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EXPLORING SUPERVISORY AND FEEDBACK PRACTICES AMONG M.PHIL. AND PH.D. SCHOLARS ACROSS UNIVERSITIES IN HAZARA DIVISION, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Research supervision and feedback are central to the development and successful progression of postgraduate research students. This study explored supervisory and feedback practices among M.Phil. and Ph.D. students in public-sector universities of Hazara Division, Pakistan. A quantitative, descriptive survey design was employed, and data were collected from 270 research students at Hazara University Mansehra, the University of Haripur, and COMSATS University Abbottabad through multistage random sampling. A researcher-developed 49-item questionnaire covering seven dimensions of supervisory and feedback practices was used. The instrument demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .98). Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students across the supervisory dimensions examined. Similarly, university-wise comparisons showed no significant differences in students' perceptions of supervisory and feedback practices. The study concludes that students across degree programs and universities generally experience comparable supervisory and feedback practices. It recommends strengthening consistent, constructive, timely, and student-responsive supervision through institutional guidelines, supervisor professional development, and regular feedback mechanisms to further enhance postgraduate research quality.

1. Introduction

Research supervision and feedback are fundamental components of postgraduate research education because they guide students through the complex process of developing and completing independent research. Postgraduate research students require academic and methodological support at different stages, including identifying a research problem, selecting a topic, developing a research plan, collecting and analyzing data, interpreting findings, and preparing the final thesis. In this process, supervisors act not only as academic experts but also as mentors, facilitators, coaches, and

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professional guides who help students develop research competence and greater independence.

Effective supervision involves more than providing instructions; it requires continuous interaction, communication, mentoring, and constructive feedback between supervisors and students. Devos et al. (2016) describe supervision as a structured set of responsibilities and activities that may vary according to the supervisor, student, and research context. Similarly, Kleijn et al. (2013) and Nicol (2010) emphasize the dialogic nature of supervision, in which supervisors and students interact through meetings, discussion, reflection, and feedback. Such interaction can contribute to students' research skills, academic confidence, motivation, and development of a research identity. Feedback is an equally important element of the supervisory process. Effective feedback enables students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their work, clarify research expectations, identify areas for improvement, and move from their current level of performance toward desired outcomes. Constructive, specific, timely, and supportive feedback can encourage reflection, motivation, and continued engagement with research (Juwah et al., 2004; de Kleijn et al., 2014). Conversely, inadequate, delayed, or unclear feedback may create difficulties in research progression and affect the quality of students' academic work (Cekiso et al., 2019; East, Bitchener, & Basturkmen, 2012).

The supervisory relationship is also an important dimension of postgraduate research. Students generally value supervisors who are approachable, accessible, supportive, responsive, and genuinely interested in their academic development (Halbert, 2015). A positive supervisory relationship can promote trust, communication, academic satisfaction, and student engagement. At the same time, supervision needs to be flexible because students' abilities, research skills, and support requirements change as they progress through their research journey. Supervisors therefore need to balance guidance and independence by providing appropriate support while gradually enabling students to take greater ownership of their research (Hemer, 2012; Bamber, 2015).

Supervisory needs may also differ according to the level and nature of postgraduate research. M.Phil. students may require greater support in developing fundamental research skills, methodological understanding, and independent research practices, whereas Ph.D. students are generally expected to demonstrate greater independence, critical thinking, originality, and contribution to knowledge. Consequently, nature, intensity, and expectations of supervision and feedback may differ between the two groups. Previous research has highlighted the importance of developing supervisory practices at the doctoral level, while comparatively less attention has been given to systematic consideration of supervision at the master's level (Bamber, 2015; Halse, 2011). This makes comparison between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students particularly relevant for understanding whether supervisory and feedback practices adequately respond to the needs of students at different stages of research education.

Universities also differ in their institutional structures, supervisory arrangements, resources, academic cultures, and mechanisms for providing feedback. These differences may influence students' experiences of research supervision. The need for consistency and professional development in supervisory practices has increasingly been recognized, with universities introducing supervisor training and institutional mechanisms to improve the quality of postgraduate research supervision (Lee, 2014; Hamilton, Carson, & Ellison, 2014). However, the effectiveness of such practices ultimately depends on how they are experienced by research students within their institutional contexts.

In Pakistan, particularly within the universities of Hazara Division, postgraduate research has become an important component of higher education. However, limited empirical attention has been given to students' perceptions of supervisory and feedback practices, particularly

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from a comparative perspective involving both M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students across different universities. Understanding these experiences is important because the quality of supervision and feedback can influence students' research progress, academic development, satisfaction, and ability to complete meaningful research. Therefore, the present study, titled "Exploring Supervisory and Feedback Practices among M.Phil. and Ph.D. Students across Universities in Hazara Division, Pakistan," examines students' perspectives on supervisory and feedback practices. It specifically considers differences between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students and examines variations in their opinions across universities. By focusing on these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute empirical evidence for strengthening postgraduate research supervision, improving feedback practices, and supporting a more effective research environment in universities of Hazara Division.

