

## Perceptions of Supervisors and Supervisees about Supervisors' Role and Responsibilities in Students' Research Work

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### Abstract

The present study seeks to discover the supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions about supervisors' responsibilities in students' research work throughout the research process. A self-developed 16 items questionnaire based on the process of thesis work was used to collect data from a sample of 75 supervisors and 200 supervisees who were selected through convenient sampling technique from a university in a metropolitan area of Pakistan. Findings of the study revealed that supervisors held supervisees more responsible for gaining scholarship and selection of topic. On the other hand, supervisees perceive their supervisors to be less responsible for topic selection and decisions regarding recognition for publication. Results of independent sample t-test show wide gap between the perception and expectations of both the groups. It calls for serious actions to be taken by the department. Recommendations and educational implications are given in the research paper..

### Key Words

Supervisor, Supervisee, Research Work, Research Process.

### Introduction

With an increase in number of universities, Pakistan has also experienced a rapid escalation in number of graduates and post graduates. This progression is result of efforts made by Higher Education Commission which aims at expansion of research (Aman, 2011). Research is an integral part of higher education which cannot take place without the guidance of a supervisor (Marsh, Rowe, & Martin, 2002). Research supervision is meant for transmission of research and related skills from supervisor to supervise (van Rensburg, Mayers, & Roets, 2016). Therefore, Wisker (2005) considers that research supervision transforms a research scholar into an independent researcher. The success and quality of higher education largely depend on effective and efficient supervision of postgraduate students (Alam, Alam, & Rasul, 2013).

Baptista (2015), Qureshi and Vazir (2016) are of the view that research supervision involves two parties, supervisor and supervisee, who make collective efforts to get to the finish line in time. Similarly, researchers consider the supervisor equally responsible for successful completion of a student research work (Hockey, 1994; Ismail, Majid, & Ismail, 2013; Rademeyer, 1994). S/he is responsible for providing support, time and expertise to supervise in order to organize a thesis in acceptable standards (Heath, 2002). His/ her role in supervisee's cognitive, emotional, and professional development is indispensable (Doğan & Bıkmaz, 2015).

Although thesis supervisor influences supervisee positively, a bulk of literature highlights the issue of confusion between supervisor and supervisee related to their roles and responsibilities during student's research work (Alam et al., 2013; Holbrook, Shaw, Scevak, Bourke, Cantwell & Budd, 2014; Malfroy, 2005; Meyer, 2007; Stubb, Pyhalto & Lonka, 2012). This role confusion results in negative student learning experience (Guerin & Green, 2015; Lahenius & Ikavalko, 2014; Manathinga, 2012; Taylor & Frsa, 2016) and incomplete or delayed degree (Malfroy, 2005). Both the parties need to be candid for reducing attrition, improving degree completion rate and maintaining overall level of satisfaction (Al-Muallem, Elzubeir, Roberts, & Magzoub, 2016). Clarity of supervisor's role and responsibilities is considered crucial to get maximum out of supervisory process (Polonsky & Waller, 2014). Similarly, (Russell, 2013) is of the view that a realistic match between supervisors and supervisees' perceptions about their roles and responsibilities is a prerequisite of quality research.

Conversely, if there is a mismatch between their views, quality of research work is at risk. In this context, it is need of the hour to spell out the perceptions of supervisors of supervisors and supervisees

related to supervisor's role and responsibilities.

## **Literature Review**

Supervision is a multidimensional and complex process (Al-Muallem et al., 2016) which employs supervisor and supervisee to learn and develop together (van Rensburg et al., 2016) while moving towards the same goal (Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Zaaba et al., 2015). High quality research output, higher research completion rate and supervisee satisfaction are major outputs of effective research supervision (Abiddin, Ismail, & Ismail, 2011; Alam et al., 2013; ).

