

Effective Doctoral Supervision through the Supervisee Lens: A Multidimensional Study of Public Universities in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT: Good doctoral supervision should not only ensure the completion of the doctoral thesis but also support doctoral researchers in becoming independent, critical, ethical, and professionally connected scholars. This study explored doctoral supervisees' perceptions of effective supervisory practices across five dimensions: Relationship Building, Quality Feedback, Explicit Communication, Accessibility and Responsiveness, and Academic Development. Using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 226 doctoral supervisees enrolled in four public sector universities in Southern Punjab, Pakistan through proportionate stratified random sampling. A researcher-made 29-item questionnaire was employed, demonstrating high internal consistency overall (Cronbach's alpha = .952) and across all dimensions (.834–.895). Descriptive statistics revealed an overall positive perception of supervision ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.74$). Among the dimensions, Quality Feedback received the highest rating ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.86$), followed by Accessibility and Responsiveness ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.85$), Relationship Building ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.86$), Academic Development ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.90$), and Explicit Communication ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.89$). Particularly favourable supervisory practices included needs-responsive and timely feedback, supervisor accessibility, equitable treatment, and encouragement of original ideas. However, weaker areas included early clarification of expectations, participatory goal-setting, support for scholarly writing and networking, monitoring incremental progress, and maintaining regularity. The findings suggest that while the overall quality of supervision in the selected universities was generally good, supervisees experienced it differently. Strengthening explicit communication, expectation setting, and academic development opportunities may help shift doctoral supervision from a narrow focus on thesis completion toward a more comprehensive process of researcher formation.

KEYWORDS: Doctoral Supervision, Doctoral Supervisees, Quality Feedback, Supervisory Relationship, Academic Development, Higher Education, Pakistan

Introduction

The doctorate has a unique role in higher education as it is expected to impart knowledge at the highest level of a discipline as well as to develop researchers who can create new knowledge, make independent decisions, and be

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responsible members of a scholarly and professional community. Thus, the doctorate is more than a research project carried out at a higher level. It is a developmental process whereby candidates learn to identify problems that can be researched; to assess the evidence; to make defensible methodological choices; to communicate complex arguments; and to place their work in a broader academic context. In this process, doctoral supervision is a key educational strategy as supervisors are likely to be the primary source of intellectual guidance, evaluative feedback, research socialization and access to disciplinary networks (Polkinghorne et al., 2023; Taylor & Kiley, 2025).

The concept that good supervision is simply helping a candidate complete his or her thesis in a timely fashion is no longer considered to be a viable option in contemporary scholarship. Completion is important, but a doctorate should also create researchers who think critically, write persuasively, work ethically, and make increasingly independent decisions. This wider perspective has led to an understanding of supervision as a relational, pedagogical, communicative and developmental practice. Supervisors can serve as critical readers, mentors, facilitators, scholarly role models, and gatekeepers to professional networks, with these roles evolving according to the candidate's stage of candidature (Guarimata-Salinas et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2024).

The meaning of supervision has broadened, and the supervisee perspective is particularly significant. Not all practices that are meant to be supportive, or formally required by an institution, can be assumed to be effective. How guidance is received, interpreted, and used by doctoral researchers is a key element in the educational value of supervision. What a supervisor might see as detailed comments might be considered to be high-quality feedback, while for a candidate it might be hard to prioritize. Likewise, a supervisor might consider it adequate to be available periodically, and a supervisee might consider it adequate to be available at a critical point in the research process. Candidates' perceptions thus give evidence of whether the intentions of the supervisors are realized in meaningful research experiences.

Supervision has been shown to be linked to doctoral engagement, wellbeing, satisfaction, research progress, academic identity and professional development in recent research (Cardilini et al., 2022; Corcelles-Seuba et al., 2023; Li et al., 2025; Tikkanen et al., 2025). None of these outcomes is likely to be achieved by any one supervisory behaviour. Rather, supervisory effectiveness seems to be a result of a number of interrelated practices. In the current study, these practices are grouped into five dimensions: Relationship Building, Quality Feedback, Explicit Communication, Accessibility and Responsiveness, and Academic Development. These dimensions collectively reflect the interpersonal support, pedagogical guidance, shared expectations, access to expertise at the right time, and development of the candidate beyond the immediate requirements of thesis production.

It's also important to consider the context. Much of the international literature on doctoral supervision has come from higher-education systems that have relatively well-developed research infrastructures and professional-development structures. Supervisory practice in public universities in Pakistan is influenced by the institutional set-up, resources, culture of the discipline, workload of supervisors, and academic interaction. Thus, practices that are known to be effective in other countries need to be explored in their context. While there is growing evidence of the importance of feedback, access, supervisory attitudes, academic development, and supervisor-student fit in the doctoral experience from recent studies in Pakistan (Masood et al., 2023; Waheed et al., 2021; Zahid & Mahmood, 2025), evidence is still relatively limited, especially from the perspective of multi-dimensional candidate-centred studies.

The present study addresses this need by exploring the perceptions of doctoral supervisees of effective supervisory practices in four public-sector universities in Southern Punjab. Supervisees are not viewed as passive recipients of supervision, but rather their perceptions are seen as an important measure of whether the supervisory practices are perceived as clear, supportive, timely, and developmentally useful. This study looks at five dimensions at once and

keeps the pattern of items within each dimension, which identifies areas of relative strength and practices that might need more systematic attention.