2. Statement of the Problem

Effective research supervision and feedback are essential for postgraduate students because they provide academic direction, methodological support, constructive criticism, and guidance throughout the research process. The quality of supervisory practices can influence students' research skills, motivation, confidence, academic progress, and successful completion of their theses. Similarly, timely, specific, constructive, and supportive feedback enables students to identify weaknesses, improve their research work, and develop greater independence as researchers.

Despite the recognized importance of supervision and feedback, postgraduate students may experience differences in the accessibility, quality, consistency, and nature of supervisory support. These differences may arise from variations in supervisors' approaches, student needs, institutional practices, academic resources, and university-level research environments. Furthermore, the requirements of M.Phil. and Ph.D. students are not necessarily identical. M.Phil. students may require comparatively greater guidance in developing research competencies, while Ph.D. students are expected to demonstrate increasing independence, critical thinking, originality, and advanced research capabilities. It is therefore important to determine whether supervisory and feedback practices adequately address the needs of both groups.

Although previous studies have examined research supervision and feedback in different educational contexts, there is limited empirical evidence focusing specifically on M.Phil. and Ph.D. students in universities of Hazara Division, Pakistan. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to comparing students' opinions according to their research degree and examining whether their experiences vary across universities. The absence of such comparative evidence makes it difficult to determine the extent to which existing supervisory and feedback practices are consistent and responsive to the needs of postgraduate research students in the region. The problem addressed by the present study is therefore the limited empirical understanding of how M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students perceive supervisory and feedback practices and whether these perceptions differ across universities in Hazara Division. Addressing this problem can provide evidence for identifying strengths and areas requiring improvement in postgraduate research supervision and feedback. The study consequently aims to compare the opinions of M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students and examine variations across universities, thereby contributing to the improvement of research supervision practices and the overall quality of postgraduate research education in Hazara Division, Pakistan.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a quantitative, descriptive survey design to examine supervisory and feedback practices among M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students in public-sector universities of Hazara Division, Pakistan. The population comprised M.Phil. and Ph.D. supervisees in the social

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sciences at Hazara University Mansehra, the University of Haripur, and COMSATS University Abbottabad during the academic years 2017–18 to 2019–20 (Table 1). A multistage random sampling technique was used, through which three universities were selected by simple random sampling, followed by the selection of six social science departments from each university. From each selected department, 10 M.Phil. and 5 Ph.D. students were selected through disproportionate stratified random sampling, resulting in a total sample of 270 respondents (180 M.Phil. and 90 Ph.D. students). Data were collected using a researcher-developed 49-item questionnaire based primarily on established measures of research supervision and supervisor feedback, covering seven dimensions: facilitation, reflective practice, mentoring, coaching and feedback, elaboration, goal-relatedness, and sponsoring/networking. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 5 = Always to 1 = Never. The instrument was reviewed by experts in social sciences and education to establish face and content validity and was pilot-tested with 20 M.Phil. and Ph.D. students whose responses were excluded from the main study. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.98. Data were collected through face-to-face administration and, where necessary, online platforms including Google Forms, email, SurveyMonkey, and WhatsApp, particularly in response to COVID-19-related restrictions and difficulties in accessing participants. Ethical principles were observed by obtaining institutional permission and informed consent and assuring participants of confidentiality and the research-only use of their responses. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 21 through descriptive and inferential statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and independent-samples t-tests, to examine differences in students' perceptions across degree programs and universities.

Table 1: Population of M.Phil. and Ph.D. Research Students by University and Academic Year

University	Program	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
University of Haripur	M.Phil.	128	169	285	360	942
	Ph.D.	12	43	47	134	236
	Subtotal	140	212	332	494	1,178
Hazara University Mansehra	M.Phil.	100	304	208	257	869
	Ph.D.	14	27	27	30	98
	Subtotal	114	331	235	287	967
COMSATS University Abbottabad	M.Phil.	582	504	431	249	1,766
	Ph.D.	61	36	42	29	168
	Subtotal	643	540	473	278	1,934
Total	M.Phil.	810	977	924	866	3,577
	Ph.D.	87	106	116	193	502
	Grand Total	897	1,083	1,040	1,059	4,079

4. Results

Table- 2 Comparative Views of Respondents (M.Phil and PhD) about their supervisors, as a Facilitator in Research Supervisory and Feedback Practices

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	P.value
M. Phil	183	4.3	0.68			
Facilitator				1.21	268	0.22
PhD	87	4.2	0.40			

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The table-2 shows comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors (as a facilitator) feedback in the different research stages t = 1.21, p=0.22 > 0.05, which means that there is no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors supervisory and feedback practices in term of supervisor as a facilitator. This means that respondent is of similar views.

