

Supervision of Graduate Studies: A Case Study of Postgraduate and Academic Staff

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Abstract

Although the success of graduate students is heavily influenced by their supervisors, there is a lack of documented graduate student insight into their learning experience in countries with recent expansions of graduate programs. To provide rich, in-depth qualitative data on graduate student and faculty supervisor perspectives on students' learning experiences, we conducted in-depth individual interviews with final-year graduate students and their supervisors at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. We asked participants two open-ended questions about the quality of teaching and learning in their program and how this quality could be improved. Interview transcripts were coded to identify and categorize recurring themes. We found that graduate students and their supervisors had differing perceptions of students' learning experiences. Students indicated that the organization and development of learning experiences needed to be guided by their supervisors. Additionally, students expressed concerns regarding the main concern expressed by students as will be described in the results section with more details and more accurate reflection with the need for high-quality learning experiences. On the other hand, supervisors gave examples of effective teaching practices, including building self-confidence in student decision making. These findings could be used to develop curriculum content, support faculty use of effective teaching strategies, and improve practices in graduate programs and could further stimulate broad discussions of shared decision-making and evaluations of student and teacher performance.

Keywords: Learning and teaching, professional development, graduate students, higher education, qualitative analysis

1. Introduction

Many previous studies address student perceptions of teaching and learning in the context of higher education. Importantly, studies centered on

student practices and perceptions suggest that students should be given more opportunities to influence their own learning (Alshehry, 2018). Whereas distancing students from discussion of their education disconnects them from the learning experience, the knowledge gained from influencing one's own pedagogical journey could make great contributions to student learning.

The goal of this study was to enhance graduate education in Saudi Arabia by improving the quality of the teaching and learning environment and interactions between graduate students and their faculty supervisors. The findings of this study suggest that knowledgeable and experienced supervisors use effective strategies to help graduate students enhance their education by selecting, integrating, and organizing learning experiences and information. This work has the potential to promote new learning systems to support the graduate learning experience.

2. Literature Review

Many studies of student perceptions of their teaching and learning indicate that students are often excluded from policy decisions and lack control over their learning process (Alshehry, 2017). Also, previous qualitative studies consistently show that the instructor characteristics considered most important by students are availability, approachability, encouragement, constructive feedback, demonstration, supportiveness, and organization (Harvey, 2003; Seale, 2010). These findings are echoed by quantitative studies of graduate student perceptions of their education (Alshehry, 2018). Although these studies highlight several important perceptions of graduate students, there are several notable gaps in this literature. First, relatively few studies focus on student perceptions of their education and learning environment, and even fewer employ a qualitative approach (Corbin, 2009; Watson, 2003; Till, 2005). Moreover, empirical research on how the quality of the learning environment in graduate education impacts student learning is limited. Second, there is a lack of knowledge of how graduate students experience the educational and learning environment, particularly in a Saudi Arabian context. Third, most previous studies focus on student learning in a classroom context. Therefore, qualitative research on graduate student perceptions of learning in a research context is lacking. Finally, many studies underline the need for further qualitative research focusing on student perceptions and reflections as a basis for better understanding characteristics of effective teaching and learning environments in higher education (Divaris, 2008; Alshehry, 2017). Of note, a New Zealand group examined student learning experiences and developed curriculum and planning guidelines for pedagogical experiences based on their findings. In their study, student perceptions of the learning experience, teaching curriculum, and supervision were focal points that provided valuable

information. However, their findings may not be broadly applicable to Arabian countries.

Together, these studies emphasize the need for a qualitative understanding of the learning experience of graduate students. To gather this information, individual interviews with graduate students and their supervisors were conducted and analyzed for recurrent themes. We anticipate that the results of this study will provide in-depth information that could be used to guide decisions and influence future pedagogical theories and practices of teaching and learning in higher education.

3. Methods

3.1. *Participants and Interviews*

Detailed perspectives of graduate students (n=20) and their faculty supervisors (n=6) were collected through individual interviews, which are one of the most important sources of case study evidence (Yin, 2017). Using purposive sampling, we included all 2018 final-year students and 2019 graduates of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching Methods at Najran University.

Interviewees were asked the following two questions: (1) what do students need academically from their supervisors, and (2) do their supervisors fulfill these needs? During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher strived to follow the predetermined line of inquiry and ask questions in an unbiased manner (Yin, 2017).

3.2. *Coding and Thematic Analysis*

Interview data were qualitatively analyzed using a general inductive approach to develop explanatory thematic frameworks (40). A line-by-line approach was used to examine each critical incident. To identify patterns, key phrases were underlined and between-interview comparisons were performed. Major themes and sub-themes were identified, given brief descriptions, and presented with illustrative quotes. Due to their intertwined nature, teaching 'effectiveness' and 'quality' were considered synonymous.