Formal progress procedures, completion indicators, or supervisors' accounts of their practice are common methods for assessing doctoral supervision in universities. These mechanisms are helpful but incomplete in that they might not illustrate how candidates experience the day-to-day processes by which supervision becomes educationally meaningful. A supervisee can be given regular meetings and not be clear about expectations, or be given a lot of feedback and not be given enough time to build up independent writing and professional networks. Thus, it is important to examine supervision from the candidate's point of view on several related aspects, and not just on administrative indicators, or on individual measures of satisfaction.

The need is especially pertinent in Pakistan where the number of doctorates has grown and where universities are increasingly being pressured to be productive and of good quality in research. Previous research suggests that feedback, supervisory styles, communication, research support and access to scholarly opportunities can all impact doctoral experiences. But little is known about the relative pattern of these practices when they are evaluated together using a common framework. A contextually based, supervisee-centred assessment can thus help to identify areas of practice that seem relatively strong and areas where institutional improvement might be most helpful.

Objective of the Study

The study had one main goal

- ▶ To explore effective supervisory practices as perceived by doctoral supervisees.

Research Question

RQ1: What are doctoral supervisees' perceptions of effective supervisory practices in the following areas: Relationship Building, Quality Feedback, Explicit Communication, Accessibility and Responsiveness, and Academic Development?

Literature Review

Effective Doctoral Supervision as Researcher Development

The concept of good doctoral supervision has evolved in the context of wider developments in doctoral education. Previous methods tended to focus on completion and the role of the supervisor to ensure that the project was academically acceptable and was on track. Later on, methods focus more on the researcher's development of the candidate. Masek and Alias (2020) define good supervision as being based on the right supervision approaches, expectations and dispositions, whereas Taylor and Kiley (2025) highlight the cultivation of creativity, critical and analytical thinking, methodological competence and scholarly independence. This developmental approach implies that supervisors will be evaluated not only based on their knowledge but also in their capacity to enable candidates to make their own research choices.

Supervision is thus adaptive and not static. Proposal stage candidates might need intensive assistance at the stage of topic refinement, literature positioning, conceptual framing, or methodological planning. Candidates who are nearing completion may require a different type of supervision which focuses on argumentation, interpretation, publication and independent judgement. Thomas et al. (2024) also demonstrate that the practice of supervision changes over a candidature. A good supervisory relationship should therefore make appropriate changes to the level and nature of supervision without causing confusion as to the reasons for the changes in responsibilities. This means that communication and developmental judgement are key to good supervision.

Relationship Building

Much doctoral learning takes place in the context of the interpersonal relationship of the supervisory relationship. Li et al. (2025) demonstrate the link between the supervisor-doctoral student relationship and learning progress, academic success, wellbeing, professional development, and broader scholarly networks. Trust, respect, empathy, openness, fairness, and encouragement are therefore not secondary elements of doctoral supervision, but are part and parcel of the ability of candidates to ask questions, to reveal uncertainty, to talk about setbacks, to be exposed to challenging criticism.

Supportive supervision is not "friendship" or lower standards of academic performance. Rigorous critique is required of doctoral candidates, and sometimes of weak assumptions, inadequate evidence, or poorly justified methodological choices made by the candidate. Buirski (2022) proposes that supportive supervisory relationships need to include a combination of intellectual challenge and an approach to interaction that maintains the candidate's ability to interact confidently. The difference between criticism of the academic work and criticism of the person is thus significant. Difficult feedback is more likely to be used constructively by candidates when they feel the relationship is respectful and that the academic environment is safe.

Quality Feedback

One of the most obvious pedagogical activities in doctoral supervision is feedback. Candidates regularly submit proposals, chapters, analyses, presentations and manuscripts for comment, and these cycles of production, critique, revision and resubmission are a key way in which doctoral learning takes place. Bearman et al. (2024) demonstrate how feedback can make explicit and tacit standards of scholarly practice available to doctoral candidates. Good feedback will thus do more than just mark mistakes; it will enable candidates to appreciate how scholarly claims are constructed, assessed, substantiated and modified.

Bao and Feng (2025) show how supervisory feedback can help to advance doctoral academic literacy, specifically in the context of writing for publication. This is because the skill of editing a specific chapter does not necessarily mean that the skill of writing independently to various academic audiences is gained. Feedback is developmental when candidates are told why they need to revise, and they can apply this to their future work. Carless et al. (2024) therefore see feedback as a process of academic socialisation, where candidates are taught the norms, academic communication and engagement in academic communities.

Explicit Communication

There are many expectations in doctoral supervision which can be left unspoken if not discussed. These involve the frequency of meetings, the time it takes for feedback to be returned, who must keep things moving, how much the supervisor is involved in decisions, publication expectations, authorship, how things are communicated and the level of independence expected at various stages. According to Cardilini et al. (2022), one of the most common problems is that of mismatching expectations between the supervisor and the candidate, and that frequent communication does not necessarily mean that everyone is on the same page.