Zainal Abidin and Ismail (2011) have enlisted the tasks which a research supervisee has to undertake during his/her research work. Approval of proposal, methodological decisions, thesis writing, conferences attendance and presentation, thesis submission, defense and research publications are hallmarks of this journey. Supervisor has a momentous role in helping the supervisee to obtain proper professional behavior and to go through the aforementioned professional activities (Lee, 2009) as supervisees usually lack prerequisite research skills (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Chikte & Chabilall, 2016). However, a balance between supervisor input and student independence (Lessing & Lessing, 2004) and a balance between giving too much or too little feedback on supervisor's behalf (Kiani & Jumani, 2010) are highly recommended. Thompson, Kirkman, Watson, and Stewart (2005) further indicate that there is a danger in spoon feeding the supervisees.

Lessing and Schulze (2002) advocate a differentiated approach for supporting the graduates. They present a diverse pattern of supervisory involvement in student's research work. This diverse pattern embroils a substantial early investment of time and energy in designing the research objectives and corresponding questions, followed by less collaboration and more monitoring during the execution phase, and finally increased input during the final writing of the research report. Chikte and Chabilall (2016) assert that supervisor's expertise, his/her approach towards research and supervisee's individual needs call for the diverse pattern of supervisory involvement.

As the supervisor is fully involved in all the standard steps of research along with supervisee, it is very important to discuss supervisors' characteristics here. Effective supervisors are characterized by empathy, respect, honesty, genuineness and non-authoritarian and non-sexist approach (Hockey, 1996). S/he exemplifies calm and patience, positive attitudes, approachability, constructive criticism, enthusiasm, commitment and dedication (Chikte & Chabilall, 2016). Supervisor should be expert in relevant study field (Calma, 2007; Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2014), topic expert, methodology expert, process expert, motivational expert (Polonsky & Waller, 2014) and should act as a confidence booster and motivator (Sidhu et al., 2014).

Ali, Watson, and Dhingra (2016), explored the attitudes of supervisees and their supervisors towards supervision. They sum up that effective supervisor shows interest in the supervisee's work, provides him with constructive and timely feedback, familiarizes supervisee with his or her areas of strengths and weaknesses, supports the supervisee manage his/her time effectively, encourages the supervisee to work autonomously and provides supervisee with the forums where supervisee could disseminate his/her research work.

A mounting research discusses the role and responsibilities of research supervisor in conventional research activities but mostly from supervisee's perspective. Supervisees needs supervisor's support in choosing a suitable research topic (Kiley, 2009; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Piccinin, 2000; Polonsky & Waller, 2014; Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2013; Taylor & Frsa, 2016), preparing research plan (Abiddin et al., 2011; Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2004; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Moskvicheva, Bordovskaia, & Darinskaya, 2015; Taylor & Beasley, 2005; Taylor & Frsa, 2016), building professional supervisor supervisee relationship (Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Severinsson, 2015; Sidhu et al., 2014; Wolff, 2010), being available and supporting supervisee when needed (Lee, 2009; Thompson et al, 2005), designing regular and purposeful meetings (Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Eley & Murray, 2009; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Severinsson, 2015; Taylor & Frsa, 2016), preparing time schedules and setting achievable targets (Abiddin et al., 2011; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Moskvicheva et al., 2015), accessing to suitable resources (Abiddin et al., 2011), keeping on track with constructive feedback (Moskvicheva et al., 2015; Russell, 2013; Sidhu et al., 2013), writing thesis according to academic conventions (Kiley, 2015; McAlpine, 2013; Moskvicheva et al., 2015; Woolf, 2010; Taylor & Frsa, 2016) and preparing for viva or public defense (Murray, 2009; Taylor & Frsa, 2016).

Many universities have also documented these roles and responsibilities and have disseminated this document on their webpages e.g. ( City University London, 2017; London School of Economics, 2017; The University of Edinburgh, 2017; Trinity College Dublin. 2017).

A little research is available which explores the supervisors' experiences of research supervision (Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Lee, 2009; Russell, 2013; Severinsson, 2015) and even fewer studies indicate the differences between supervisees' and supervisors' perceptions of supervisor's role and responsibilities as far as students' research work is concerned.

Therefore, the present study seeks to discover the supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions about supervisors' responsibilities in students' research work throughout the research process. The following research questions were addressed: (i) how much responsible do the supervisors consider themselves as far as students' research work is concerned? (ii) how much responsible do the supervisees consider their supervisors for their research work? (iii) do the supervisors and supervisees perceive supervisors' roles differently?

