

Analysis of MPhil/PhD Supervisor's Relationship Development and Communication Competence

Muhammad Sher Baz Ali *

Ashfaque Ahmad Shah †

Muhammad Sarwar ‡

Abstract *The purpose of this research was to analyse the relationship development and communication competence of MPhil/PhD supervisors. A confirmatory mixed-methods research design was used to conduct the study in two stages. For both phases, 360 MPhil/PhD graduates and 72 supervisors were selected from four public universities in Punjab using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected electronically from 239 MPhil/PhD graduates during phase-I using an adapted questionnaire from ASHA's supervision model, while in phase-II, 72 MPhil/PhD supervisors were interviewed to cross-check the Phase-I findings. According to MPhil/PhD graduates, their supervisors have relationship development and communication competence. During interviews, most MPhil/PhD supervisors refute their supervisees' claims and offer suggestions to improve supervisors' competence. Based on supervisor suggestions, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan should revise the supervision structure, provide Postdoctoral fellowships to all supervisors, and promote international conferences. This study may be helpful to supervisors in self-evaluation as well as understanding relationship development and communication competence.*

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Introduction

The goal of supervision, regardless of the discipline, theoretical basis, or orientation, is to increase the practitioner's knowledge and competence (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007). Students entering university have high expectations for achieving a goal such as a higher degree and the opportunities that this will provide for future careers. In higher education, research supervision is critical in preparing students to become researchers (Wisker, 2008).

A study was conducted to examine graduate supervision capacity and competence, which is still a significant barrier for many South African higher education institutions. Concerned in this article is the extent to which rapid development of supervision competence among faculty will come at the expense of learning as a "process" and deep conceptual development of the young academic. How do new supervisors negotiate liminality while learning to be researchers and teaching the craft to their assigned research

students? A structured, accredited postgraduate supervision programme was taught at seven merged higher education institutions in South Africa from 2014 to 2016. I contend that high-level research supervision is dependent on a set of minimum research supervision competencies, the attainment of which causes a process-oriented approach. Young novice faculty, on the other hand, must negotiate a precarious futuristic utopia in which they learn the research "trade/craft" as an apprentice while also teaching the research "trade/craft" to research candidates they supervise (Maistry, 2017).

The supervisory process is defined as "interaction between the supervisor and the supervisee that may be related to the supervisor or student's behaviour or to the programme in which the supervisor and supervisee are employed" (Waller et al., 2018). Anderson's approach does not exclusively place the supervisor in the expert role. Her attention is

* PhD Scholar, Department of Education, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Dean, Faculty of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Baltistan Skardu, Pakistan.

‡ Director, QEC, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan.

drawn to the supervisory process. She claims that "supervision exists on a continuum that spans a professional career, and there are interaction styles that are appropriate for each stage of the continuum" (Anderson, 2002).

Supervision competence is regarded as crucial for improving the quality and effectiveness of supervisees' research work. Many researchers have diverted their attention to the study of supervision competence. For example, (Al-Muallem, 2018) believes that the supervisory process assists practitioners in improving their reflective skills and closing the gap between theory and practice. Supervision is an opportunity to receive support, both practically and theoretically, in the form of recommendations, ideas, or suggestions (Hoy & Forsyth, 1986).

Doctorate supervisors play a significant role in doctoral supervision, and successful research education programmes require 'excellent' doctoral supervision. The changing nature of universities, as well as the apparent shift in doctoral supervision practises, has heightened the need to clarify the nature and scope of contemporary doctoral supervision work. The pedagogy of doctoral supervision has been described as poorly articulated and under-theorized by some and as a sort of secret business by others: As an intensive form of supervisor-student engagement, supervision entails professional commitment. The various layers of the supervisor-student relationship are always addressed. (Alleyne et al., 2010; Ostrom et al., 2013; Pearson & Brew, 2002)

There has been much discussion about developing a single definition for communication competence that is acceptable to scholars and intellectuals in the field. In this regard, there have been a plethora of definitions on the subject over the years. The following two definitions highlight the differing views projected by scholars on this matter. Communication competence is defined as "awareness of appropriate communication patterns in a given situation and the ability to apply that knowledge." However, a few argue that communication competence is related to an individual's ability to adapt effectively to their surroundings over time (Amador et al., 2015).