Table-3 Comparative Views of Supervisee (M.Phil and PhD) about Reflective Practice supervision in research supervisory and feedback Practices

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	P.value
M.Phil	183	4.1	0.60			
Reflective practice				0.7	268	0.44
PhD	87	4.2	0.68			

The table-3 shows comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors feedback and practices in term of reflective practice supervision in the different research stages t = 0.7,p=0.44 > 0.05, which reveals that respondents are similar opinions and no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors supervisory and feedback practices in term of reflective practice supervision. This means that respondent is of similar views.

Table-4 ***Comparative Views of Supervisees (M.Phil and PhD) about their Supervisors as mentor in Research Supervisory and Feedback Practices***

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	P.value
M.Phil	183	4.9	0.64			
Mentoring				1.06	268	0.28
PhD	87	4.8	0.66			

The table-4 shows comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors (as mentor) feedback in the research stages t = 1.=0.28 > 0.05, which means that there is no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and ph.d researchers about their supervisors supervisory and feedback practices in term of mentoring . This means that the respondent is of similar views.

Table 5 ***Comparative Views of Supervisee (M.Phil and PhD) about the role of Supervisors in Coaching and feedback in Research Supervisory and feedback Practices***

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	P.value
M.Phil	177	4.5	1.09			
Coaching and feedback				0.26	262	0.79
PhD	87	4.4	1.27			

The table-5 shows comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisor's role in coaching feedback in the research stages t = 0.26, p=0.79 > 0.05, it indicate that there is no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisory and feedback practices in term of coaching and feedback. This means that M.Phil and Ph.D

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researchers are of similar opinions about coaching and feedback.

Table 6 ***Comparative Views of Supervisee (M.Phil and PhD) explain Goal-Relatedness in Research Supervisory and Feedback Practice Supervision***

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	p.value
M.Phil	183	4.2	0.58			
Goal-relatedness				1.14	268	0.25
PhD	87	4.1	0.63			

The table-6 reveals that comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors feedback in term of goal relatedness in the different research stages t = 1.14,p=0.25 > 0.05, which means that there is no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and Ph.D respondents about their supervisors supervisory and feedback practices in term of goal-relatedness. This means that respondent is of similar views.

Table 7 ***Comparative Views of Supervisees (M.Phil and PhD) about Sponsoring in Research Supervisory and Feedback Practices***

Programme	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	P.value
M. Phil	183	4.4	1.44			
Sponsoring				0.95	268	0.34
PhD	87	4.6	1.86			

The table-7 shows comparative views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about their supervisors (as a facilitator) feedback in the different research stages t = 1.95, p=0.22 > 0.34, reveals that there is no significant difference between the views of M.Phil and Ph.D researchers about supervisory and feedback practices in term of supervisors as sponsoring. This means those respondents are of similar views.

Table 8 ***Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities on the Role of Facilitators in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices***

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.200	2	.600	1.632	.197
Within Groups	98.110	267	.367		
Total	99.310	269			

Table-8 shows that F (2, 269) = 1.632, with p = 0.197, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of facilitators in research supervision and feedback practices.

Table 9 ***Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities on the role of Reflective Practices in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices***

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.

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Between Groups	.493	2	.246	.623	.537
Within Groups	105.664	267	.396		
Total	106.157	269			

Table-9 shows that F (2, 269) = 0.623, with p = 0.537, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of reflective practices in research supervision and feedback practices.

Table 10 ***Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities on the role of mentoring in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices***

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.102	2	.051	.121	.887
Within Groups	113.049	267	.423		
Total	113.151	269			

Table-10 shows that F (2, 267) = 1.21, with p = 0.887, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of mentoring in research supervision and feedback practices.

Table 11 ***Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities on the role of Coaching and Feedback in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices***

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.743	2	.872	.649	.523
Within Groups	350.601	267	1.343		
Total	352.345	269			

Table-11 shows that F (2, 267) = 0.649, with p = 0.523, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of coaching and feedback in research supervision and feedback practices.

Table 12 Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities on the Role of goal Relatedness in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.060	2	.030	.084	.920
Within Groups	96.348	267	.361		
Total	96.409	269			

Table 12 shows that F (2, 267) = 0.84, with p = 0.920, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of goal relatedness in research supervision and feedback practices.