Explicit communication is thus not about the amount of communication but about clarity, negotiation, and understanding. Baydarova et al. (2023) view the supervisory expectations as a product of the relationship that is co-constructed. This is especially true as expectations evolve over time as candidates grow. The level of direction can vary according to the beginning supervisee's need for more direction and the advanced candidate's need for less direction and more interpretation and decision-making. A decrease in guidance could be seen as a decrease in supervisory interest if this is not discussed as a change in responsibility.

Accessibility and Responsiveness

Supervisory expertise can only be used to develop candidates when it is available at times that are useful to the candidate's academic development. Accessibility and Responsiveness is defined as reasonable availability for guidance, prompt responses to communication regarding research, turnaround of feedback, scheduled contact, and follow-up if progress is slow. The quality of the supervisory relationship and interaction is a factor in doctoral satisfaction (Seeber & Horta, 2021), and the frequency of supervision and support is important (Anttila et al., 2024).

Accessibility does not mean unhindered or instant access. Teaching, research, administration, professional service, committee work, and multiple supervisees are typical of the activities that supervisors handle. Bahtilla (2024) recognizes workload and competing responsibilities as some of the factors that can delay feedback. The question is thus whether candidates are able to achieve predictable and meaningful access without undue disruption of research progress. It may be better to have a mutually agreed-upon timeframe for responding rather than an unrealistic expectation that the person is always available.

Academic Development

Academic Development is the overall goal of doctoral supervision, which is a researcher who can work beyond the scope of the thesis. Academic writing, methodological competence, critical reading, research ethics, publication, conference participation, networking, scholarly confidence, and independent decision-making are included in this dimension. Supervisory interaction can be a factor in the development of doctoral academic identity (Bao et al., 2025), and supervisory competence and support from the research community are highlighted (Pyhältö et al., 2024).

Networking is especially significant in the context of professional learning, as doctoral learning is spread across scholarly communities. Candidates are exposed to other perspectives and standards through conferences, seminars, research groups, professional associations, collaborative projects and publication networks. Corcelles-Seuba et al. (2023) also highlight the need for research-community support. Supervisors can help this process by introducing candidates to experts, encouraging them to participate in conferences, to engage in scholarly writing and to understand the requirements for academic publication.

Need for a Multidimensional Supervisee-Centered Assessment

Studies on doctoral supervision tend to be directed at a single dimension, e.g., feedback, wellbeing, quality of relationship, satisfaction. However, these practices are shared by candidates. One supervisee might get great feedback and not get a lot of access to professional networks; another might have a respectful relationship but have unclear expectations; another might see a supervisor a lot but not get meaningful developmental feedback. Assessing five dimensions at once thus allows for the identification of the pattern of strong and weaker practices and not just the assumption that supervision is either good or bad.

This multi-dimensional approach is used in the present study with the doctoral supervisees of public-sector universities of Southern Punjab. It is particular and descriptive, and it is candidate-centered. It is not intended to compare institutions, nor individual supervisors, but rather to reveal the experience of the major areas of supervisory practice and to pinpoint specific practices that seem to be worth more careful consideration.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey design. This design was deemed suitable because the study was intended to describe the perceptions of doctoral supervisees of a specific set of effective supervisory practices at a specific time. It allowed for systematic quantitative data collection from a specific sample, and it allowed for the

analysis of patterns between the different dimensions of doctoral supervision identified. This design was especially appropriate for examining supervisees' current experiences and perceptions without the manipulation of any study variables or the implementation of an intervention.

Population, Setting, and Sampling

The study was carried out in four public sector universities of Southern Punjab, Pakistan, namely Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU), The Islamia University Bahawalpur (IUB), Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology (KFUEIT), and The Women University Multan (WUM). There were 545 doctoral researchers from nine social-science disciplines who constituted the supervisee population. The number of supervisees eligible for the study varied among the universities and departments, so proportionate stratified random sampling was employed to ensure that the various strata contributed proportionately. 226 doctoral supervisees were in the final sample. The percentage of females was 52.7% and males 47.3%. The highest percentage of the respondents was from IUB (52.2%), followed by BZU (30.1%), KFUEIT (10.2%), and WUM (7.5%). The participants were from various social-science disciplines, had different research periods, and were at different stages of candidature. Importantly, 65.9% were in thesis writing/submission or defence preparation, thus having a considerable amount of experience of doctoral supervision and thus being well placed to assess supervisory practices.

Table 1

Profile of Doctoral Supervisees (N = 226)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	107	47.3
	Female	119	52.7
University	BZU	68	30.1
	IUB	118	52.2
	KFUEIT	23	10.2
	WUM	17	7.5
Years on research	1-2 years	143	63.3
	3-4 years	36	15.9
	5-6 years	21	9.3
	Above 6 years	26	11.5
Research stage	Literature review & methodology	31	13.7
	Data collection & analysis	46	20.4
	Thesis writing & submission	86	38.1
Feedback meetings	Defense preparation	63	27.9
	Weekly	135	59.7
	Twice a month	59	26.1
	Once in 3 months	23	10.2
	Once in 6 months	9	4.0
Supervision mode	Face-to-face	192	85.0
	Online	8	3.5
	Hybrid	26	11.5

The results are also interpreted in the context of the supervisory contact profile. Most of the respondents indicated that they had feedback meetings once a week (59.7%), and 26.1% indicated twice a month. Face-to-face supervision was the most common (85.0%), and hybrid (11.5%) and fully online supervision (3.5%) were less common. The sample thus broadly represents doctoral supervision that took place in a relatively frequent and direct manner, but whether or not this interaction was of high quality and developmentally beneficial was an empirical question.

