

Phenomenological Inquiry into Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Academic Supervision and Feedback Experiences

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Abstract: *This study investigates the impact of supervision and feedback on the quality of research conducted by postgraduate students, focusing on their experiences and perspectives. Five participants from different universities in Karachi, Pakistan, were interviewed using a phenomenological approach. The findings reveal a range of experiences, with some feeling supported by their supervisors while others felt neglected. Differences were observed in communication styles, feedback procedures, and levels of support, particularly between public and private sector university postgraduate students. Despite variations, participants emphasized the importance of advocacy, emotional support, and mentorship from their supervisors. The study underscores the complexity of the supervisor-supervisee relationship and highlights the need for standardized communication, supervisor training, and a supportive environment to enhance postgraduate students' academic performance and experience.*

Keywords: *Postgraduate students; supervisor; supervision; feedback practices*

I. Introduction

Postgraduate research is distinguished by autonomous inquiry and in-depth exploration of specific topics, with supervisor interactions usually involving one-on-one advice and counselling. Even with this lonely aspect, the collaborative partnership between the supervisor and the researcher creates a positive atmosphere that encourages learning and idea sharing. Effective supervision plays a pivotal role in the achievement of successful postgraduate research endeavours, although its instructional dynamics remain relatively opaque (Cekiso et al. 2019; Mapasela and Wilkinson, 2005). Consequently, a plethora of research has been dedicated to elucidating the obstacles that could impede the progress of postgraduate research students. These investigations have unveiled alarming statistics, indicating high dropout rates and a significant portion of students failing to complete their studies within designated time frames (Netshitangani et al. 2021; Naim & Dhanapal, 2015; Sidhu et al. 2013; Ismail et al. 2013).

Just like many other academic endeavours, a PhD journey is rarely simple. It is a trip full of vulnerable times, where research scholars often come across periods of inactivity that are acknowledged as necessary components of their adventure of discovery and experimentation (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006). Research students venture into unfamiliar environments and immerse themselves in novel experiences, frequently breaking through barriers into more uncertain territory outside of their typical learning bounds. When these new experiences become barriers to understanding, Perkins (1999) refers to them as "troublesome knowledge." Hence, to support students, doctoral supervisors assume a significant responsibility in fostering transformation by instructing research scholars in the methodologies of inquiry, conceptualization, and innovation (Barnett, 2004). With the aid of diligent mentorship from their supervisors, research students can surmount the obstacles obstructing their comprehension and mastery of threshold concepts. Wisker and Morris (2010) introduce the term 'nudging' to delineate the efficacious doctoral supervision practices aimed at assisting research students in transcending threshold concepts (Phulpoto, Oad, & Imran, 2024).

This study investigates the function of supervision through the lens of research students, marking a departure from existing literature that predominantly emphasizes the viewpoints of supervisors and institutions. Particularly, the research concentrates on documenting the experiences of postgraduate

(Doctoral) students concerning the supervision and feedback approaches employed by their PhD supervisors.

2. Literature Review

Postgraduate supervision has garnered significant attention globally, with calls for transparency, equity, and rigor (Sidhu et al., 2013). Various authors have offered diverse definitions of the supervisory process. For instance, Pearson and Brew (2002) characterize academic supervision as a mechanism aimed at nurturing students into autonomous professional researchers and scholars within their respective disciplines, adept at navigating diverse research environments, whether within academia or industry. In contrast, Cryer and Mertens (2003) conceptualize postgraduate supervision as a multifaceted process entailing a blend of intricate academic and interpersonal competencies. As per Cryer and Mertens (2003), these skills encompass guiding postgraduate students through proficient proposal formulation, judicious methodological selection, adept documentation, and dissemination of their research findings, fostering both nurturing and professional associations, and encouraging reflective practices throughout the research endeavour.

