenever the student needs advice. So, they need more guidance and help in the initial stages of their research journey.

#### **Feedback:**

On the basis of information received from open-ended questions, students indicated that supervisors should give constructive and prompt feedback to them. Feedback given by the supervisor should be according to the students' needs with explicit advice on how to improve their work.

"Supervisor should give clear, timely, and constructive feedback. It should be thorough. Feedback should be written and verbal. During verbal feedback questioning is possible and written feedback can be reviewed when required"

Students display elevated levels of motivation when they receive constructive and positive feedback from the supervisor. It will help the postgraduate students to use their time effectively. Both verbal and written feedback is preferred. Demoralizing feedback can cause annoyance and frustration in the students.

#### **Communication:**

Direct, frequent, and honest communication is very important to address the challenges faced by either the supervisor or student. The supervisor should be friendly and promote direct communication with the student. Lack of proper communication between supervisor and student adversely affects the progression of postgraduate degrees (Yousefi et al., 2015).

"Communication between the student and supervisor can be made more effective by scheduling regular meetings. Effective communication is very essential for a smooth progression of a research project. It would help to clarify the confusions we have in our minds regarding our research project"

To assure success in any professional relationship, effective and frequent communication is necessary.

#### **Emotional and psychological support:**

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to counsel and give the needed intellectual and psychological assistance to the students. The post-graduate masters' students desired effective mentorship which would encourage and support them during

the research journey. The absence of that mentorship can cause students annoyance and frustration.

"The supervisor should be the students' safe place where students can confide their worries"

There is a variation of the students' uncertainty as a roller coaster along their research track but the severe peaks of uncertainty are experienced by the students at the beginning of their research journey. There are consecutive peaks of uncertainty at the different levels of their research journey. So, the emotional and psychological support given by the supervisor helps them to get through this process smoothly.

### **3. AVAILABILITY OF SUPERVISOR:**

The third theme is availability of supervisor which includes the following sub theme:

#### **Contact with the supervisor:**

The students indicated that the frequency of contact with the supervisor should be as per requirement and according to the need of the students. A supervisor should be available whenever a student needs him.

"A supervisor should be available whenever I need him. He should be accessible and present whenever I need help rather than an unapproachable entity rarely seen"

It is clear that the supervisor is expected to be available to the students whenever they need help which would aid them to manage their research in time. The more the supervisory interactions are, the more comfortable and more confident the students feel (Mahesar et al., 2020).

### **DISCUSSION**

Most of the time, educational supervisors use a usual script for every postgraduate student. However, different approaches of supervision are needed for different students as per their requirements. Postgraduate masters' students do not have holistic understanding of the subject. Therefore, they struggle more to choose an appropriate topic and find the gaps in the literature as compared to the doctorate students. The unrestricted nature of the research and the requirement of an enquiring brain is difficult for many postgraduate students. Many postgraduate students have self-doubt about their capacity to do research which in turn decreases their self-efficacy leading to withdrawal from the research or procrastination of their work. There are also consecutive peaks of uncertainty at the different levels of their research journey. So, the emotional and psychological support given by the supervisor helps them to get through this process smoothly (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021). To make supervision effective for the postgraduate masters' students, it should be flexible and adapted according to the requirements and interests of the students. Due to different research topics and needs of the students in research, the supervisor's role increases substantially

to guide the students individually (Zaheer & Munir, 2020). He has to advise the students about their shortcomings in their research and guide them for improvement in this regard.

A supervisor should be knowledgeable, well-informed, empathetic, enthusiastic and interested in the students' research project (Orellana et al., 2016). Attention should be paid to the interest of the student to keep him motivated during the entire journey of research. He should help the student to define and develop realistic plan through schedule planning. Effective supervision is the key to the successful and timely completion of postgraduate study. According to the students more advice is needed at the beginning of the research journey, therefore, the supervisor should assist the student in the selection of the research topic and should guide him about the scope and feasibility of the project. Students in postgraduate degree programs expect to maintain the momentum of the study and to complete their postgraduate degrees in time. So, they expect in time and prompt feedback from their supervisors throughout the research period (Njambi Kimani, 2014). He should be available to the student whenever the student needs help and should promote direct and effective communication. Direct, frequent, and honest communication is very important to address the challenges faced by either the supervisor or student. Lack of proper communication between supervisor and student adversely affects the progression of postgraduate degrees (Yousefi et al., 2015).