Research Instrument

Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire that aimed to elicit the supervisees' perception of effective doctoral supervision in the context of Pakistani universities. There were two parts to the instrument. Seven items of demographic and research-background information were collected in Part A. Part B included 29 Likert-type statements, grouped into five dimensions: Relationship Building (8 items), Quality Feedback (6 items), Explicit Communication (5 items), Accessibility and Responsiveness (5 items), and Academic Development (5 items). Answers were on a scale of 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

The item pool was based on national and international literature on doctoral supervision and was organized into the following categories: interpersonal, pedagogical, communicative, accessibility and researcher-development practices. Relationship Building encompassed respect, support, appreciation, equitable treatment and positive interaction. Quality Feedback emphasized the developmental value of feedback. Expectations, roles, research goals and candidate participation were covered under Explicit Communication. Accessibility and Responsiveness covered timely access, feedback, meetings and follow-up. Academic Development included writing, conferences, professional networks, originality and research integrity.

Validity and Reliability

Expert validation was used to assess content validity. The questionnaire was reviewed by three experts for relevance, language, clarity of wording, appropriateness and comprehensiveness with regard to the study objective. They provided feedback on the instrument, which was revised. It was also pre-tested with respondents who were similar to the target respondents but not included in the sample. Before the main data collection, the clarity of instructions and items, respondents' understanding, contextual appropriateness, and practical administration were assessed using the pilot process.

Cronbach's alpha was then used for the internal consistency test. The coefficient for each of the five dimensions of supervisee was greater than .80, and the total 29-item scale was .952. These coefficients show that the items on each dimension were sufficiently homogeneous to be analyzed descriptively as a composite.

Table 2

Internal Consistency of the Supervisee Instrument

Dimension	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Relationship Building	8	.895
Quality Feedback	6	.860
Explicit Communication	5	.841
Accessibility and Responsiveness	5	.834
Academic Development	5	.840
Overall scale	29	.952

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Questionnaires were used both offline and online to facilitate access to the eligible respondents. Relevant university departments facilitated contact with doctoral supervisees. The participants were told the aim of the study, and their participation was voluntary. Permission for access to the participants was obtained from the institution. Participants were told that they could withdraw, and confidentiality and anonymity were respected in data handling and reporting. The procedures were in line with the ethical guidelines of the larger doctoral study of which the current quantitative objective was part.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and entered into SPSS and checked for completeness, accuracy of coding, missing data, outliers, and consistency prior to analysis. Items that were negatively worded were reverse coded before calculating the composite dimension and overall scores so that higher scores on the composite dimensions consistently indicated more positive perceptions. Individual items, each dimension and the total scale means, and standard deviations were computed. The analysis was descriptive in nature as the research question was focused on the pattern of supervisee perceptions and not the differences between groups.

Mean scores were defined by pre-determined equal-width intervals on the 5-point response scale: 1.00-1.80 = Strongly Disagree; 1.81-2.60 = Disagree; 2.61-3.40 = Neutral; 3.41-4.20 = Agree; and 4.21-5.00 = Strongly Agree. The dimensions were also descriptively ranked to indicate their relative position. These ranks are not inferential tests and should not be interpreted as statistically significant differences between dimensions.

Results

Overall Pattern of Supervisory Practices

The total average for the 29 supervisory-practice items was 3.54 (SD = 0.74), which falls within the Agree range of the supervisee assessment. The five dimension means were also in the Agree category. Quality Feedback received the highest mean (M = 3.63, SD = 0.86), followed by Accessibility and Responsiveness (M = 3.59, SD = 0.85), Relationship Building (M = 3.52, SD = 0.86), Academic Development (M = 3.48, SD = 0.90), and Explicit Communication (M = 3.46, SD = 0.89). The overall profile was broadly positive, with a difference between the highest and lowest dimension means of only 0.17, which is not polarized. All dimensions were positive, but the results at the item level showed a more differentiated pattern. Some practices were consistently rated higher than the corresponding dimension mean while others were rated closer to the bottom end of the range of agreement. Standard deviations by item were also frequently greater than 1.00, meaning that individual supervisees were provided with the same kinds of supervisory practice, but with a lot of variation. The various dimensions are thus explored in detail below.