It is critical to figure out the factors contributing to supervisee disclosure in supervision as a critical factor influencing the

effectiveness of supervision. Researchers investigated the relationships between supervisee disclosure and two types of supervision variables: supervisory working alliance and supervisory style. In two of these studies, the researchers used qualitative inquiry to examine supervisees' disclosure experiences in supervision. In both studies, supervisees reported hesitating to disclose when their supervisory relationships were problematic, but they tended to disclose more when their supervisory relationships were positive (Kavanagh et al., 2003; Mori et al., 2009).

In summary, most studies on supervisor competence were conducted in western countries. A study was conducted in Pakistan to learn about the effects of principal supervision practices on the work performance and growth of primary school teachers. There is a need to investigate the effects of school principals' supervision practices on teachers' work performance and growth in Pakistani society (Yousaf, 2018). It can be concluded from the preceding research work that, at the international level, most studies were conducted to find supervisory competence in various educational environments using various testing models. In comparison to other supervision models presented to estimate supervisors' supervision competence, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association defines supervision competence model under the guidance of Reuler, Messick, Gavett, McCready, & Raleigh (2011), which was published in the Plan for Developing Resources and Training Opportunities in Clinical Supervision (ASHA, 2008). ASHA's tool was used for clinical supervision but not for academic supervision, and the current study is doing the same to test relationship development and communication competence in academic supervision according to ASHA's supervision model (2016).

Material and Methods

In this section, methods and procedures are explained that were used to execute this study.

The procedure of the Study

A mixed-methods approach was used in this study. The mixed-methods design figures out whether qualitative or quantitative data are

collected first, whether data is combined or separated for analysis, and whether data is combined or separated for analysis ([Klassen et al., 2012](#)).

The mixed-methods design specifies whether qualitative data is gathered; first, quantitative data is gathered first, or both are gathered simultaneously. It decides whether to combine or keep data separate for analysis. This design also determined where researchers could continue to combine and mix the two types of data while collecting data, between data collection and analysis, and during or after data interpretation ([Fetters et al., 2013](#)).

There are six types of mixed methods designs; the convergent parallel design collects both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time. The data collection phase of the explanatory sequential design is divided into two phases. Quantitative data are collected in phase one, and qualitative data are collected in phase two to explain the quantitative results ([Klassen et al., 2012](#)). This design is also called confirmatory mixed methods design ([Cotten et al., 1999](#)). The exploratory sequential design seeks to investigate a phenomenon by collecting qualitative data first, followed by quantitative data to describe the relationships found in the qualitative data.

According to the embedded design, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently. However, one type of data supports another type of data; supportive data can be quantitative or qualitative. The transformative design defines the study's purpose and addresses value-based and ideological issues such as racism and ethical disability. ([Green, 2007](#)). The multiphase design describes a series of phases used by a team of researchers to investigate a problem. It is built on convergent, explanatory, exploratory, and embedded design principles ([Gill & Werner, 2008](#); [O'Cathain et al., 2007](#)).

However, in this study, the researcher did not collect data concurrently, did not investigate the phenomenon, did not describe the purpose of the study, and did not use a series of phases to investigate the problem by a team of researchers. The confirmatory mix methods design was used to validate quantitative findings through qualitative analysis. The current study aimed to quantitatively assess the knowledge-

related learning outcomes of PhD graduates before validating them through qualitative data analysis.

Population and Sample

Respondents of the study were all the enrolled PhD graduates of all the public universities of Punjab (Pakistan). A multistage sampling technique was employed to select the sample. The multi-stage sampling technique involves two or more stages. These stages lead the researcher to access of sample of the study ([Sedgwick, 2015](#)). The current study was consisted of three stages to select the sample. That is why multistage sampling techniques were employed to select the sample. At the first stage, four public sector universities that were offering doctoral programmes in three disciplines (natural sciences, social sciences, and languages) were selected purposively. In the second stage, six departments, two from each discipline, Chemistry and Physics from natural sciences, Education and History from social sciences and Urdu and English from languages, were taken from each selected university of Punjab Province. At the third stage, ten (15) PhD graduates from each department were selected conveniently (120 from each university, 440 in total from all the sampled universities, however, two departments history and English of Sargodha university 20 respondents were not included as these departments were not offering PhD programme) and three MPhil/PhD Supervisors from each department were selected conveniently (18 from each university, 72 in total from all selected universities). The sample of the study constituted 312 respondents (440 PhD graduates and 72 MPhil/PhD Supervisors) from all the selected universities.

Delimitation of the Study

The current study was delimited to MPhil/PhD programmes of public sector universities of the Punjab, Pakistan.