## Methodology

This study was descriptive in nature. The data were collected using quantitative approach. Population of the study consisted of M Phil and PhD scholars and their supervisors from four universities in Faisalabad. Convenient sampling method was used to select sample. Data were collected from 75 supervisors and 200 M.Phil and PhD students who were at different stages of their research work. Among supervisors, there were 68 (90%) assistant professors and 7(10%) associate professors, 40(53.3%) male and 35(46.7%) female, 38(50.7%) from social sciences, 27(36.0%) from physical sciences and 10(13.3%) from linguistics. Their teaching experience ranged from one year to 23 years and number of research publications ranged from one to 20. Among supervisees, there were 73(36.5%) males and 127(63.5%) females and 143(71.5) M Phil scholars and 57(28.5) PhD scholars. Most of them were at data collection stage 96(48.0%).

Data were collected with the help of two equivalent forms of a questionnaire used separately for supervisors and supervisees. The questionnaire consisted of 16 statements related to the process of research. This list of statements was a modified form of questionnaire "Supervisor & Research Student Expectation Questionnaire" developed by the university of Notre Dame Australia in 2017. The way to measure the phenomenon through weight or percentage was adopted from "Responsibility for students' achievement" by Guskey (1981).

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 15. Descriptive statistics were applied to find out the perceptions of supervisors and supervisees about supervisors' roles and responsibilities in students' research work at M Phil and PhD level in universities in Faisalabad. Independent sample t-test was applied to find out the difference between the perceptions of two samples.

## Results

**Table 1.** Supervisors' Perception about their own Role and Responsibilities

	Range				
Process of Thesis Writing	N	M	SD	Potential	Actual
8. Development of professional supervisor and supervisee relationship	75	89.71	15.719	0-100	30-100
7. Supervisee-supervisor relationship	75	89.36	15.173	0-100	25-100
13. Keeping the students on right track	75	77.53	18.497	0-100	20-100
15. Decision regarding final submission	75	74.12	21.298	0-100	25-100
11. Work follow up	75	71.99	17.279	0-100	25-100
9. Holding regular meetings	75	70.73	17.431	0-100	25-100
12. In time completion of thesis	75	70.65	21.296	0-100	20-100
6. Awareness of relevant policies, procedures and requirements of candidature	75	66.25	21.713	0-100	20-100
3. Decision about theoretical frame work and methodology	75	65.4	20.937	0-100	10-95
14. Thesis write up and presentation for defense	75	64.93	20.293	0-100	20-100
4. Development of a program and timetable of research	75	60.13	24.632	0-100	0-100
16. Decision regarding recognition for publication	75	57	15.268	0-100	20-100
10. Coordination of communication between supervisor and supervisee	75	54.87	15.574	0-100	20-100
5. Access to appropriate services and facilities	75	50.93	21.304	0-100	10-100
2. Selection of topic	75	26.28	16.827	0-100	0-80
1. Gaining scholarship	75	26	13.828	0-100	0-50

Table 1 is organized on the basis of supervisors' mean score in descending order. Table 1 shows how much responsible supervisors held themselves as far as different stages of students' research work are concerned. It is evident from table 1 that means score could range from 0 to 100. More than 50% mean score shows that supervisors perceive themselves to be more responsible for the said action whereas the mean score less than 50% shows that the supervisors held supervisee to be more responsible for the said action. Supervisors held themselves most responsible for developing professional supervisor and supervisee relationship (M=89.71%) whereas they held

supervisees most responsible for gaining scholarship (M=26%) and selection of topic (M=26.28%). On most of the items (N=14), they perceive themselves to be more responsible for given tasks.