3.3. *Researcher's Position*

In this study, the primary researcher served as an instructor, along with other faculty participants, of a course in which student participants were enrolled, with one graduate assistant who assisted with course design. The researcher wrote the interview questions, analyzed participants' responses, and attempted to present the findings without interjection of their own views.

4. Results

Graduate students and their faculty supervisors were individually interviewed about their perceptions of the student learning process and its supervision. The themes that emerged from student perceptions of their educational experiences were then related to faculty supervision of the learning process. Three major themes were identified: the delay before the start of supervision, the time-consuming nature of supervision, and the need to provide supervision according to students' specific needs. Interestingly, we observed differences between student and faculty perceptions of students' educational experiences.

The interview findings suggest that most students were not engaged with their supervisors but were likely to respond positively to teaching practices and techniques that demonstrated or explained learning material more effectively. The students' responses included abundant and in-depth insight into their understanding of effective and ineffective approaches to teaching and supervision. These findings can be used as a basis to improve curricula, supervisory practices, decision-making, mentoring approaches, and educational program design and planning. In addition, faculty provided valuable information that could be used to guide these improvements.

4.1. Student perceptions

Several students expressed concerns regarding the timing of supervision, stating that they needed supervision from the beginning. For example, *"We need direct guidance through the wrong and right ways from the second level. We need them essentially to say 'okay' when you are done with your work..."* (student participant 7). Students also indicated that early supervision *"...is helping us to effectively deal with complex issues and situations. We could work independently according to our staff guidance and direction to have a valuable and a good tutor and get their hands-on instruction right away"* (student participant 2). Although most students had positive views on the impact of advisers on student success, several students said they believed students at the university had a negative view of academic advising. Therefore, mentoring students from the beginning may have the most beneficial results. As one student stated, *"the close supervision encouraged us to get a better academic understanding and highlighted critical learning from journals and textbooks. We need more research experience, but a lack of supervision will not help us to research correctly"* (student participant 5).

Students identified several missing components of their learning experience and supervision. One student indicated a need to prioritize research ethics, stating *"We need more clarification on research ethics and how to apply them. ...we need to go through ethics, because we are dealing with*

ethics, and we need more experience on how this affects our study in relation to research planning and direction” (student participant 8). Another student identified a lack of teacher follow-through, stating *“We, as a students, need to obtain a wider view of how to learn the topics [the teachers] wanted us to learn, but they did not give us a reading list for the seminar session. We really want to have this more and to be taught step-by-step”* (student participant 7). Finally, another student commented, *“Sometimes you cannot find our supervisor during their office hours when you got stuck on some information. When you contact them, they say they are busy right now, and you have to come later...but that later never happens”* (student participant 4).

Students often recognized that there are positive and negative personal and emotional impacts of certain teaching and learning practices. For example, some students identified unmet needs for guidance and supervision, whereas others recognized a need for increased self-confidence in decision-making to personalize their learning. Student understanding of effective supervision is exemplified by the comment, *“...it helps me know how to treat my study planning in the first year and how to be in contact regularly with my supervisor to get support and guidance”* (student participant 5).

Overall, students indicated that the absence of real guidance from supervisors was detrimental to their learning experience. Specifically, students noted that if their supervisors provided reading lists of previous studies, let them participate in decision-making, and helped them with their seminars, students would be empowered to make progress through the educational program. Of note, some students verbalized gratitude for their supervisors. For example, one student reflected that *“If something went wrong in my study, my supervisor was there to correct it and help me with great support. It was lovely to get something new to learn”* (student participant 2).

4.2. Faculty perceptions

Faculty tended to have positive perspectives of the impact of their supervision on student learning experiences. For example, one staff member commented that there were *“...no delays in [student] progress of teaching and learning, and students are treated in the right way. They have their tutor for assistance and support”* (faculty participant 2). Another staff member stated *“Usually, the student cannot wait for us more than five minutes. We, as supervisors, deal with a lot of tasks in the department, such as academic guidance, supervision, teaching, and committee duties, and we are sometimes away from our offices. Students must consider this for us”* (faculty participant 4).

Some faculty cautioned against intensive supervision. One faculty member said *“[Students] are missing the importance of supervisor guidance to direct them in the right way if the tasks are dictated. They have to know how*

to interact with the teacher and how to get the associated background information about academic teaching and learning processes” (faculty participant 2). Another faculty member acknowledged that some students require heavy supervision, explaining that *“[Students] know nothing, and we, as supervisors, are aggressive in their direction of study. They are mostly told...that they need to have a background of different experiences to appreciate and value the supervision in a supportive learning environment”* (faculty participant 1).