Supervisors serve as mentors, and their primary responsibilities are to advise students on intellectual issues (Khosro, Oad, & Ahmad, 2023). These include the suitability of their research design, the viability of their research problem, the standard and advancement of their literature review, the creation of a suitable theoretical framework for interpreting the research's findings, how to handle unforeseen issues, and the overall production of the written work (Lubbe et al. 2005). Typically, a proficient supervisor is anticipated to devote an equivalent amount of attention to a student's research program as the student themselves. While the supervisor bears the responsibility of offering guidance, it is evident that the management of the project primarily lies with the student.

Mouton (2007) underscores that among the core responsibilities of supervisors is to offer guidance, advice, ensure scientific rigor, and furnish necessary emotional and psychological support to their students. Moreover, Abiddin (2007) posits that exemplary supervisors demonstrate care by monitoring their students' progress and providing constructive feedback on their achievements. Moses (1992), in earlier scholarship, stresses the imperative for postgraduate research students to shoulder responsibility

for their research endeavours, from determining research requirements to execution. Expanding on this perspective, Abiddin (2007) advocates for students to exercise autonomy in managing their work, without necessitating detailed step-by-step instructions. Additionally, Lessing and Schulze (2003) highlight that e-research students must adeptly select pertinent topics, apply appropriate research methodologies, and present their findings accurately. The extent to which research students fulfil these responsibilities hinges significantly on the guidance provided by their supervisors (Oad, & Alwi, 2021). Postgraduate students possess supervisory needs, characterized by the academic support provided by supervisors, which encompass mentoring, nurturing, and guidance. Wiegman (2013) contends that, inherently, supervision embodies the essence of mentoring. Building upon this assertion, she grounds her interpretation of the ontological essence of supervision in the understanding that a mentor transcends the role of a mere guide, serving as a multifaceted supporter throughout the entirety of the postgraduate students' research journey (Nawaz, Akhlaq & Bilal, 2023). Wiegman (2013) underscores the significance of supervisors in offering comprehensive support to postgraduate students (Oad & Niazi, 2021). They not only offer professional guidance but also extend personal advice, aiding students in navigating the transition into and out of graduate school. Additionally, supervisors provide constructive feedback on various aspects such as writing, teaching, and career development. Moreover, they play a pivotal role in assisting students in achieving a balance between their professional aspirations and personal commitments, while also offering emotional support during difficult periods (Ahmad, et al., 2023). Postgraduate mentoring relationships are characterized by close, personalized connections that evolve gradually between graduate students and one or more faculty members (Wiegman, 2013). Mentors are expected to possess attributes such as expertise in research methodologies, adherence to ethical research practices, and personal qualities that foster effective personal and intellectual development (Borders et al., 2012). Consequently, research mentors are tasked with imparting their specialized knowledge and skills to their mentees. However, supervisors are not necessarily required to possess comprehensive knowledge across all facets of research (Fourie-Malherbe et al., 2016; Vyncke, 2012). Nevertheless, it is imperative for supervisors to acknowledge their own limitations as researchers and communicate these to their mentees, encouraging them to seek alternative resources when necessary (Borders et al., 2012).

Highlighting the significance of supervisor feedback, Saleem and Mehmood (2018) underscore its pivotal role in supporting the developmental trajectory of postgraduate students throughout their academic research journey. Wang and Li (2011) concisely capture the essence of this feedback dynamic, asserting that "Students benefit from engaging in intellectual exchanges with their supervisors in order to receive guidance on their research progress and thesis writing." Furthermore, Stracke and Kumar (2014) validate this perspective, emphasizing that it is through the feedback mechanism that supervisors steer students along the research trajectory, facilitating their evolution into independent researchers and adept critical scholars. While feedback is generally beneficial for students' academic development, it can, in certain instances, have adverse effects on their self-esteem and consequently impede their learning outcomes (Ahmad, Bibi, & Imran, 2023).

