Exploration of doctoral students' supervisory experiences in Pakistani universities

Eksplorasi pengalaman pembimbing mahasiswa doktoral di universitas-universitas Pakistan

Muhammad Zahid[1] & Qaisar Khalid Mahmood[2*]
[1]Department of Sociology, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan
[2]Department of Gender studies, University of the Punjab
Address: [1]Bacha Khan Monument, Nowshera Mardan Rd, Muslimabad, Mardan, 23200, Pakistan
[2]Canal Rd, Quaid-i-Azam Campus, Lahore, Pakistan
E-mail: qaisar.dgs@pu.edu.pk

Abstract

Doctoral education and PhD completion are influenced by various factors, including student-related, institution, and supervisor. This study explores PhD scholars' considerations in selecting supervisors and documents their experiences regarding accessibility, supervisory meetings, and feedback. PhD scholars from four universities were interviewed. The data were analyzed using the Braun and Clarke thematic analysis approach. The findings reveal that Pakistani PhD scholars meticulously select their PhD supervisor keeping in view research related factors, professional and personal factors of supervisors. Findings also show that PhD scholars emphasized alignment of research area, good fit, and accessibility for good and timely feedback particularly in cases where supervisory relationships may be characterized as toxic. PhD scholars had mixed supervisory experiences during their PhD study. Some PhD scholars deemed their supervisors as "ideal"; however, there were cases of toxic supervision. The study emphasizes the need for universities to provide academic assistance and guidelines, as well as to create a conducive environment for PhD scholars and supervisors by enhancing communication, support systems, and training opportunities. The study contributes to the understanding of these challenges and aims to provide insights for improving the doctoral education process in and beyond Pakistan.

Keywords: doctoral education; supervisory roles; supervisee's agency; delayed feedback; academic assistance

Abstrak

Pendidikan doktoral dan penyelesaian PhD dipengaruhi oleh berbagai faktor, termasuk aspek yang berhubungan dengan mahasiswa, institusi, dan pembimbing. Studi ini mengeksplorasi pertimbangan para mahasiswa PhD dalam memilih supervisor dan mendokumentasikan pengalaman mereka terkait aksesibilitas, pertemuan dengan supervisor, dan umpan balik. Para sarjana PhD dari empat universitas diwawancarai. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis tematik Braun dan Clarke. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa para mahasiswa PhD Pakistan dengan cermat memilih pembimbing PhD mereka dengan mempertimbangkan faktor-faktor terkait penelitian, faktor profesional dan pribadi pembimbing. Temuan juga menunjukkan bahwa para mahasiswa PhD menekankan keselarasan bidang penelitian, kecocokan, dan aksesibilitas untuk mendapatkan umpan balik yang baik dan tepat waktu untuk beberapa kasus supervisi yang bersifat toksik. Para mahasiswa PhD memiliki pengalaman supervisi yang beragam selama studi PhD mereka. Beberapa mahasiswa PhD menganggap pembimbing mereka "ideal", namun ada kasus-kasus pengawasan yang toksik. Studi ini menekankan perlunya universitas memberikan bantuan dan panduan akademik, serta menciptakan lingkungan yang kondusif bagi para mahasiswa PhD dan supervisor dengan meningkatkan komunikasi, sistem pendukung, dan kesempatan pelatihan. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman tentang tantangan-tantangan ini dan memberikan wawasan untuk meningkatkan proses pendidikan doktoral di negara ini.

Kata kunci: pendidikan doktoral; peran supervisor; badan yang diawasi; umpan balik yang tertunda; bantuan akademik

Introduction

Gardner (2008) identified seven key areas for a comprehensive understanding of issues in doctoral education, including completion and attrition rates, time to degree, socialization processes, dissertation planning, supervisory roles and relationships, gender, race, and disciplinary differences. Additionally, other researchers have identified student-related, institution-related, and supervisor-related factors that

affect the performance of postgraduate students (De Zoysa 2008, Wareing 2009, Meerah 2010, Hadi & Muhammad 2019). Some scholars have classified these factors as personal, academic, or non-academic (Wollast et al. 2018). Other scholars have organized them into three major themes: student deficiencies, inappropriate supervision processes, and inappropriate research environments. Studies have examined personal, academic, and financial factors that influence postgraduate research (Gardner 2008, Wamala et al. 2012). Issues in supervisory relations have consistently been cited as significant factors affecting PhD progression and completion (Behr et al. 2020).