**Table 2.** Supervisees' Perceptions about their Supervisors' Role and Responsibilities

Process of Thesis Writing	Range				
	N	M (%)	SD	Potential	Actual
7. Supervisee-supervisor relationship	200	70.11	20.38	0-100	10-100
12. In time completion of thesis	200	66.04	18.98	0-100	0-100
8. Development of professional supervisor and supervisee relationship	200	66.03	21.42	0-100	0-100
11. Work follow up	200	64.56	18.38	0-100	0-100
13. Keeping the students on right track	200	63.43	19.59	0-100	10-100
6. Awareness of relevant policies, procedures and requirements of candidature	200	62.06	19.06	0-100	0-100
3. Decision about theoretical frame work and methodology	200	58.19	19.85	0-100	0-100
9. Holding regular meetings	200	57.35	17.648	0-100	1-90
4. Development of a program and timetable of research	200	55.33	17.72	0-100	1-100
5. Access to appropriate services and facilities	200	53.32	17.92	0-100	5-95
15. Decision regarding final submission	200	51.46	18.4	0-100	0-95
10. Coordination of communication between supervisor and supervisee	200	51.28	18.97	0-100	0-95
14. Thesis write up and presentation for defense	200	50.97	22.67	0-100	0-100
1. Gaining scholarship	200	50.41	23.64	0-100	1-100
16. Decision regarding recognition for publication	200	49.43	18.23	0-100	1-100
2. Selection of topic	200	42.83	21.95	0-100	10-100

Table 2 illustrates that supervisees perceive supervisee-supervisor relationships to be purely professional. They believe that close personal relationships have minimal place in research process (M=70.11%). They, furthermore, consider their supervisor highly responsible for developing this professional relationship (M=66.03%). Mean score above 50 percent on fourteen items proves supervisors to be more responsible for the given tasks. Contrarily, their mean score less than 50 percent demonstrates that they held their supervisors less responsible for publication decision (M=49.43%) and topic selection (M=42.83%).

**Table 3.** Difference Between Supervisors' and Supervisees' Perceptions about Supervisors' Role and Responsibilities

	Status	M	SD	DF	T Value	P Value
Gaining scholarship	Supervisor	26.00	13.82	272	-8.40	.00
	Supervisee	50.41	23.64			
Selection of topic	Supervisor	26.28	16.82	272	-5.90	.00
	Supervisee	42.83	21.95			
Decision about theoretical frame work and methodology	Supervisor	65.40	20.93	272	2.64	.09
	Supervisee	58.19	19.85			
Development of a program and timetable of research	Supervisor	60.13	24.63	272	1.78	.07
	Supervisee	55.33	17.72			
Access to appropriate services and facilities	Supervisor	50.93	21.30	272	-.93	.35
	Supervisee	53.32	17.92			
Awareness of relevant policies, and requirements of candidature	Supervisor	66.25	21.71	272	1.56	.12
	Supervisee	62.06	19.06			
Supervisee-supervisor relationship	Supervisor	89.36	15.17	272	7.43	.00
	Supervisee	70.11	20.38			
Development of professional supervisor and supervisee relationship	Supervisor	89.71	15.71	272	8.72	.00
	Supervisee	66.03	21.42			
Holding regular meetings	Supervisor	70.73	17.43	272	5.66	.00
	Supervisee	57.24	17.61			
	Supervisor	64.67	15.57	272	1.46	.14

Coordination of communication between supervisor and supervisee	Supervisee	51.28	18.97			
	Supervisor	71.99	17.27	272	3.02	.00
Work follow up	Supervisee	64.56	18.38			
	Supervisor	70.65	21.29	272	1.73	.08
In time completion of thesis	Supervisee	66.04	18.98			
	Supervisor	77.53	18.49	272	5.39	.00
Keeping the students on right track	Supervisee	63.43	19.59			
	Supervisor	64.93	20.29	272	4.67	.00
Thesis write up and presentation for defense	Supervisee	50.97	22.67			
	Supervisor	74.12	21.29	272	8.69	.00
Decision regarding final submission	Supervisee	51.46	18.40			
	Supervisor	57.00	15.26	272	3.19	.00
Decision regarding recognition for publication	Supervisee	49.43	18.23			

Table 3 shows that both the groups had no difference of perception regarding supervisors' role in access to appropriate services and facilities, awareness of relevant policies, procedures and requirements of candidature, coordination of communication between supervisor and supervisee and in time completion of thesis. Their perceptions were significantly different from each other on rest of the tasks.

## Discussion

Addressing the first research question, it is found that supervisors held themselves most responsible for developing professional supervisor - supervisee relationship rather than personal.