From the viewpoint of students, feedback serves as a means of assessing their knowledge, skills, and understanding, thereby enabling them to gauge their own progress (Scott, 2014). Effective feedback practices encompass fostering self-reflection, fostering dialogue, clarifying objectives, bridging the disparity between current and desired performance levels, delivering high-quality feedback, motivating students, and furnishing information to educators (Jawah et al., 2004). Ultimately, feedback should engender a reciprocal exchange between assessors and students to enrich the learning experience. Studies by Chugh et al. (2022), Mahlangu (2021) and Hyland and Hyland (2001) have demonstrated that receiving critical feedback can pose emotional challenges for some students. Therefore, to maintain healthy supervisory relationships, feedback should not only address the "what" but also consider the "how" it is given and received (Geyskens et al., 2012). Employing the motoring model, supervisors and students engage in open, dialogic exchanges of insights and ideas, fostering critical and reflective acceptance (Wang & Li, 2011).

During the course of PhD studies, the research supervisor emerges as a pivotal figure in a student's academic journey (Rubab, Mustafa & Nawaz, 2020). Thus, cultivating an effective working relationship between the supervisor and the student is deemed essential (Shariff et al., 2014). Naim and Dhanapal (2015) contend that the quality of the student-supervisor relationship holds significant sway over the success or failure of a project or dissertation. Conversely, Morris (2011) observed that power dynamics

within the student-supervisor relationship are often perceived as unequal. Findings from studies examining this power differential indicate that supervision characterized by exploitation, aggression, or intrusiveness can lead to academic difficulties.

The discourse surrounding doctoral supervision predominantly revolves on delineating effective supervisory skills from the standpoint of supervisors and institutions. Nevertheless, in Malaysia, Ismail et al. (2012) conducted a study that delved into the perspectives of research students by conducting in-depth interviews with four participants. The aim was to discern students' views on what constitutes an 'ideal' supervisor. The findings of this study identified ten significant challenges in supervision encountered by research students. These challenges encompassed issues such as inadequate feedback, lack of dedication and enthusiasm, ineffective communication, disparities in expectations between supervisors and students, and insufficient expertise in both research and supervision roles (Ahmad, Ali, & Sewani, 2021). Findings from a study conducted in South Africa by Chireshe (2012) revealed that postgraduate students encountered various challenges concerning their supervisors. These critical issues included supervisors being too preoccupied to effectively fulfil their roles, students expressing dissatisfaction with inadequate feedback, conflicts arising from inconsistent feedback provided by supervisors, tensions and differing perspectives within the supervisory relationship, communication breakdowns and disputes regarding the research project, instances of selfish behavior and disrespect from supervisors, and perceived limitations in their knowledge and expertise within the field of study. According to respondents in Chireshe's study, supervisors' busy schedules were attributed to the multitude of students they had to supervise, substantial teaching commitments, and the obligation to attend numerous meetings (Ahmad & Hamid, 2021).

Existing literature reveals that postgraduate supervision has been extensively studied, yet there is a notable dearth of empirical research on this topic in Asia, particularly in Pakistan. Given this gap in knowledge, the current study was undertaken to investigate the perspectives, expectations, and experiences of postgraduate supervisees regarding supervision and feedback, with a specific focus on Karachi city, Pakistan.

3. Research Methodology

This study involved five participants from four universities in Karachi, comprising one public and three private sector universities. These participants had either completed their PhD or were currently enrolled in a PhD program, meeting the established criteria. The study employed purposive sampling, where participants were selected based on the researcher's judgment of their potential to contribute meaningfully to the research (Creswell, 2003). Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary method for data collection, with questions adapted from Wisker et al. (2010). The study adopted phenomenological interviewing as a qualitative inquiry method to capture the lived experiences of participants and elucidate the phenomenon under investigation. Instead of providing explanations, the study aimed to offer descriptions and utilized the phenomenological approach to illuminate "the experiences and perspectives of individuals from their own viewpoints" (Lester, 1999).

4. Results and Findings

The findings of this study indicate that research students commonly encountered three significant experiences while interacting with their supervisors. These experiences are discussed in detail below, offering insights into the dynamics of the student-supervisor relationship.