Phases of the Study

The present study was conducted in two phases. Phase-1 was a quantitative phase, while phase-2 was a qualitative one.

Phase-I of the Study: Quantitative Phase

During phase-1 responses of MPhil/PhD graduates were determined quantitatively

Instrument of Phase-1

A five-point Likert-type rating scale was employed to compile the perceptions of MPhil/PhD graduates of universities in Punjab about Relation Development and Communication. The scale ranged from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (i.e., 1= strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). This tool consists of two parts. In part (a) of the questionnaire, we asked respondents for their demographic information. Part (b) of the questionnaire consisted of nine (9) items.

Data Collection Procedure for Phase-1

Universities in the country were closed due to the COVID-19 situation. It was not possible for the

researchers to physically visit the selected universities to collect data. So, after consulting with experts, it was decided that the data would be collected electronically. The current study's questionnaire was converted into Google forms. Following that, the researcher telephoned the HODs of the selected departments and obtained the contact information for the Class Representatives (CRs) of the selected programmes. The research tool was distributed in WhatsApp groups of their classes with the help of CRs to collect data. A total of 239 completed questionnaires were obtained.

Results and Discussion

Phase-1

This section describes the quantitative results of the study. To measure the level of supervision competence of MPhil/PhD supervisors, the scale was divided into three equal parts, i.e., 1.00-2.33 low, 2.34-3.66 medium, and 3.67-5.00 high.

Table 1. Relationship Development and Communication Competence

Items	SDA	DA	SDA+DA	N	A	SA	A+SA	Mean	Level
My supervisor:									Medium
6. develops a supportive relationship	1.3	4.4	5.7	8.7	21.8	63.8	85.6	3.42	Medium
7. creates a learning environment	1.3	3.9	5.2	10.9	27.5	56.3	83.8	3.34	Medium
8. transfer decision-making	1.3	3.5	4.8	12.2	34.1	48.9	83	3.26	Medium
9. educates about the supervisory process	1.7	5.2	6.9	12.7	30.6	49.8	80.4	3.21	Medium
10. defines expectations and goal setting	2.2	3.9	6.1	10.5	32.8	50.7	83.5	3.26	Medium
11. defines cultural competence and responses	1.3	3.9	5.2	17.5	30.6	46.7	77.3	3.17	Medium
12. ensure accommodations for disable	2.6	4.8	7.4	15.3	34.9	42.4	77.3	3.10	Medium
13. engages in difficult conversations	7.9	5.7	13.6	17.9	29.7	38.9	68.6	2.86	Medium
14. demonstrates the use of technology	3.1	5.7	8.8	13.1	30.1	48.0	78.1	3.14	Medium
Overall	2.5	4.6	7.1	13.2	30.2	49.5	79.7	3.20	Medium

Note. All values are given in percentage except mean and level

Table 1 shows the relationship development and communication competence level of supervisors through the response of their supervisees. The data in the table indicate that supervisors have a medium level of relationship development and communication competence in 'develops a supportive relationship', 'creates a learning environment', 'transfer decision-making',

'educates about the supervisory process', 'defines expectations and goal setting', 'defines cultural competence and responses', 'ensure accommodations for disabling', 'engages in difficult conversations', 'demonstrates the use of technology.

Overall, it was revealed that supervisors have a medium level of relationship development and communication competence.

Phase-2 of the Study: Qualitative Phase

For the confirmation of the findings of phase-1 of the study, university supervisors were interviewed.

Instrument of the Study

For the confirmation of quantitative findings, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on quantitative data findings. It consisted of nine questions that were validated by expert opinion. Supervisors were interviewed to confirm the findings of phase 1. Most

supervisors strongly disagreed with the assertion that supervisors have good relationship development and communication skills. Rather, they declared that MPhil/PhD graduates had a low level of relationship development and communication competence. Furthermore, faculty members highlighted the underlying reasons for failing to achieve a high level of relationship development and communication competence in order to bridge the gap. The table below shows the responses of MPhil/PhD graduates and their supervisors about relationship development and communication competence of supervisors, the underlying reasons for this gap, and faculty members' suggestions to bridge this gap.