Table 3

Overall Perceptions of Effective Supervisory Practices

Rank	Dimension	M	SD	Interpretation
1	Quality Feedback	3.63	0.86	Agree
2	Accessibility and Responsiveness	3.59	0.85	Agree
3	Relationship Building	3.52	0.86	Agree
4	Academic Development	3.48	0.90	Agree
5	Explicit Communication	3.46	0.89	Agree
	Overall supervisory practices	3.54	0.74	Agree

Note. Ranks are descriptive and indicate relative positioning within the supervisee sample; they are not tests of statistical significance

Relationship Building

The overall mean score for Relationship Building was 3.52 (SD = 0.86). Equitable treatment of all regardless of cultural or personal differences (M = 3.64, SD = 1.14) was the highest rated relational practice. Emotional support in stressful situations (M = 3.54, SD = 1.05) and support for mental wellbeing (M = 3.53, SD = 1.17) were also rated positively. The mean rating for maintaining a positive relationship was 3.51 (SD = 1.12), the mean rating for

conflict resolution was 3.48, and the mean rating for genuine interest in research-related concerns was 3.47. The lowest mean of all the positively worded relational items was for appreciation of minor achievements and research progress ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.15$). The mean for the negatively worded item about reprimanding subordinates for poor performance was 2.47 ($SD = 1.13$), which, when reverse-coded, represented disagreement and thus a positive response. In general, supervisees reported feeling that relationships were respectful and supportive, and that there was an awareness of incremental progress, though this was not as consistent.

Table 4*Supervisees' Perceptions of Relationship Building*

Code	Supervisory Practice	M	SD
RB1	My supervisor resolves the conflicts or misunderstandings when they arise between us.	3.48	1.15
RB2	My supervisor shows genuine interest when I share my research issues with him/her.	3.47	1.17
RB3	My supervisor equally treats me regardless of differences in our cultural and personal backgrounds.	3.64	1.14
RB4	My supervisor provides emotional support during the stressful situations of my doctoral journey.	3.54	1.05
RB5	I receive adequate support from the supervisor for my mental well-being.	3.53	1.17
RB6	I feel appreciated by my supervisor even for my minor achievements and progress in research work.	3.45	1.15
RB7*	My supervisor reprimands me for poor performance in research work.	2.47	1.13
RB8	My supervisor maintains a positive relationship with me.	3.51	1.12
Overall	Relationship Building	3.52	0.86

Note. RB7 was negatively worded and reverse-coded for calculation of the composite Relationship Building score.

Quality Feedback

Quality Feedback was the most highly rated dimension with an overall mean of 3.63 ($SD = 0.86$). The most positive response was for feedback based on the supervisee's research needs ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.16$). The means for feedback that enhanced academic writing, encouragement to think about alternative viewpoints, and expectations for evidence-based written and oral arguments were all 3.64. There was also a positive adaptation of the supervisory style to the academic needs ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.07$). The lowest mean in this dimension was for feedback, which allowed candidates to extend and develop their research ideas, but this was still clearly positive ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.10$). The small range of items (3.56-3.69) indicates that supervisees were fairly consistent in their perceptions of the various parts of feedback. However, candidates' standard deviations of over 1.00 indicate that the intensity of these experiences was different for candidates. Thus, Quality Feedback is a relative strength at the aggregate level and not necessarily a strong experience for all supervisees.

Table 5*Supervisees' Perceptions of Quality Feedback*

Code	Supervisory practice	M	SD
QF1	My supervisor's feedback helps me to further expand and refine my research ideas.	3.56	1.10
QF2	My supervisor provides feedback according to my research needs.	3.69	1.16
QF3	My supervisors' feedback on my written work helps me improving my academic writing skills.	3.64	1.12
QF4	My supervisor encourages me to consider diverse perspectives while addressing research issues.	3.64	1.12
QF5	My supervisor expects me to present my argument (written and verbal) with strong evidences.	3.64	1.12
QF6	My supervisor adapts her/his supervisory style according to my academic needs.	3.61	1.07
Overall	Quality Feedback	3.63	0.86

Explicit Communication

The lowest composite rating was for Explicit Communication, but this dimension was still in the Agree range ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.89$). The most highly rated item was comfort in discussing research issues with the supervisor ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.10$), indicating that many supervisees were comfortable in a climate where research issues could be discussed. The importance of supervisees' ideas when considering innovative solutions was also rated positively ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.14$). There were two items that suggested more specific areas to focus on. Setting research goals was just within the Agree range ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.16$) and was the only item that was not highly endorsed. More importantly, clear communication of supervisory expectations at the start of research resulted in an unrounded mean of 3.398 (rounded to 3.40, $SD = 1.13$) and thus was in the Neutral category of the adopted decision rule. Reverse coding of the negatively worded item showed disagreement ($M = 2.53$) – this is a positive result in a collaborative view of doctoral supervision.

Table 6

Supervisees' Perceptions of Explicit Communication

Code	Supervisory practice	M	SD
EC1	My supervisor clearly communicates his/her expectations at the beginning of the research work.	3.40	1.13
EC2*	My supervisor strictly requires me to follow his or her instructions exactly as given.	2.53	1.14
EC3	My supervisor actively involves me in setting my research goals.	3.41	1.16
EC4	I feel comfortable discussing my research issues with the supervisor.	3.55	1.10
EC5	My supervisor gives equal importance to my ideas when exploring innovative solutions to research problems.	3.46	1.14
Overall	Explicit Communication	3.46	0.89

Note. EC2 was negatively worded and reverse-coded for the composite score.

Accessibility and Responsiveness

Accessibility and Responsiveness was the second overall with a mean of 3.59 ($SD = 0.85$). Timely feedback was rated highest ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.04$) and supervisor accessibility when guidance and support were needed was rated second ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.09$). Timely follow-up of the supervisor after late submission of assignments ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.10$) and timely responses to research-related e-mail or messages ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.13$) were also positively perceived. This dimension had the lowest score with regard to the frequency of meetings in relation to research progress ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.15$). The mean was positive, but the relatively large standard deviation indicates that there was a significant variation in the candidates' opinions as to whether they felt the frequency of meetings was adequate. The results thus suggest that generally, supervisees were aware of their supervisor's availability and timeliness, and the frequency of structured supervisory contact was not as consistent as individual experiences.