4.1 Supervisory Relationship

A vital component of academic endeavour, the supervisory relationship between research students and their supervisor shapes students' scholarly growth and success. Students frequently negotiate a complicated web of expectations, assistance, obstacles, and interactions with their supervisors within this dynamic relationship (Nawaz & Rasool, 2023). Clarifying the details of the supervisory process and creating an atmosphere that supports academic progress and achievement require an understanding of the experiences and viewpoints of students in this setting. The participants discussed various aspects of this relationship which are depicted in figure I below:



Figure 1: Supervisory Relationship

One of the participants who has recently completed his PhD from a private university stated, “...*I felt appreciated and trusted in our working relationship since my supervisor constantly paid attention to what I had to say and valued my opinions.*” While another participant who is enrolled in the same university and is doing research work stated, “...*my supervisor frequently brushes off my decisions and concerns, which makes me feel unheard and erodes trust in our working relationship.*” A participant who is enrolled in a public sector university shared his experience and said, “*I frequently feel neglected and discouraged in our supervisory relationship because I believe that my supervisor doesn't give priority to my needs or worries.*”

Similarly, participants recounted various experiences with their supervisors regarding communication. Those from public sector universities described their communicative experiences as disappointing. One participant shared, “... *my supervisor never initiated communication. It was always me who took the initiative and asked for meetings or feedback.*” Conversely, participants from private sector universities characterized their communicative experiences with their supervisors as meaningful and commendable. Reflecting on her experience, one participant stated, “... *my supervisor always stayed in touch. She was eager to communicate, and we even had Zoom meetings early in the morning, in the noon and evening.*”

Sharing their experiences regarding the availability and accessibility of their supervisors, a participant from a private sector university expressed, “*I had the privilege of accessing my supervisor frequently. We had established a meeting schedule, and she consistently made herself available according to that schedule.*” Similarly, a participant from a public sector university echoed a similar sentiment, stating, “*During the second week of the semester, we both sit down and devise a meeting schedule, which we strive to adhere to. In this*

regard, my supervisor is almost always available."

Participants' experiences with their supervisors varied significantly, particularly in terms of the guidance provided. Participants from private sector universities expressed differing experiences regarding guidance from their supervisors. One participant, who recently completed their PhD, reflected positively on their supervisor's guidance, stating, *"My supervisor always considered my needs and weaknesses. She had a clear understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and she consistently provided guidance on areas where I struggled."* In contrast, a participant from a public sector university shared a similar sentiment, noting, *"My supervisor always strives to offer personalized guidance. Despite having multiple supervisees, he never convenes group sessions for guidance and instruction."* Conversely, another participant from a private sector university expressed dissatisfaction, stating, *"Unfortunately, my supervisor does not provide individualized guidance. He gathers all his supervisees at once and offers guidance in a group setting, which I find ineffective."*

Resolving conflicts is a crucial aspect of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Findings from this study revealed that supervisors from private institutions were more proactive in addressing any conflicts that arose. One participant stated, *"...my supervisor and I have a mutual understanding. While conflicts are rare, whenever they arise, we both make an effort to sit down and comprehend each other's perspectives."* In contrast, a participant from a public sector university expressed dissatisfaction, noting, *"...my supervisor is unwilling to listen to my input. He insists on his own suggestions, and I am compelled to comply."*

4.2 Feedback Practices

Feedback plays a pivotal role in the doctoral journey. When questioned about their encounters with supervisors' feedback practices, participants offered diverse perspectives. However, the most notable practices pick up from their reflections are illustrated in Figure 2 and subsequently discussed (Nawaz, Noor & Ahmed, 2023).