Doctoral students face a variety of supervisory issues. It is important to keep the student-supervisors connection as healthy as possible to achieve favorable results, which requires good supervision (Hussain et al. 2022). Moreover, the effective communication skills of supervisors significantly influence MPhil/PhD graduates' overall experience (Waheed et al. 2022). The academic background of the scholar, for instance whether he has completed a thesis for a prior degree, might also contribute to the quality of supervision and research abilities (Riaz 2020). Research during the COVID-19 pandemic brought a range of new crisis-specific concerns which have infiltrated the dynamics of online doctoral students and supervisors, changing dialogue and pedagogy. It highlights the necessity of communicating and providing feedback in virtual environments efficiently, as has been argued elsewhere (Ali et al. 2021). In fact, as represented in a recent series of research papers (Khan et al. 2018, Hina Batool et al. 2021), strong supervisory relationships, communication skills and academic backgrounds correlate with the feelings that PhD scholars have about their experiences at Pakistani institutions (Rafi & Moghees 2022). The supervision structures and mechanisms for the doctoral research capacity of Pakistani higher education institutions are fundamental to determine their research success (Mahesar et al. 2020).

PhD scholars encounter multiple problems, such as finding suitable supervisors for their work, lack of collaboration and unfinished research projects (Hussain et al. 2022). Additionally, many doctorate students have difficulty with writing a dissertation, technical aspects of writing, literature review or making an argument. This would have a negative impact on the study (Hina Batool et al. 2021). As stated by Abbasi et al. (2020), supervisors, through appropriate guidance, feedback, and expertise in research management, hence become integral to the research process. To support PhD students' hurdles to timely graduation should be cleared and administrative measures be implemented so that supervision takes place adequately.

Due to these challenges many students decide to withdraw from their PhD programs prior to completing their degrees. A tragic occurrence in 2020 was when Nadia Ashraf committed suicide while she was a PhD student at the University of Karachi; the incident got coverage from social and electronic media channels. There were many different interpretations of the incident that surfaced, with friends of the deceased attributing her death to the activities of her supervisor and the institution, while the management of the university vigorously refuted all the charges.

The issue is not specific to Pakistan. The screening of literature shows that such issues prevail in different parts of the globe. The section provides an overview of the issue. Supervisors or advisors are critical for the doctoral journey. A PhD student pairs research scholars with their supervisors, who form an essential bond. Gardner (2008) stated that supervisors can build and break a scholar. A supervisor's role is also a major factor in doctoral attainment or attrition. Black (2017) discusses how supervision affects student outcomes. Supervisors directly influence student perceptions of the doctoral program, research topic selection, dissertation quality, academic performance, and satisfaction. It would not be easy to discuss the effects of supervision without a thorough understanding of its roles.

Sverdlik et al. (2018) discussed different roles of the supervisor and argued that supervisors should encourage students to start earlier on a topic of interest. Supervisors should organize meetups for discussion and review the submitted work at the proper time. It is also pertinent to mention the supervisor's personality and the approach to moderate supervision. For example, a supervisor with poor communication skills may not provide a quick review. Similarly, an overburdened supervisor also

takes time to provide feedback. It is suggested that students be extremely cautious when selecting PhD supervisors. Sverdlik et al. (2018) also discussed student considerations in supervisor selection. Students prefer those involved and committed supervisors who extend support to them, are reputable, and respect timelines. A student also chooses supervisors who can help them secure Post Docs or job opportunities after their PhD attainment. Moreover, the student likes to select a supervisor with whom their research interests converge. In addition, students like supervisors who are flexible to various research approaches. The studies cited are conducted in other parts of the globe; however, less scholarship is available on dynamics of supervisory relationship in Pakistani universities.

The need for a good fit between students and supervisors must be considered (Jakszt et al. 2021). This notion is affirmed by Sverdlik et al. (2018), who found that students who chose supervisors showed higher satisfaction levels than students to whom supervisors were allocated. Poor fit between supervisor and supervisee results in the propensity of student attrition (Gardner 2008, Castelló et al. 2017).