### CONCLUSION

It is important to provide supervisors the opportunities to learn new skills through formal education which can help them to develop research expertise for promoting timely accomplishment of postgraduate degrees. It is important to mention that supervisor development programs have become very common these days because they have the standards of supervisory qualities and records of authorized supervisors. However, the availability of supervision remains a continuous challenge for the students. Therefore, it should be ensured that the supervisors remain available to the students as per their requirements. Supervisors should also acknowledge the importance of external factors and look for the methods to address those factors which influence postgraduate research supervision (McCallin & Nayar, 2012). Post-graduate masters' students' experiences of anxiety at different stages of postgraduate research can be further explored. It would help supervisors in devising various methods to control the uncertainty and anxiety of the students during postgraduate research supervision which would improve the quality and outcome of postgraduate research.

### DECLARATION

The author report no declaration of interest.

### REFERENCES

- Agricola, B. T., Prins, F. J., van der Schaaf, M. F., & van Tartwijk, J. (2020). Supervisor and Student Perspectives on Undergraduate Thesis Supervision in Higher Education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1775115>
- Agricola, B. T., Prins, F. J., van der Schaaf, M. F., & van Tartwijk, J. (2020). Supervisor and Student Perspectives on Undergraduate Thesis Supervision in Higher Education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1775115>
- Albertyn, R., & Bennett, K. (2021). Containing and harnessing uncertainty during postgraduate research supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1775559>
- Ali, J., Ullah, H., & Sanauddin, N. (2019). Postgraduate research supervision: Exploring the lived experience of Pakistani postgraduate students. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*.
- Ali, P. A., Watson, R., & Dhingra, K. (2016). Postgraduate research students' and their supervisors' attitudes towards supervision. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3541>
- Cekiso, M., Tshotsho, B., Masha, R., & Saziwa, T. (2019). Supervision experiences of postgraduate research students at one South African higher education institution. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.20853/33-3-2913>
- Davis, D. (2019). Students' perceptions of supervisory qualities: What do students want? what do they believe they receive? *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4361>
- Mahesar, P. A., Jabeen, F., & Pathan, M. (2020). Supervision of Research at Higher Education: Perception and Practices of Supervisors in Karachi Pakistan. *Global Regional Review*. [https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2020\(v-iii\).25](https://doi.org/10.31703/grr.2020(v-iii).25)
- McCallin, A., & Nayar, S. (2012). Postgraduate research supervision: A critical review of current practice. In *Teaching in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.590979>
- Muraranza, C., Mtshali, F., & Mthembu, S. Z. (2016). Research supervision: Perceptions of postgraduate nursing students at a higher education institution in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. *African Journal of Health Professions Education*. <https://doi.org/10.7196/ajhpe.2016.v8i2.294>
- Mushoriwa, T. D., & Nyakutse, G. (2014). M.Ed graduates' perceptions of thesis supervision, writing and defence. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n8p319>

Orellana, M. L., Darder, A., Pérez, A., & Salinas, J. (2016). Improving doctoral success by matching PhD students with supervisors. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3404>

Ribau, I. (2020). Doctoral supervisors and PhD students' perceptions about the supervision process in a young European university. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.080105>

Yousefi, A., Bazrafkan, L., & Yamani, N. (2015). A qualitative inquiry into the challenges and complexities of research supervision: viewpoints of postgraduate students and faculty members. *Journal of Advances in Medical Education & Professionalism*.

Zaheer, M., & Munir, S. (2020). Research supervision in distance learning: issues and challenges. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/aaouj-01-2020-0003>.

#### **AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION**

1. Dr Aisha Liaquat. Manuscript preparation, study design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation of results.