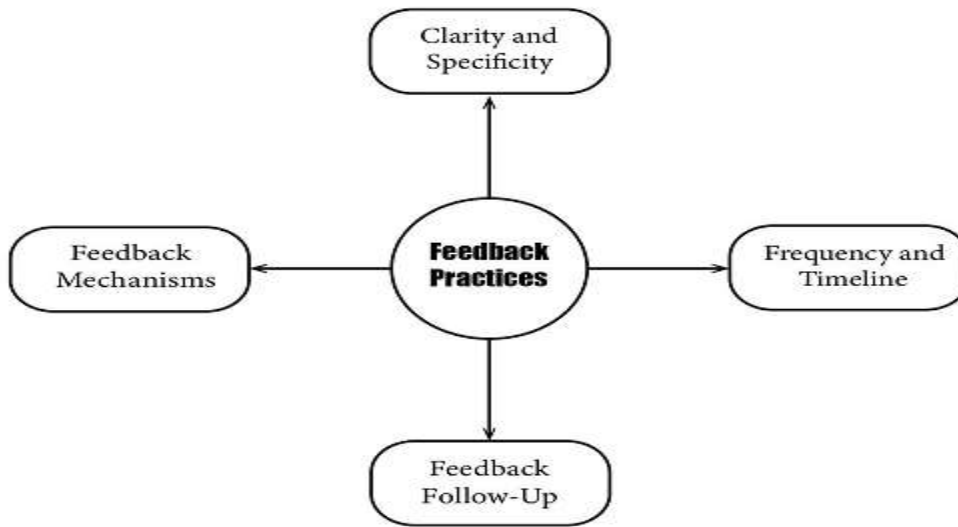


Figure 2: Feedback Practices

When discussing their experiences with supervisors' feedback practices, participants expressed a range of perspectives. Regarding the depth, clarity, and specificity of feedback, a participant from a public sector university remarked, *"...my supervisor tends to provide feedback on nearly every aspect, yet his feedback is clear. I have never encountered ambiguity or confusion."* On the other hand, a participant from a private sector university stated, *"...my supervisor consistently delivers clear and specific feedback. Once a task is completed, it is finalized, and we do not revisit it."* However, another participant from a private university said, *"...my supervisor's feedback tends to be shallow, lacking specificity and clarity. It is challenging for me to address such feedback, leading to frequent communication with my supervisor."*

When probed that how often the supervisors are used to give feedback, the participants discussed their experiences about the frequency of the feedback. One of the participants who was enrolled in a PhD program at a public sector university and another from a private university said that they have a meeting plan in place hence the feedback is given during that meeting (s). One of the participants said, *"... as I earlier said that we have a meeting plan in place, so it is obvious to have supervisor's feedback during that meeting..."*. One participant said, *"... we don't do meetings frequently but for the feedback, whenever I complete a task, I send it to my supervisor and the supervisor after going through, gives his feedback and it normally takes a while (no specific time period)..."*

Follow up on the given feedback is another crucial aspect. When asked about to share their experiences about the follow up practices utilized by the supervisors, the participants of the research reflected on their experiences. One of the participants from a private university reflected and said, *"...look, my supervisor was*

very disciplined about it. She always gave me deadlines to complete the given tasks and she really followed that...”. One participant from the same university said, “... my supervisor is lenient to the follow up. Once something is advised/suggested, he is in no hurry to follow that up...it’s up to me to complete that task and request for feedback...”. One participant from a public sector university reflected on their experiences and said, “... my supervisor keeps a keen note of follow up. He demands that the suggestions/advice be incorporated in true letter and spirit...”

When asked about the mechanism and manners of provision of feedback by the supervisor, the participants shared their experiences. One of the participants said, “...my supervisor usually used written feedback. I used to take print outs of my work and the supervisor used to give feedback on the same work...” Another participant stated, “... my supervisor normally used online feedback inserting the comments on soft copy of my work...”

4.3 Supervisory Support

Support from the supervisor is pivotal in shaping the academic career of a PhD student. When participants were queried about the support they received from their supervisors, they recounted diverse experiences. Figure 3 portrays the primary categories of supervisory support that were most frequently discussed by the study's participants.