According to Lovitts (2002), one of the most critical factors in student decisions on whether to withdraw from or continue a candidature is the relationship with the supervisor. Manathunga (2005) emphasized that adequate support, access, and guidance from supervisors are essential to avoid student dropout, particularly in the initial stages of candidature. According to McCulloch et al. (2016), the quality of a candidate's experience and the outcomes of the study period are closely related to the quality of the supervisory process. Therefore, high-quality doctoral supervision processes, including a good supervisor/ student relationship, can provide elevated levels of student fulfillment and satisfaction and, consequently, successful doctoral candidatures. Moreover, the concept of toxic supervision exists. Other scholars have used the term exploitative supervision (Cheng & Leung 2021). Cheng & Leung (2022) concluded that PhD scholars faced five types of exploitation. These are autonomous exploitation, justice exploitation, fidelity exploitation, beneficent exploitation, and non-maleficence exploitation. Other scholars have termed it toxic supervision, wherein students suffer because of supervisors' poor supervisory roles. In toxic supervision, supervision is counterproductive to supervisors and supervisees. Toxic supervision is a prevailing phenomenon in higher education and has negative repercussions on students' mental well-being and academic success (Grove 2016, Davis 2019).

Students often complain about their supervisory relationship and quality of supervision (Bryan & Guccione 2018). Sometimes, supervisors are overburdened as they have other supervisees and fail to treat them properly (Saleem & Mehmood 2018). Sometimes, supervisors are preoccupied with other administrative responsibilities, such as holding department chairs or other tasks assigned by universities (Sarwar et al. 2018). Some students also complained that their supervisors were out for projects and conferences and needed to provide more time to students. It has also been reported that supervisors are non-responsive and take longer to provide feedback and reviews on student work (Ali et al. 2019). There is a handful of literature on supervisory issues in Pakistani context; however, there is a lack of studies on preferences for supervisor selection, need for good fit between supervisor and supervisee, importance of supervisory working alliance, supervisory support and overcoming supervisory challenges.

Issues related to supervisory relationships are sometimes less debated and ignored in student dropouts. University faculty and administrators believe that student attrition is due to student shortcomings. PhD supervisors believe that students drop out due to a lack of prior training, skills, and issues in their personal lives. Interestingly, the student versions differed. Students passionately believe that they drop out because of poor supervision, departmental challenges, and lack of motivation and integration. Conflictual relationships with supervisors is one of the main reasons for doctoral attrition (Lovitts 2002). Students reported that the primary source of conflict is the need for more feedback on submitted work. Second, students complain that providing less time is also a source of conflict.

To the contrary, supervisor attributed students' dropout to students' personal characteristics. This is a widespread practice in universities, and the game continues. These accusation and counter-accusation fail to work. The importance of a good fit between students and supervisors cannot be underestimated. Excellent supervisory fit yields many benefits for PhD students. A good fit between students and

supervisors positively affects students' emotions and persistence (Sverdikeet al. 2018). Interaction with supervisors is emotionally intensive and it has been reported that the interactions between PhD students and supervisors are emotional. It has also been reported that supervisors play a significant role in enhancing students' sense of belonging or isolation during their doctoral journey. Doctoral students spend more time with their supervisors than with other stakeholders. The quality and nature of the relationship with supervisors have a significant-good or dire consequences for doctoral students.

Owing to the importance of supervisory relationships, various research scales have been used to measure their nature and quality of supervisory relationships. Schlosser & Gelso (2005) developed the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory (AWAI) to assess working alliances from a student's perspective. This was a student version of the questionnaire. In subsequent research, the AWAI was used to evaluate the supervisor's perspective (Schlosser & Gelso 2005) to determine the relationship between the supervisor and doctoral students. The scale has three critical concepts: rapport, apprenticeship, and identification-individuation. These factors contribute to good working relationships between supervisors and doctoral students. The Research Training Environment Scale (RTES) (Gelso et al. 1996) and 'Relational agency' (Pyhältö & Keskinen 2012) are used to measure research training and student agency in research and supervisory environment. A recent development was the doctoral questionnaire developed by Holbrook et al. (2022). This scale measures different dimensions, including relationships with supervisors. The authors suggest that this scale can be used to assess and improve advisory relationships (Holbrook et al. 2022).