Table 2. Relationship Development and Communication Competence Gap's Reasons and Suggestions

Sub-theme	Response of Supervisees	Response of Supervisors	Underlying Reasons by Supervisors	Suggestions by Supervisors	f
Relationship Development and Communication	MPhil/PhD supervisees claim that their supervisors are competent at a medium level in Relationship Development and Communication	MPhil/PhD Supervisors claim to have a low level of Relationship Development and Communication competence.	MPhil/PhD supervisors lacked high levels of Relationship Development and Communication competence because:	It is suggested that:	
			Supervisors are only acting as evaluators and have not established any relationships to improve the learning environment	The use of cutting-edge technology for communication will benefit both parties in this regard	(N=46, 63%)
			Supervisory mostly dealing with the supervisee of same research interest	Supervisors should be more rational in dealing with supervisees from all areas of research on an equal basis	(N=40, 55%)
			Supervisees are responsible for their family's financial matters, making it difficult to effectively communicate with supervisors	HEC should provide scholarships to all scholars throughout their research process.	(N=38, 52%)
			There are management issues such as a lack of a LAN system and a lack of researcher hostels	University management should give priorities to research-related tasks	(N=21, 31%)
Not research-oriented universities	The statistician should be allocated for research purpose	(N=24, 36%)			

Sub-theme	Response of		Underlying Reasons	by Supervisors	Suggestions by f
	Supervisees	Supervisors			
			Not healthy relationship is developed between supervisor and supervisee		(N=2, 3%)
			Lack of research communities	Conferences, in fear research situation, could not be handled	(N =34 47%)
			The supervisor could not afford ample time	The motivation of teacher, through the commitment of teacher, should be determined in advance	(N=12, 18%)
			Lack of research facilitation	Through understanding both sides	(N=12, 18%)

Table 2 shows the perception of MPhil/PhD graduates about the relationship development and communication competence of their supervisors, the responses of supervisors, the reasons for the contradiction between the perceptions of MPhil/PhD graduates and supervisors, and suggestions given by faculty members to achieve a medium level of supervision competence. The data given in the table shows that MPhil/PhD graduates claim that their supervisors have a medium level of relationship development and communication competence, but university supervisors negate the students' point of view and say that supervisors have a low level of relationship development and communication competence for different reasons.

The faculty members fortified their standpoint by highlighting the reasons like 'supervisors are only acting as evaluators and have not established any relationships to improve the learning environment', 'supervisory mostly dealing with the supervisee of same research interest', 'supervisees are responsible for their family's financial matters, making it difficult to effectively communicate with supervisors', 'there are management issues such as a lack of a LAN system and a lack of researcher hostels', 'not research-oriented universities', 'not healthy relationship is developed between supervisor and supervisee', 'lack of research

communities', 'supervisor could not afford ample time'.

Moreover, the supervisors also suggested certain measures to achieve a high level of supervision process competence, for example, 'the use of cutting-edge technology for communication will benefit both parties in this regard', 'supervisors should be more rational in dealing with supervisees from all areas of research on an equal basis, 'HEC should provide scholarships to all scholars throughout their research process.', 'university management should give priorities to research related tasks', 'statistician should be allocated for research purpose', 'mental understanding is required because a good question from supervisee can open window for supervisee', 'conferences, in fear research situation, could not be handled', 'motivation of teacher, through a commitment of teacher, it should be determined in advance', 'through understanding both sides'.

Findings of Qualitative Data: Phase-2

Supervisors did not support the claim of MPhil/PhD graduates regarding the medium level of relationship development and communication competence due to some underlying reasons. These reasons include 'supervisors are only acting as evaluators and have not established any relationships to improve the learning environment', 'supervisory mostly dealing with

the supervisee of same research interest', 'supervisees are responsible for their family's financial matters, making it difficult to effectively communicate with supervisors', 'there are management issues such as a lack of a LAN system and a lack of researcher hostels', 'not research-oriented universities', 'not healthy relationship is developed between supervisor and supervisee', 'lack of research communities', 'supervisor could not afford ample time'.

Discussion

The HEC has recently begun to focus on the supervision process. The objectives are to make qualified supervisors available throughout Pakistan. Even though it emphasised the smart process of granting access to all supervisors, it is only the beginning of a more comprehensive, established supervision system (Ali et al., 2019). The current study was designed to assess MPhil/PhD supervisors' relationship development and communication competence. The study's findings revealed that MPhil/PhD level supervisors have a high level of relationship development and communication competence based on the responses of their supervisees. These findings were gathered using a five-point Likert type scale questionnaire developed under the supervision model provided by ASHA. Most supervisees agreed or strongly agreed with the presence of supervision competence of supervisors, indicating a high level of response. There was also an above-average rating of supervisees to their supervisor, which was mentioned as extremely positive feedback (Bucky et al., 2010). It was also found that supervisees did not disclose their supervisors but only with their peers or friends (Ladany et al., 1996). They may have overreported because such responses are socially desirable (Sohail & Alam Malik, 2021). It was discovered that in Pakistani culture, supervisees have a religious sense of respect for their teachers, so they rate their supervisors positively (Duan & Roehlke, 2001). Overall, most supervisees rate their supervisors positively due to factors such as respect, non-disclosure of their supervisors to anyone, the social desirability of such responses, or it is a common trend.