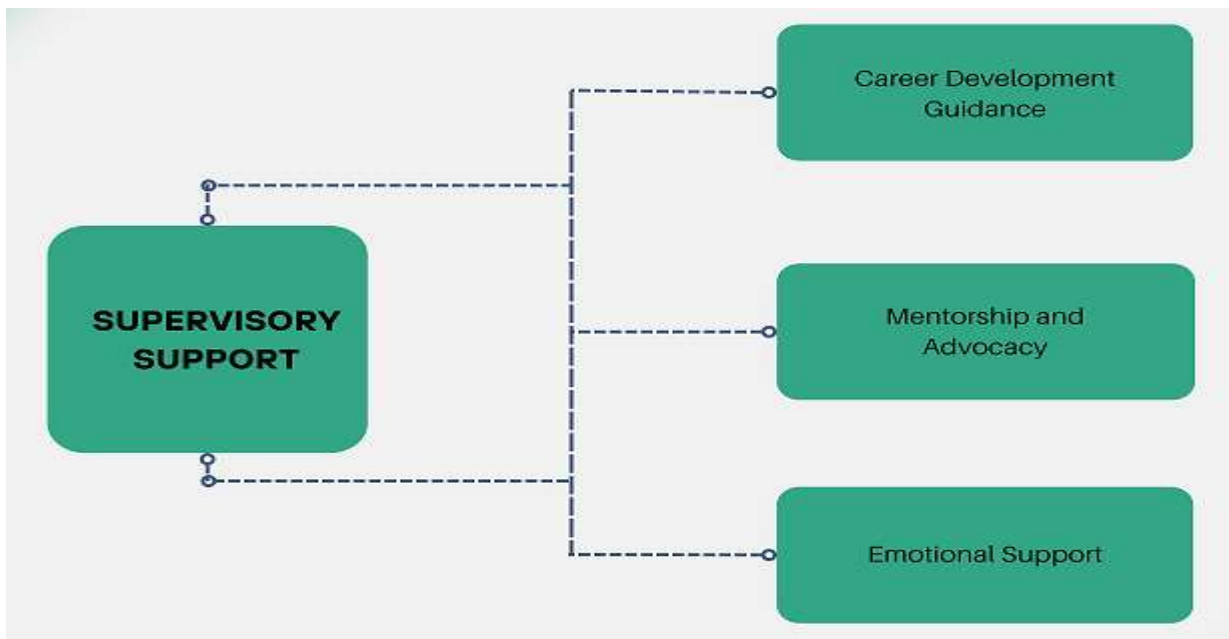


Figure 3: Supervisory Support

On inquiring about support they received from their supervisors, the participants expressed and shared their experiences. All the participants mentioned that their supervisors were keen to support them in guiding their career and professional development. One of the participants stated, “... my supervisor always guided me in

terms of my professional development. She would refer me to conferences, seminars, workshops, and other professional and career development opportunities...”. Another aspect of supervisory support was mentorship and advocacy. The participants had all the praise for their supervisors for their mentorship. One of the participants quoted, “...*Along the way, my supervisor provides vital guidance and advocates for my professional progress in addition to guiding me through my academic path.*” Emotional support is another key factor that boosts the relationship between a supervisor and the supervisee. Participants of this research reflected on the emotional support they got from their respective supervisor. One of the participants stated, “... *I was lucky enough that my supervisor was empathetic. She encouraged me whenever I felt down. She was like... come on, it is almost done, we are almost there... you can do it...*” while another participant said, “...*my supervisor, at first seemed to be rude but by the passage of time, I felt that he is like an elder brother. He always wanted me to do my best...*”

5. Discussion

The variety of experiences that participants shared revealed a wide range of variables within the supervisor-supervisee interaction. While some students at private universities felt respected and encouraged by their supervisors. These findings are in line with the findings of Netshitangani et al. (2021) who reported that most of the participants of their research study felt supported and respected by their research supervisors however others reported feelings of neglect and mistrust. Such findings support the findings of Ismail et al. (2013), Gurr (2001), Janssen (2005), Vilkinas (2008), and Wisker et al. (2010) who found that the supervisors do not respect and support their supervisors. Universities in the public and private sectors differed in their communication styles as well. Public sector participants regretted the absence of proactive communication which is contrary to the findings of Ali et al. (2019) who in their study concluded that the supervisors at postgraduate level remain available to the students, whereas private sector participants commended their supervisors' persistent efforts in this area.