Against this backdrop, the current study is aimed to explore Pakistani PhD scholars' considerations for supervisor selection and to elicit their experiences regarding accessibility, supervisory meetings, and feedback. Moreover, the study seeks to document PhD scholars' accounts of good and bad supervisory experiences.

Research Method

Sixteen PhD scholars who had authored proposals, dissertations, or awaited degrees were recruited through personal networks. Scholars from various academic backgrounds and genders at four universities in Pakistan were contacted for interviews. This study uses semi-structured interviews organized around open-ended questions about the supervisory experience during the PhDs to collect in-depth data. This study uses a constructivist approach to interviewing (Charmaz 2015), because the priority in this study is to draw out the experiences of the participants, allowing them to use individual accounts and understanding, perceptions of how they explain the issue under investigation. An interview guide was used based on concepts from the literature and previous piloting with two PhD scholars.

The following topics were explored in the interviews: (1) considerations for supervisor selection. (2) scholars' experiences regarding accessibility, supervisory meetings, and feedback, and (3) scholars accounts of good and bad supervisory experience during PhD studies. Emerging themes identified by constant comparative analysis were explored in subsequent interviews. Recall of the participants' accounts was made by probers and pointers to get more detail on how and why these factors affected their PhD over time. Data were collected using audio recordings and researcher's field notes. Post-transcription, summaries were created and sent with the full transcript participants. This member-checking process allowed the participant to verify their account, lending credibility to the transcription and summary of research data (Barnard et al. 2009). Transcripts were then uploaded to Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) to manage and make sense of the raw data. Pseudonyms were used for participants in final report for ensuring anonymity.

The approach in this study prioritizes describing lived experiences and personal accounts factors affecting PhD through an iterative and systematic method of analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006). Braun & Clarke's (2006) six steps approach was used for analysis. In this study, a thematic framework was also used to explore the interview data, inductively coding the data to allow codes and themes to emerge and develop from the data. This research is subject to code for ongoing refinement and revision, grouping

and agreeing on sub-themes and themes in the final stage. Peer debriefing was used throughout the research to test emerging themes and embed credibility into the analytical process. In the process of analyzing the data, this study acknowledges that representing raw data as quotes in the results is an interpretive process open to bias.

Results and Discussion

This section reports the findings of this study. It begins with demographic characteristics of the PhD scholars. This section also discusses PhD scholars' considerations of their supervisor selection and then proceeds to discuss their supervisory experiences. It discusses different themes along with quotes surrounding the research problem and engages with literature too. Interviews ($n=16$) were conducted from March 2022 to May 2022 and lasted 50 minutes on average. The participant demographics are presented in Table 1, organized by pseudonyms, gender, doctoral degree subject area and years in the PhD program.

Table 1.
Demographic characteristics of PhD scholars

Pseudonym	University	Discipline	Year of Study	Degree status	Gender	Marital status	Employment
BAS	Abul Wali Khan University Mardan	Botany	5	Thesis submitted	Male	Married	Employee
DAW	Abul Wali Khan University Mardan	Botany	4	Thesis write up	Male	Married	Govt Employee
DON	Abul Wali Khan University Mardan	Education	5	Thesis submitted	Male	Married	Govt employee
ELU	Abul Wali Khan University Mardan	Political science	3	Thesis write up	Female	Married	Govt employee
FAI	International Islamic University Islamabad	Sociology	5	Thesis submitted	Male	Unmarried	Govt employee
ALI	International Islamic University Islamabad	Sociology	4	Thesis write up	Male	Married	Govt employee
SHA	International Islamic University Islamabad	Management sciences	3	Proposal submitted for approval	Male	Married	Private employee
HIR	International Islamic University Islamabad	English	6	Defense awaited	Female	Unmarried	Govt employee
SOH	Quaid e Azam University Islamabad	Economics	4	Thesis write up	Female	Married	Private employee
DAN	Quaid e Azam University Islamabad	Geology	5	Thesis write up	Male	Married	Govt employee
KHA	Quaid e Azam University Islamabad	Plant sciences	3	Topic approved	Male	Unmarried	Govt employee
RAZ	Quaid e Azam University Islamabad	Sociology	3	Topic approved	Male	Married	Govt employee
RAU	University of Punjab	History	5	Thesis write up	Male	Married	Govt employee
HAF	University of Punjab	Sociology	6	Thesis submitted	Male	Married	Govt employee
RAF	University of Punjab	Mass communication	5	Thesis submitted	Female	Married	Private employee
JAV	University of Punjab	Biotechnology	5	Defense awaited	Male	Unmarried	Govt employee