Table 7

Supervisees' Perceptions of Accessibility and Responsiveness

Code	Supervisory practice	M	SD
AR1	My supervisor is readily accessible when I need her/his guidance and support.	3.65	1.09
AR2	My supervisor provides timely responses to my emails or messages.	3.56	1.13
AR3	I receive timely feedback from my supervisor.	3.68	1.04
AR4	The frequency of meetings with my supervisor is sufficient for my research progress.	3.47	1.15
AR5	My supervisor approaches me in case of delay submission of assigned tasks.	3.58	1.10
Overall	Accessibility and Responsiveness	3.59	0.85

Academic Development

The overall mean for Academic Development was 3.48 (SD = 0.90). Support for intellectual originality was generally recognised, with the highest rated item being encouragement to develop original and innovative ideas (M = 3.55, SD = 1.17). The mean score for participation in conferences, seminars and training programmes was 3.48 as well as the mean score for communication about the consequences of plagiarism. The level of support for developing professional networks was slightly lower at 3.46 (SD = 1.12). Involvement in scholarly writing activities (M = 3.41, SD = 1.13) was the lowest academic-development practice, and falls at the lower end of the Agree range. Academic Development also had the highest dimension-level standard deviation (SD = 0.90), with all items on the dimension having standard deviations greater than 1.00. These findings indicate that there were opportunities for development, but they were not equally experienced. The pattern is especially significant as it relates to writing, networking, and scholarly exposure, which are key to the process of going from finishing a thesis to operating independently in academic communities.

Table 8

Supervisees' Perceptions of Academic Development

Code	Supervisory practice	M	SD
AD1	My supervisor offers me opportunities to participate in conference, seminars and training programs.	3.48	1.11
AD2	My supervisor facilitates me in developing professional networks within my research area.	3.46	1.12
AD3	My supervisor involves me in various academic writing tasks to develop my scholarly writing skills (such as drafting abstracts, reviewing articles, preparing research summaries and publications).	3.41	1.13
AD4	My supervisor motivates me to develop original and innovative ideas in my research work.	3.55	1.17
AD5	My supervisor clearly communicates me about the consequences of plagiarism.	3.48	1.20
Overall	Academic Development	3.48	0.90

Cross-Dimensional Pattern

There are three overall trends in the results. Firstly, the dimensions of Quality Feedback and Accessibility and Responsiveness were relatively strong. Candidates were generally aware that their supervisors gave them feedback that was appropriate to their needs and that they were fairly available for guidance when needed. Second, the areas of Explicit Communication and Academic Development were relatively weak. Certain practices, such as early expectation-setting, participatory goal-setting, scholarly writing, networking, and structured developmental opportunities, were less strongly perceived. Third, the high standard deviations for each item suggest that the primary problem is not necessarily the overall quality of supervision, but the extent to which good supervisory practices are experienced in each supervision.

Discussion

The results show a positive yet mixed picture of doctoral supervision in the chosen public-sector universities. While all five dimensions had positive ratings overall, Quality Feedback and Accessibility and Responsiveness were relatively strong dimensions, while Explicit Communication and Academic Development were relatively weak dimensions. This pattern indicates that supervisees tend to be provided with useful academic advice and have reasonably good access to their supervisors, but practices related to clarifying expectations, engaging candidates in research decisions, and preparing them for wider engagement in research are not as consistently experienced. The supervision of doctoral

candidates is no longer seen as a process of guiding candidates to the completion of their theses but as a developmental process in which doctoral candidates develop into scholars, become independent, acquire a professional identity, and enter research communities (Carless et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025; Tikkanen et al., 2025). From this angle, the results show that the practices are present and effective, but that the practices could be enhanced to provide systematic researcher development.

Quality Feedback was the highest dimension, and in general, supervisees felt that the feedback they received from their supervisors was relevant and academically useful. Specifically positive perceptions related to feedback that was responsive to individual research needs, improvement of academic writing, evidence-based argumentation, engagement with other perspectives, and adaptation of supervisory approaches. These results are in favor of a developmental perspective of feedback, rather than a perspective of feedback only for the correction of written products. Bearman et al. (2024) believe that doctoral feedback gives candidates access to explicit and tacit standards of scholarly practice, and Bao and Feng (2025) show that supervisory feedback is important to the development of doctoral academic literacy, especially in writing for publication. Carless et al. (2024) also view doctoral feedback as a form of academic socialization that involves learning the conventions and standards of the discipline. The current findings thus suggest that feedback from the supervisor is indeed working as an important mechanism of candidate development. But the relatively low score for feedback that extends and develops research ideas indicates potential for more dialogic feedback, where candidates are encouraged to justify, question, and reconsider their conceptual and methodological choices and not just revise their work in response to feedback.