Study participants talked about their diverse experiences receiving criticism from supervisors. Some stated that the supervisors' feedback was thorough and simple to understand, which is consistent with the findings of the Kashif et al. (2014) study. However, others stressed that there was a lack of accuracy and clarity, which made communication difficult. The earlier findings of Sidhu et al. (2013) corroborate

these findings. While feedback was given to some through work completion submissions, it was also given to others during scheduled meetings. There were variations in the input frequency. Supervisors varied in how they followed up on recommendations; some enforced strict deadlines, while others were more relaxed and gave the student the final say. A variety of methods were used to provide feedback, such as written notes on hard copies and online comments on soft copies. These results corroborate those of Gezahegn and Gedamu (2023), who discovered that while not many supervisors utilize online comments, many use written feedback.

A strong commitment to guiding their professional and career progress was demonstrated by the anecdotes recounted by the participants. It is noteworthy that supervisors shown a strong commitment to professional development by actively organizing conferences and workshops (Bukhari, Khan, & Haq, 2024). The participants acknowledged that mentorship and advocacy were essential components, praising their supervisors for their invaluable assistance and active support of their professional development. Supervisory empathetic and motivating moments were emphasized, creating a nurturing relationship that was reminiscent of an older sibling. One key element that became apparent was emotional support, which had a huge impact on the supervisor-supervisee interaction. These results are consistent with earlier research (Khan et al., 2023; Batool, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2016), which came to the identical conclusion that postgraduate students gain emotional support from their supervisors in addition to career and professional assistance. Furthermore, it is discovered that supervisors actively guide and support the people they oversee, which is consistent with the findings of this study.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study's findings reveal disparities in feedback practices, communication philosophies, and support levels between public and private universities, as well as a broad spectrum of experiences in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Similar to earlier studies, some participants said they thought their superiors mistrusted and ignored them, while others said they were supportive and encouraged. Participants from the public sector bemoaned the lack of proactive communication, notwithstanding differences in sector-specific communication practices. Feedback was received in a variety of ways; some felt it was comprehensive, while others felt it was ambiguous. Supervisors had varying approaches to offering

comments and following up, suggesting that they each had a unique supervisory style. Despite these variations, participants consistently emphasized the importance of emotional support, advocacy, and mentorship from their supervisors, which is in accordance with previous studies. Overall, the findings demonstrate the intricacy of the connection between a supervisor and supervisee as well as the range of responsibilities that supervisors can play in supporting the professional and career development of postgraduate students.

Drawing from the research's conclusions, the following recommendations are made to improve the supervisor-supervisee relationship and aid in postgraduate students' professional development:

- Provide supervisees with regular feedback channels.
- Immediately address any concerns brought up in feedback and acknowledge the need of providing supervisees with emotional support.
- Provide supervisors with tools or instruction to assist supervisees' mental health.
- Establish uniform communication protocols at universities in the public and private sectors.
- Make sure supervisees and supervisors communicate consistently and proactively.
- Provide training courses to aid in the professional growth of postgraduate students.
- Encourage cooperative problem-solving in the supervisor-supervisee relationship; facilitate the professional development of supervisors through conferences and seminars; and foster cooperative problem-solving in the supervisee-supervisor relationship.
- Establish a supportive and upbeat environment for both supervisors and supervisees.
- To increase performance and the academic experience, cultivate respect and admiration in the classroom.

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