Source: Fieldwork conducted by author

Good or bad supervisory relationships can significantly impact a PhD's success. PhD attrition may be caused by a lack of supervisory support. Approximately 50% of PhD candidates quit PhDs due to inadequate supervision (Litalien & Guay 2015). Supervisory styles, roles, and responsibilities affect PhD completion (Vilkinas 2005, Gardener 2008, Orellana et al. 2016). The following theme discusses how PhD scholars select supervisors and their experiences during their PhD journey.

Considerations for supervisor selection and process of supervisor selection

Selecting the right PhD supervisor is critical for a successful PhD journey. Scholars emphasize considering research-related factors, professional attributes, and personal attributes of a supervisor when making this decision.

Table 2.
Reasons for supervisor selection

Research related considerations	Alignment of the research area, specialized and knowledgeable in his research area, resourceful, published author, research skills, funded project, previous working experience/supervision.
Professional attributes of supervisor	HEC-approved supervisor, senior and experienced supervisor, chairperson/ director, Tenured Track System (TTS),
Personal attributes of the supervisor	Female, sympathetic, accessible, accommodative, kind, dedicated, cooperative, considerate, goal setter

Source: Created by the author

PhD scholars also shared their supervisors' allotment processes. Most universities involve PhD scholars in the supervisor selection process. In certain cases, they consented and were allotted a supervisor of their choice, while in other cases they were asked to consent for a supervisor, but later the department allotted another supervisor. They were informed that the department also had an administrative perspective while allotting supervisors. Two scholars reported not being part of the supervisor selection and allotment process. They shared that the department allotted supervisors without their consent. A PhD scholar added.

> "We were not involved in the supervisor selection process. Instead, the department allotted to us a supervisor. We had no say in this process. We had to accept what was done by the department. We had no agency in this regard. What good can be expected from such decisions." (Informant ALI).

Similarly, another scholar also shared a similar experience, but luckily the research area was aligned. He narrated.

> "I did not select my supervisor. One committee member showed interest in my work when I presented my topic. My proposed area was somehow relevant to his PhD project as he was PhD in development studies." (Informant DAW).

This sections reports PhD scholars' consideration for supervisor and their agency in supervisor selection process. The forthcoming sections reports PhD scholars' accounts of PhD scholars' supervisory experiences in Pakistani universities.

Supervisory experiences at PhD: A tale of good supervision, toxic supervision, and doctoral orphanhood

A PhD scholar's success depends on his relationship with his supervisor, which is influenced by their interests, prior knowledge, and the supervisor's roles and styles. The supervisory experience is also affected by the institution's infrastructure, policies, structures, and procedures (Jiranek 2010, Abiddin et al. 2011, Jones 2014).

The Higher Education Commission (HEC) initiated the approved supervisor program to identify and register experienced researchers/scholars from HEC recognized universities and Degree Awarding Institutions. HEC also issued guidelines for approved supervisors to promote PhD-level research. HEC-approved supervisors must select students with research potential and mentor them. They should provide academic guidance and interact regularly to help with research, publications, dissertation completion, and post-degree career paths.

A good fit between superior and supervisee, mutual respect and accessibility to supervisors enable PhD completion

Good supervision requires a strong fit between supervisors and supervisees at both personal and academic levels. Alignment of the research area is a crucial factor in determining compatibility. Successful completion of a PhD is linked to the quality of the relationship with the supervisor (Phan 2023, Polkinghorne et al. 2023).

PhD scholars and supervisors agree that a good fit between supervisor and supervisee is crucial for the successful completion of a PhD journey. Scholars have also agreed that a good fit between PhD supervisors and supervisees is crucial for successfully completing a project. Without it, the construction of the thesis cannot be sustained, causing delays and hurdles in completion. A scholar compared that, "*Supervisors and supervisees should be aligned like wheels on a vehicle. The supervisor provides guidance and time while the supervisee completes assigned work punctually, for a smooth PhD journey, supervisor should also provide timely feedback.*" (Informant SOH).