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Table 13 *Comparative Views of M.Phil and PhD Supervisees across Universities Regarding the Role of Goal-Sponsoring in Research Supervision and Feedback Practices Sponsoring*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.558	2	.279	.109	.896
Within Groups	681.336	267	2.552		
Total	681.895	269			

Table 13 shows that F (2, 267) = 0.109, with p = 0.896, which is greater than α = 0.05. This indicates that there are no significant differences among respondents from different universities regarding the role of Sponsoring in research supervision and feedback practices.

5. Discussion of the results

The study examined research supervisory and feedback practices in universities of Hazara Division, focusing on the perceptions of M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students. The findings covered six major dimensions: facilitation, reflective practice, mentoring, coaching and feedback, goal-relatedness, and sponsoring/networking. The findings showed that M.Phil. and Ph.D. students had similar perceptions of their supervisors as facilitators. M.Phil. students reported a mean score of 4.3, while Ph.D. students reported 4.2. The difference was not statistically significant (t = 1.21, p = .22). This suggests that students at both levels generally perceived their supervisors as providing guidance, direction, time, and support during different stages of research. This finding is consistent with Gatmon et al. (2001), who emphasized the importance of effective interaction between supervisors and supervisees in developing a satisfactory supervisory relationship.

The results indicated no significant difference between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students regarding reflective supervisory practices. The mean scores were 4.1 and 4.2, respectively, with t = 0.70 and p = .44. This suggests that supervisors provide comparable opportunities for students to reflect on their research ideas, decisions, and progress. Reflective supervision can help researchers identify weaknesses and improve their research through critical consideration of their work. M.Phil. and Ph.D. students also expressed similar views regarding the mentoring role of supervisors. The mean scores were 4.9 and 4.8, respectively, and the difference was not statistically significant (t = 1.06, p = .28). The relatively high scores suggest that mentoring is an important aspect of research supervision. Supervisors can support students by helping them develop research ideas, understand relevant literature, and gradually become independent researchers.

The findings showed no significant difference between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students regarding coaching and feedback (M = 4.5 and 4.4; t = 0.26, p = .79). This indicates that both groups perceived similar levels of guidance and feedback from their supervisors. East et al. (2012) and Hattie and Clarke (2018) emphasized that effective feedback should not only identify weaknesses but also provide feedback for improving subsequent work. De Kleijn et al. (2014) similarly highlighted the importance of examining the quality and effectiveness of supervisory feedback. The results further showed that M.Phil. and Ph.D. students had similar perceptions regarding goal-relatedness. The mean scores were 4.2 and 4.1, respectively, with no significant difference (t = 1.14, p = .25). The finding suggests that supervisors generally connect their guidance and feedback with students' research objectives and progress. Orsmond and Merry (2011) emphasized the importance of feed-forward information in helping students understand the next steps required to improve their work. In research supervision, linking feedback with research goals can therefore help students maintain direction and make continuous progress. M.Phil. and Ph.D. students also reported similar perceptions of supervisors' sponsoring and networking practices.

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The mean scores were 4.4 and 4.6, respectively, and the difference was not statistically significant. This indicates that supervisors provide broadly similar support regarding access to resources, facilities, technical assistance, and professional opportunities. Supervisory networking can contribute to students' academic and professional development by connecting them with relevant resources and research communities (Shepherd & Hannafin, 2008; Tripp & Rich, 2012).

The university-wise analysis also revealed no statistically significant differences across the participating universities. No significant differences were found for facilitation ($F = 1.632$, $p = .197$), reflective practice ($F = 0.623$, $p = .537$), mentoring ($F = 0.121$, $p = .887$), coaching and feedback ($F = 0.649$, $p = .523$), goal-relatedness ($F = 0.084$, $p = .920$), or sponsoring ($F = 0.109$, $p = .896$).

6. Conclusion

The study examined research supervisory and feedback practices in universities of Hazara Division from the perspectives of M.Phil. and Ph.D. research students. The findings indicate that supervisors generally perform multiple roles in the research process, including facilitator, reflective practitioner, mentor, coach, feedback provider, goal-oriented guide, and sponsor/networking supporter. The comparative analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between M.Phil. and Ph.D. students regarding any of the examined dimensions of research supervision and feedback. Similarly, the university-wise analysis showed no statistically significant differences among the participating universities in facilitation, reflective practice, mentoring, coaching and feedback, goal-relatedness, or sponsoring. These findings indicate that respondents across the two research programmes and participating universities held broadly similar perceptions of supervisory practices. The findings further highlight that effective research supervision involves more than monitoring students' thesis progress. It includes providing appropriate guidance, encouraging reflection and independent thinking, offering constructive and timely feedback, connecting feedback with research goals, and supporting students' access to academic and research resources. In particular, feedback and feed-forward practices can help students understand both their current performance and the steps required for further improvement.

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