Accessibility and Responsiveness was the second strongest dimension. The provision of timely feedback and availability of supervisors for guidance, when needed, were especially well received. This responsiveness is significant because research advances can only be achieved with the expertise of the supervisor if the candidates can draw on it at academically relevant junctures. Recent research also highlights the links between adequate supervisory support, research engagement, wellbeing and positive doctoral experiences (Rönkkönen et al., 2024; Tikkanen et al., 2025). But the frequency of meetings was rated lower in comparison, indicating a difference between supervisors' availability when called upon and the continuity of supervision. Anttila et al. (2024) also highlight the importance of supervisory support and the frequency of supervision. The regularity should therefore not be the same for all candidates, but should be agreed and tailored to the research stage, complexity, new problems that arise, and the growing independence of the candidate. Contact that is structured but flexible can help to avoid the build-up of research issues prior to candidates requesting help.

Relationship Building was also well received, especially with regard to equitable treatment, emotional support, mental wellbeing, conflict management and positive relationships. The results show that the interpersonal aspect of supervision is still a key element in candidates' doctoral experiences. According to Li et al. (2025), supervisor–doctoral student relationships impact academic progress, professional development, wellbeing, academic networks, and career development. Likewise, Tikkanen et al. (2025) highlight emotional support as a crucial component of the quality of supervision, along with feedback and integration with the research community. Supportive relationships can provide opportunities for candidates to express uncertainty, to talk about methodological challenges, to question interpretations, and to respond positively to criticism. Psychological safety in the supervisor–student relationship is also highlighted by Gunasekera et al. (2021). The conflict with the negatively worded statement about reprimanding supervisees is thus welcome, because effective academic challenge does not need to be based on punitive interaction.

However, one of the relatively weaker practices of relations was the appreciation of minor achievements and research progress. This should be noted because many doctoral studies have a long timeframe from start to finish, and often little comes of them in terms of thesis or publications. If meaningful incremental progress is recognised,

this may help to reinforce motivation and to help candidates to recognise their developing competence. This does not mean that the standards of academic excellence should be lowered or that criticism is to be replaced by praise. Instead, robust feedback can be linked with recognition of any authentic improvement in writing, methodology, conceptualization or independent decision making. This type of recognition can be especially beneficial considering the evidence of the importance of supervisory and research-community support for doctoral engagement and wellbeing (Rönkkönen et al., 2024; Tikkanen et al., 2025).

The most obvious aspect that needed improvement was Explicit Communication. Despite its positive rating overall, the clarity of the communication of supervisory expectations at the start of research was rated in the Neutral band, and the involvement of candidates in setting research goals was just above the neutral band. This is significant because seemingly supportive supervisory relationships can also include implicit expectations about roles, responsibilities, how and when to meet, how and when to provide feedback, who will make decisions, who will write, who will own the research, who will publish, and the degree of independence. Cardilini et al. (2022) report that mismatches between supervisors' and candidates' expectations are a common source of problems in doctoral education. Baydarova et al. (2023) also show that supervisory expectations are shaped, negotiated and adjusted during the course of candidature. So, even if you are in regular contact with one another, it does not mean that you will have a common understanding. Explicit discussion of expectations by supervisors and supervisees is required at the beginning of candidature and needs to be reconsidered as the competence of the candidate and their research needs evolve.

The results with regard to goal-setting also underscore the need for candidate agency. A good doctoral supervisor should progressively hand over the responsibility for research decisions from the supervisor to the supervisee. While early-stage candidates might need a lot of direction, as candidates become more competent, they should be given more opportunity to identify priorities, evaluate alternatives and defend their decisions. The disagreement with the negatively worded statement that supervisees must do exactly what supervisors tell them is thus positive, in that it is in line with a collaborative model of supervision. But the relative weakness of the candidate involvement in research goal setting indicates that not wanting too much direction does not necessarily mean that participation is being achieved in supervision. Productive supervisory relationships are associated with research progress, professional capacity and autonomy, as demonstrated by Li et al. (2025). Therefore, more systematic participation of candidates in establishing research objectives may help to enhance ownership and prepare candidates for independent scholarship.

Academic Development was another relatively weak aspect. The encouragement to create original and innovative ideas was positively perceived, while the encouragement to engage in scholarly writing, professional networking, and conference, seminar, and training activities was less strongly experienced. This is important because the support of originality in a thesis is not the same as the preparation of candidates to be independent members of academic and professional communities. Bao and Feng (2025) provide evidence that writing for publication is a process that can foster academic-literacy development, and Bao et al. (2025) provide evidence of how supervisory interaction can foster doctoral academic-identity development. Participation of the research community is important too. Corcelles-Seuba et al. (2023) and Rönkkönen et al. (2024) highlight the need for greater support for doctoral experiences and engagement from the research community. Supervisors should therefore also encourage candidates to undertake thesis-related activities, but also to build up experience in scholarly writing, conference attendance, publications, networking and interaction with broader research communities.

The relatively less robust academic-development practices are especially significant in the Pakistani context as access to professional networks and developmental opportunities can be different at different institutions and with

individual supervisors. Zahid and Mahmood (2025) studied the doctoral students' supervisory experiences in Pakistani universities and found accessibility, timely feedback, supportive relationships, communication, and institutional assistance to be important features of supervision, along with a lot of variation in the experiences of the candidates. The current results add to this evidence, demonstrating that there are differences not only in general perceptions, but also in specific supervisory practices. Opportunities for networking, publication mentoring, or scholarly development may not be evenly distributed where these opportunities are largely reliant on individual supervisors. Academic-writing support, methodology workshops, research seminars, publication mentoring, conference opportunities, and research groups, therefore, must be provided in addition to supervision.