Supervisors suggested a variety of measures to achieve a high level of supervision competence, such as supervisors being aware of fundamental research methodologies as well as

the supervisee's strong points for their own comfort (Majid, 2018). It is self-evident that a supervisor with limited knowledge and expertise in their supervisee's field of study will make little or no effort to encourage them (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). According to the previous study, the supervisor should be involved in advanced studies and research problems related to them, adapt more skills, and be approachable to the supervisee. Due to the fact that the supervision process must have a deadline, it was suggested that the supervisor should guide the supervisee through the work plan (Burke & Fessler, 1983). At the start of the research process, the supervisor should provide a time frame; his assistance will speed up the research process. And he must assign small tasks to the supervisee so that they can be managed with proper consultation. As it is suggested in a study, breaking down the project into smaller, more manageable units that can be planned and controlled results, rather than making excuses not to attend supervision meetings, and either could not produce any work, submitting only a small portion of the assignment to the supervisor will reduce the excuses (Ho, 2003). They must help and guide the supervisee rather than criticize them, as this will help the supervisee develop critical thinking skills. According to the studies, most of the clinical training was provided by reflective supervisors who were non-judgmental and compassionate towards trainees. Through strong supervisory relationships, supervisors must reflect clinical reactions, assisting trainees in developing confident, reflective inner voices (Hull et al., 2016). Supervisors may wish to convey their anger and frustration at a supervisee's actions, but they must keep the supervisee's vulnerability in mind when doing so (Rubin et al., 2007). Additionally, collaborative learning can be aided by having both the supervisor and the supervisee work toward the same objectives. Supervisors should also keep in mind that supervisees may feel more at ease expressing themselves in response to polite behaviour from supervisors (Granello & Babalis, 2004).

Conclusions

Graduates of MPhil/PhD respond that their supervisors have a medium level of relationship development and communication competence, yet this level is less than that of the high level. On

the other hand, faculty members proclaimed that MPhil/PhD supervisors had a low level of relationship development and communication competence. Hence, it was concluded that MPhil/PhD supervisors did not have a high level of relationship development and communication competence.

Supervisors suggested a variety of measures to achieve a high level of relationship development and communication competence. The supervisor must be interested in advanced studies and research problems related to them, and he must be approachable to the supervisee. Guide the supervisee through the work plan. Plan of supervision dissection Set a deadline. Between the supervisor and the supervisee, use online communication. Assign small tasks to the supervisee so that they can be managed with proper consultation. At the start of the research process, the supervisor should provide a time frame; his assistance will speed up the research process. Mental understanding is required because a good question from the supervisee can open the door to supervise conferences in fear that the research situation will not be managed properly. They must assist and guide the supervisee rather than criticize them, as this will help the supervisee develop critical thinking skills.

Recommendation

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study. The results on supervision competence of supervisors indicate that MPhil/PhD supervisors do not have an adequate level of relationship development and communication competence as per criteria

defined by ASHA for supervision. It follows that the HEC of Pakistan should consider relevant components of supervision as provided by ASHA to define the role of the supervisor in Pakistan. Accrediting bodies should redefine the supervisor's selection criteria and revise the supervision structure by effectively implementing co-supervisor for each supervisee to make it the most beneficial. Introduce training programs for MPhil/PhD supervisors, conducting seminars, webinars, and international conferences. Arrange foreign visits of supervisors to build capacity and learn new skills in practice from around the world.

Recommendations for Further Study

The scope of this study was limited to six departments at four public universities. Further research may be justified to determine whether the findings of this study are applicable to other departments. This mixed methods study concentrated on three disciplines: natural sciences, languages, and social sciences. More discipline for study may be included in future research. The current study was limited to MPhil/PhD supervisors; further research on undergraduate level research supervisors may be conducted. The supervision model provided by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association was used in this study, but future researchers may consider other supervision models to assess supervisors' relationship development and communication competence. The current study was conducted at public universities, but private universities may also be considered for future research.

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