PhD scholars in interviews highlighted the significance of research area alignment between supervisor and supervisee. A social science PhD scholar shared how this alignment enabled him to finish his PhD on time. He also mentioned that having the same political ideology as the supervisor strengthened their bond, leading to more support than other supervisees. This is especially relevant for social sciences but may be useful for natural sciences too.

> "My supervisor specializes in my doctoral research area. We have the same mental wavelength, Moreover, I also shared political and ideological bonds with my supervisor. We are both nationalists. This enabled me to complete my PhD within four years. I owe much to my supervisor, in connection with my PhD" (Informant RAU).

Another scholar had a slightly different version. He added that alignment of the research area is an advantage but not a prerequisite for timely PhD completion. He explained that he had seen scholars struggling to complete their PhD despite the alignment of the research areas. He also opined that he had seen a scholar who completed PhD in a timely manner despite a sharp mismatch in the research area. The scholar was committed, and the supervisor also provided necessary support. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is formal and can last several years, with some scholars taking longer than the stipulated time to complete their PhD. A productive relationship requires mutual respect and dependence, as a lack of these can lead to a meaningless partnership and prolonged PhD.

A PhD scholar emphasized the importance of mutual respect in supervisory relationships and acknowledged the power dynamic in such relationships. He suggested that supervisees should demonstrate respect for and adjustment to their supervisors. In addition, the scholar also suggested that supervisor pedagogic authority should be also accepted and honored. This hinted at a power dimension and agentic factors in supervisory relationships.

> "Both supervisor and scholar must respect each other. Both must be adjusted to each other. Instead, the supervisee's responsibility is to adopt the supervisor's values because the supervisor has the upper hand as a supervisor, he is more powerful. (Informant SOH).

Other PhD scholars added that PhD students should be obedient and receptive to supervisory instructions. However, they also noted that PhD students should not rely solely on their supervisors' guidance, as supervisors may not provide detailed instructions. They also emphasized the need for initiative and self-

directed learning from PhD students. He also discussed the importance of quantitatively distributing the supervisory load: "*PhD Students should not be solely dependent upon supervisors entirely. Instead, they should be proactive and come up with innovative ideas. Supervisee should work 70 %, and supervisor should work 30%.*" (Informant HIR).

Supervisor accessibility (in-person and online)

Less accessible teachers and supervisors can demotivate PhD students, causing longer graduation times and increased dropout rates (Lovitts 2005, Gardner 2008). Effective communication is vital for learning and reducing attrition rates, facilitating discussions on assignments, papers, projects, and conferences. Non-classroom interactions also boost student persistence and retention. A PhD scholar emphasized the importance of physical meetings/in-person meetings. He added that interacting in a physical setting is more beneficial for scholars. Supervisor and supervisee interact in openly and spontaneously. The scholar commented and identified more benefits.

> "Access to a supervisor is crucial for effective communication. Although technology can bridge the gap, it may not always be suitable for interactions due to issues of digital divide and technological literacy. In-person interactions are important for learning from the supervisor's body language and gestures." (Informant ELU).

Another PhD scholar also acknowledged the importance of accessibility to supervisors in the PhD program. The scholar shared his positive experience in the following manner.

> "Accessibility to a supervisor is a crucial factor affecting PhD progress. My supervisor was available almost every time. Whenever I asked for a meeting, he never refused to meet me. I used to visit his home. In times of hurry, we used to communicate on mobile, WhatsApp, or email." (Informant BAS).

PhD scholars discussed their supervisors' availability and supervisory meetings. Some had pre-arranged meetings, while others had informal, unscheduled meetings. Despite some unproductive meetings, scholars had no issues with accessibility or availability. They could reach their supervisors through telephone, email, and social media. A scholar (Informant DON) added, "*In case of urgency, I can talk through phone and WhatsApp. My supervisor is accessible through digital means.*" However, other students complained about their teacher's accessibility.