In contrast, some supervisors explained obstacles to providing heavy supervision. For example, one supervisor stated that *“...those who require heavy duty supervision of tasks sometimes spend a lot of time to achieve this work. We also have differences in dealing with bachelor’s and graduate students, including different learning environments and supervisory roles. Taking these differences into account results in effective learning and recommendations for the academic program they need to achieve with their academic staff”* (faculty participant 3).

Faculty recognized that some students have personal circumstances or face obstacles that can limit their studies. Some students relay these difficulties to their supervisors, with one faculty member summarizing these conversations as *“[Students] have problems getting to school, and nothing works for them, which for sure contributed to their arrival at this point in their study, and they cannot recommend this program to their colleagues or friends because of what is reflected on them”* (faculty participant 1).

5. Discussion

As one of the most important components of case study research, interviews can provide rich insight into the subjective views of research participants (Yin, 2017). In the present study, in-depth interviews with individual graduate students and faculty supervisors revealed participants’ understanding of effective graduate learning approaches, which are consistent with a study by Harvey (2003). Furthermore, our findings are largely similar to those of other studies, providing insight into how methods of educational supervision shape the student’s learning environment and process (Jahangiri and Mucciolo, 2008). Of note, most of these previous studies focus on the perceptions of graduate students in highly developed countries, whereas studies from less developed countries tend to focus on undergraduate students and their progress toward degree program completion. Therefore, this study provides timely insight into graduate student perspectives in Saudi Arabia.

In a literature review of similar studies, Chendea (2008) demonstrated the importance of learning environments, taking into consideration the supervisors’ maintenance of a professional approach to improve graduate education. Moreover, previous studies of graduate student learning, such as

those by Levin (2000), Till (2005), and Alshehry (2018), assert the importance of a close professional relationship between graduate students and their supervisors. On the part of the supervisor, this relationship involves more supportive mentoring and ensuring that effective learning is taking place.

Interestingly, in the present study, most students insisted on the need for autonomy. They indicated that this autonomy could be reached if their initial learning approaches were monitored and supervised in a step-by-step manner, after which they could require less supervision to accomplish their studies independently and effectively. These findings are consistent with studies by Sather (2002) and Alshehry (2017), both of which address student reactions to changes in education. The results of the study indicated that some faculty members are poor advisors, while others are excellent. Some enjoy the duties and responsibilities, but others view being an advisor as a major inconvenience. Excellent teachers are not necessarily also good advisors. It remains to be determined whether every faculty member should serve in this role. If every faculty member must be an advisor, then training, and rules and obligations, should be provided.

This study has some limitations, prominently that the research focused on a single group of participants from one university department. To investigate the concepts of this study more comprehensively, future studies need to engage additional participants from multiple departments and universities.

This would aid in defining the factors that most highly influence the quality of graduate teaching supervision and help guide the improvement of pedagogical practices. It is important to note that the findings of the present study cannot be generalized to other graduate programs, as they may reflect the specific perspectives of graduate students and faculty in one educational program.

The findings of this study contribute to the educational literature by highlighting student and faculty perspectives on graduate education. As indicated by Watso (2013), there is a need to close the cycle of student feedback by taking effective action based on that feedback. Further studies are needed to provide a more complete picture of graduate teaching and learning, which can then be developed into action-oriented plans to improve the graduate learning experience.

Based on the results of this study, recommendations to improve advisor/student outcomes and for future study include:

- A manual or handbook that defines the advisor/student relationship and specifies the obligations of each person should be provided.
- A research manual or other type of guidance that describes ethical and other questions that students typically have regarding how to perform research should be provided.

- Implementation of the advisor/student relationship, such as meeting during the student's first semester to discuss their program of study and the advisor/student relationship should be a priority for the advisor.
- Informal mechanisms, such as gatherings where students and faculty can converse and get to know each other in a more relaxed setting should be provided.
- Whether the advisory relationship is positive or negative, annual evaluations presented to the advisors from their students should be performed. Direct feedback from the Department chairperson regarding the evaluation process should be included.

Conclusion

The present study conveys the unique perspectives of graduate students and faculty to inform our understanding of their individual academic pursuits and to evaluate their learning and teaching more effectively. These findings could help reduce student attrition and improve student-supervisor interactions. The findings could also be used to improve curriculum design and academic professional development to promote peer-to-peer learning and overcome obstacles encountered by certain students that impede effective learning. Students' concerns must be addressed and must not be ignored, and quality supervision is key to improving graduate student learning experiences. These findings could be used to develop curriculum content, support faculty use of effective teaching strategies, and improve practices in graduate programs. They could further stimulate broad discussions of shared decision-making and evaluations of student and teacher performance.

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