One of the most significant results is the significant variation in the mean scores, which are generally good. Many items had standard deviations of greater than 1.00, which means that the candidates did not have a similar experience of supervisory practices. This means that a positive average does not necessarily mean that all supervisees are receiving equally good supervision. The challenge of quality is thus not just to enhance weaker aspects, but also to minimise variation in access to good practice in supervision. Recent research also shows that experiences during a doctoral degree can vary significantly and that perceived doctoral supervision is linked to research engagement, wellbeing, professional development and academic achievement (Li et al., 2025; Rönkkönen et al., 2024; Tikkanen et al., 2025; Zahid & Mahmood, 2025). Therefore, consistency of supervisory experience should be taken into account by institutional quality assurance, in addition to the overall satisfaction or completion rates.

The results also show that the five dimensions are not independent of each other and should not be considered as separate parts of supervision. Feedback that is not useful may have been beneficial for development but not for independence; accessibility may have solved the problem without developing independence; positive relationships may have increased confidence, but not necessarily given access to scholarly communities; and frequent meetings may have done little if they had no developmental purpose. Thus, effective supervision should comprise the integration of relational, pedagogical, communicative, responsive, and developmental practices. Bearman et al. (2024) and Carless et al. (2024) also place feedback in broader contexts of scholarly learning and socialization, and Li et al. (2025) demonstrate how feedback in the supervisory context can have a wider impact on the development of professional competence, networks, wellbeing, and careers.

The overall results are in favour of changing the focus of supervision from thesis to researcher development. While good feedback, good accessibility and good relationships are important foundations, good doctoral supervision should be able to help the doctoral candidate become increasingly independent of direct supervision. Candidates require opportunities to clarify expectations, to be involved in decisions about research, to develop academic writing skills, to access professional networks, to communicate research to various audiences and to make increasingly independent decisions about research. Doctoral supervision has also been recently theorized as a process of academic socialization and literacy development, identity formation and integration into research communities (Bao & Feng, 2025; Bao et al., 2025; Carless et al., 2024). Explicit supervisory agreements, regular review of expectations, participatory goal setting, opportunities for scholarly writing, professional networking and institutional researcher-development support could thus help to make supervisory quality more consistent and developmentally meaningful. Finally, good doctoral supervision is not just measured by successful completion of the thesis, but by how much candidates have become confident, ethical, critical and more independent researchers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are a number of caveats to be noted. First, the study was done in four public sector universities of Southern Punjab and cannot be automatically generalized to all the universities of Pakistan. Second, only the social-science disciplines were sampled. Supervisory systems in laboratory sciences, engineering, medicine and other disciplines can

vary in ways that impact the significance or salience of specific dimensions. Thirdly, the research was based on self-reported perceptions. The results thus reflect candidates' experiences of supervisory practices, rather than observation of actual supervisory practices. Fourth, it was a cross-sectional design. The supervisory needs and perceptions can vary significantly as candidates' progress from the development of the proposal to data collection, analysis, writing the thesis, publication and examination. The relative importance of the five dimensions could be investigated in longitudinal studies to see if this changes over the course of candidature. Fifthly, the sample was not equally distributed among universities and among disciplines, as there were relatively more samples from IUB and Education. Sixth, the descriptive ranking of the dimensions should not be interpreted as evidence that the dimensions differ from each other statistically since there was no inferential test of within-supervisee dimension differences for this objective. Future studies might explore the factors that predict supervisee perceptions, the needs of the supervisee across different stages, the variation across disciplines, and the association between supervisory practices and outcomes like research engagement, wellbeing, publications, and timely completion.

Conclusion

This study is a candidate-centred evaluation of effective doctoral supervisory practices in some universities of the public sector in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. Supervisees rated supervision positively on the whole on all five dimensions. Quality Feedback was the relatively strongest dimension, followed by Accessibility and Responsiveness and Relationship Building. Academic Development and Explicit Communication were less positively perceived, but still positive at the composite level. The findings on the item level are the most actionable. Feedback that was personalized to the research needs, timely feedback, availability of supervisor, equal treatment, and encouragement of original ideas were the most appreciated characteristics of supervision by supervisees. In contrast, early expectation setting, involving candidates in goal setting, scholarly writing, professional networking, recognizing incremental progress, and meeting regularity were identified as areas for improvement. The high level of variation in responses also suggests that good practice was not experienced by all candidates.

The results thus indicate a need to move away from the conception of supervision as thesis management and towards thinking of supervision as researcher formation. Good supervision should ensure that candidates are aware of what is expected, that they are intellectually supported appropriately and in a timely fashion, that they are increasingly involved in research decision-making, that they are building academic networks and competence in writing, and that they are increasingly able to work without direct supervision from the supervisor. Supervisor development, clear expectations, manageable workloads, confidential candidate feedback, and broader research-development infrastructure are all factors that can help universities to foster not only completed theses but also confident, ethical, critical, and independent researchers.

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