Scholars with access to their supervisors through digital channels reported them to be responsive and accessible. However, some scholars complained that their supervisors did not give them enough time for scheduled meetings, which caused problems. Supervisors were also unavailable for supervisory meetings, especially for scholars from remote areas. One scholar reported that the supervisor did not review his research proposal before submitting it for university approval. Informant HIR added, *"Yes, sometimes there are accessibility issues; students must wait for meetings. We students complained that the supervisor does not give proper time to scholars. My supervisors signed my research proposal without checking."*

Scholars also shared challenges faced by a PhD regarding the accessibility of their supervisors through digital means. Many scholars found it difficult to contact their supervisors virtually, and in-person meetings were not always feasible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A PhD scholar shared the grim picture of supervisory relationships.

> "My supervisor was not easily accessible. We were not connected virtually. She used to tell me to come to university if I am free, I will meet you; otherwise, go back. She used to be busy in her administrative responsibilities. She used to be engaged in university-level activities." (Informant SHA).

Digital communication can be helpful in some situations, technological literacy and the digital divide can impact the effectiveness of virtual interactions. Supervisors should aim to be flexible and available to students physically and digitally. Regular communication is essential for tracking the progress of a research

project. Some scholars complained that their supervisors prioritized administrative responsibilities over supervisory responsibilities, possibly indicating a systemic issue. This is because supervisors often hold administrative positions within the university, which can lead to time-management challenges. Similarly, scholars also acknowledge that university faculty members are sometimes overburdened with teaching, administrative responsibilities, and supervisory loads, which can result in difficulties balancing other roles and negatively impact PhD scholars.

Similarly, feedback is a key factor in supervisory relations. Some scholars were satisfied with their supervisors, but some experienced long delays in feedback. Four scholars reported waiting months for feedback, despite supervisors promising to provide it in a timely manner. This impacted the research's consistency and quality, and damaged trust between research partners. One scholar had to wait for six months for a review on a chapter. There were other similar instances with other scholars too. PhD scholars suggested that feedback should not be delayed more than two weeks and called it a "red flag" if delayed regularly.

Toxic supervision and doctoral orphanhood delays PhD completion

Toxic supervision, also known as exploitative supervision and abusive supervision, refers to poor supervisory roles that are counterproductive to supervisors and supervisees. This phenomenon negatively affects students' mental well-being and academic success (Grove 2016, Davis 2019, Moss & Mahmoudi 2021, Cheng & Leung 2022). Another educationist, Brabazon (2024) used the term "Pernicious supervisor" for such supervisors. Brabazon (2024), a prominent scholar in the young area of scholarship of supervision (SoS) classified such supervisors into 10 types who are malicious for PhD students. Wang (2024) stressed for more research on the harms of malicious supervision on disempowered PhD students.

Out of the 16 scholars, four scholars reported experiencing toxic supervision, with one referring to it as 'bad supervision.' Informant SHA said: "*I would rate them as "not good." I did not receive support from my supervisor. One of the main reasons for my circuitous PhD is my bad supervisor.*" Another scholar complained about his supervisor's lack of time and unprofessional behavior. The scholar (informant RAF) recounted an incident in which the supervisor acted irresponsibly: "*I would rate them as negative/ bad because I did not get time from my supervisor. She did not bother to see my proposal when I submitted it for the meeting.*"

Correspondingly, another had hard luck. He changed his supervisor because of toxic supervision. The new supervisor no longer differed from the previous supervisor. The scholar (informant RAF) argued that toxic supervision resulted in delayed PhD completion, "*Yes, it is true. I have had negative experiences in this regard. Once my supervisor changed my topic, the new supervisor changed it. He wasted my time, and my PhD lingered for seven years.*"

Some PhD scholars are doctoral orphans, meaning that they have lost their supervisor for reasons such as retirement or turnover. This can lead to more challenges in PhD progress and a higher likelihood of attrition. Two respondents in the study were doctoral orphans who reported experiencing various challenges, including psychological and academic effects, feeling abandoned and neglected, and struggling with adjustment to a new supervisor. One respondent submitted their research proposal a year later than was planned. He added.

> "My supervisor later left the university, and I faced many problems. I was stuck for a long time. I was assigned to a new supervisor. However, things did not go smoothly. I took time to get back on track" (Informant FAI).