The findings are consistent with the previous study conducted by Severinsson (2015) who found in a qualitative study that the supervisors prefer a constructive, caring, empowering, supportive and professional supervisor- supervisee relationship and considered it the most essential for the research process. The other tasks for which the supervisors held themselves responsible are keeping the students on right track by providing constructive feedback and keeping in touch with supervisee. Russell (1996) also discovered that supervisors consider feedback or advice on direction and progress as their major responsibility. Ali et al., (2016) and Chikte and Chabilall (2016) also authenticated the significance of constructive and timely feedback. Other mentionable responsibilities of supervisors are making decision regarding final thesis submission, managing work follow up, holding regular meetings and ensuring in time completion of thesis. The findings are consistent with the previous studies (for example, Ali et al., 2016; Russell, 1996). On the other hand supervisors held supervisees most responsible for gaining scholarship and selection of topic. Severinsson (2015) also approved that the student has a right to select her/his own research topic.

Addressing the second research question, it is found that supervisees held their supervisors most responsible for developing professional supervisor - supervisee relationship rather than personal.

Previously conducted studies also have similar findings in which supervisees want their supervisors to maintain strong professional boundaries (for example, Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Severinsson, 2015; Wisker, 2005; Wolff, 2010). This is because students do not want to be exploited by their supervisors for any professional, financial or personal gain (SGS Academic Council, 2016). Moreover, supervisees want their supervisors to help them in in-time completion of thesis. The findings are in line with those of Lekalakala-Mokgele (2008) and Moskvicheva et al., (2015) who concluded that supervisor should set deadlines for students to enable them to complete their thesis well in time. According to supervisees, work follow up followed by keeping the students on right track by conducting regular meetings are other major responsibilities of supervisors which are previously emphasized by many researchers (Chikte & Chabilall, 2016; Eley & Murray, 2009; Lee, 2009; Polonsky & Waller, 2014; Taylor & Frsa, 2016). Furthermore, supervisees consider their supervisors more knowledgeable even about policies, procedures and requirements of candidature. Moskvicheva et al., (2015) and Sidhu et al., (2013) also authenticated that supervisor should be aware of thesis completion and submission process requirements so that s/he could evaluate the research work accordingly. Contrarily, what supervisees perceive supervisors to be least responsible for is topic selection. They want to choose a topic of their own choice and their own research interest. Review of the related research reveals contradictory findings regarding topic selection. Some are of the similar verdicts (Lekalakala-Mokgele, 2008; Sidhu, Kaur, Fook, & Yunus, 2013) whereas others concluded that students wanted enough help in this regard especially with reference to topic refinement (Kiley, 2009; Polonsky & Waller, 2014; Russell, 1996; Taylor & Frsa, 2016).

As far as comparison of supervisors and supervisee's perceptions is concerned, there are many conflicts. Both the groups differ in their perceptions related to supervisors' roles and responsibilities in 10 tasks out of 16 which can briefly be outlined as gaining scholarship, selection of topic, development of professional supervisor and supervisee relationship, holding regular meetings, work follow up, keeping the students on right track, thesis write up and presentation for defense, decision regarding final submission, decision regarding recognition for publication. This difference of opinion is more a matter of amount of responsibility sharing. Russell (1996) also established that supervisors claimed to assist supervisees more than the assistance supervisees claimed to have received. The role confusion also exists in the study conducted by Lee in 2009 who summed up that supervisors stressed independence, critical thinking and autonomy as crucial factors for the supervision process but the supervisees sought support and assistance to further cultivate their academic writing and critical thinking skills within supervision. Similar contradictions were evident in the study conducted by Research Information Network (2011).

Literature is evident that difference of opinion has ever been contemporaneous which may negatively affect supervision process. It can be safely concluded from the current study as well that both the research partners (supervisors and supervisees) are not on the same page. These contradictory perceptions and role conflict call for serious consideration on behalf of research institutes.

### **Recommendations**

Initial supervisor –supervisee meeting is may be conducted to clarify the roles and responsibilities expectations for a successful completion of research work. A further investigation is required to know how much responsibility do the supervisors and supervisees held supervisees to be responsible for the same research tasks. The findings call for another research study to explore whether the supervisors are actually fulfilling these responsibilities as intensively as they have claimed in this study.

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