Some scholars had positive experiences while others had issues with their supervisors. However, overall, many scholars have found their supervisory relationships to be satisfactory, with some even calling their supervisors friends. One scholar considered themselves lucky to have such a good supervisor and rated their relationship 7 out of 10. Another scholar praised his supervisor for treating them kindly as friends while maintaining professional relationships during research. Likewise, another scholar declared their

supervisor to be an "ideal supervisor" having completed their PhD in four years with the supervisor's support and guidance and having published five research papers as first authors in high-quality journals.

> "I would rate it as "an ideal" because I learned many things from my supervisor. I completed my PhD requirements within four years. Moreover, I have published five research papers as the first authors of W-category journals. It was not possible without his support and guidance." (Informant BAS).

The findings in this study have been compared and confirmed by researchers with the literature. The discussion in this study involves the researcher's findings and previous research. PhD scholars select a PhD supervisor keeping in view alignment of the research area, specialized and knowledgeable in his research area, resourceful, published author, research skills, funded project, and previous working experience/supervision. These findings are in line with previous studies (Orellana et al. 2016, Hasan & Schwartz 2019, Abbasi et al. 2022).

Similarly, PhD scholars also look for some professional factors like a HEC-approved supervisor, senior and experienced supervisor, chairperson/director, and Tenured Track System (TTS). These findings are in congruence to the findings of Datta et al. (2009) and Mandal et al. (2024) who also found students look for faculty reputation in department, academic and administrative position at an institute or university. On the other hand, the personal attributes of supervisor also play role in supervisor selection. For instance, PhD scholars stated that they chose supervisors who are sympathetic, accessible, supportive, accommodative, punctual, kind, hardworking, dedicated, cooperative, considerate, and a goal setter. These findings indicate PhD scholars meticulously select their supervisors. Previous studies (Keskin et al. 2023) also reported that having a supportive and responsive is helpful for PhD scholars.

PhD scholars stressed good fit between supervisors and supervisees. PhD scholars argued that good fit, political /ideological compatibility, mutual respect and cooperation, and expectations/clarity of roles and responsibilities as supervisor and supervisee are enabling factors for good and productive supervisory relationships. PhD scholars also highlighted that PhD scholars should also possess certain qualities to make the most of supervisory experiences. A PhD scholar should be clear about supervisory expectations, respectful, obedient, receptive to instruction, proactive and independent. These findings are similar to previous studies (Momeni et al. 2011, Cardilini et al. 2021, Jabre et al. 2021).

PhD scholars' accounts show that supervisory relationships and experiences vary across universities. All scholars agree that good supervisory relations are essential for timely PhD completion. Most participants were mostly content with their supervision experiences and called their supervisor as "ideal supervisor." However, there was another side of the coin too. Some scholars reported access and communication issues with supervisors, fewer supervisory meetings, and delayed feedback. Such issues slowed down their PhD progression and reduced the quality of their research work. Scholars labelled their supervisors as "toxic" which had dire consequences for PhD scholars. Such PhD scholars faced several problems due to their bad supervisory experiences. Some scholars were doctoral orphans which created serious problems for them. These findings match with past studies (Grove 2016, Orellana 2016, Ali et al. 2019, Cheng & Leung 2022, Moss & Mahmoudi 2021, Cornér et al. 2024).

Conclusion

A good supervisory relationship is pivotal for a productive PhD and timely graduation. Students should be involved in supervisor selection and scholars should select their supervisor diligently. This selection has long-term implications even after graduation. Various factors impact supervisory experiences. Alignment of research area with supervisor, clarity of supervisory expectations, mutual respect, accessibility, frequency of supervisory meetings, academic position of supervisor and timely feedback can impact quality of supervision. Every PhD scholar is not lucky enough to find a good supervisor; some scholars may face toxic supervision. Similarly, there are cases of doctoral orphanhood too. Toxic supervision and doctoral orphanhood are detrimental for PhD success.

The findings of this study can be useful for current, future PhD scholars and research supervisors. These findings can help PhD scholars to make the most of supervisory relations and improve doctoral experience, which can ultimately help them in timely PhD completion. These findings are based on a Pakistani context; however, these could be beneficial for scholars in other countries too. The study can be replicated in other contexts for comparison.

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Author Biographies

Muhammad Zahid holds PhD in Sociology from International Islamic University Islamabad and serves as lecturer in Sociology at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan.

Qaisar Khalid Mahmood holds PhD in Sociology and serves as assistant professor at Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.