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## Doctoral Research Supervision in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities

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### Abstract

Doctoral study is considered the most popular form of research in the world. Doctoral research supervision is a key element in successful doctoral study. Supervisor-supervisee relationship is central to effective research supervision. The multifaceted and complex mechanism of research supervision has several opportunities and challenges. Exploring these opportunities and challenges was the solo aim of this study. Doctoral student's perceptions through an in-depth interview were recorded. Fifty doctoral students from 5 selected universities were selected as a sample for this study. Three opportunities along with three challenges were identified through thematic analysis which were further divided into different subthemes. Research Identity Development, personalized supervision approaches and networking, and professional exposure were identified as different opportunities to cope with the identified challenges like Inconsistent guidance framework, resource constraints, and adapting to diverse doctoral student needs. The result indicates that the identified opportunities were supportive to cope with the challenges. The findings have significant implications for adequate and supportive doctoral supervision practices. Adequate Supervision, as perceived by doctoral students, can play a significant role in shaping a doctoral student into the novice, and a competent researcher.

### Introduction

Significant role of research supervision in attainment of educational outcomes and ensuring integrity of academic research work is admitted by recent research. Different studies pointed out the significance of effective supervision which plays a crucial role in improving teacher performances, with directive styles being particularly beneficial (Shoukat et al., 2023). At every

level of research, including higher education research, the supervisor-supervisee relationships play a pivotal role in successful completion, however, several hinders like lack of cooperation from supervisors, causes delayed work among doctoral research (Mahesar et al., 2020). Besides that, Ph.D. scholar's experience about the importance of structured guidance is evident. It suggests that regular meetings with supervisors are the mean of enhancing research (Ashraf & Butt, 2020). Additionally, in order to attain credible research outcomes, it is necessary to maintain high standards of integrity (Naveed, 2023). In Pakistan, research supervision is more significant due to its impact on both educational outcomes and ethical conduct. The situation necessitates a focused improvement in supervisory practices. It also demands fostering a supportive academic environment as well.

Research supervision influences academic excellence and overall well-being of a doctoral student significantly (Ilahi et al., 2024). To foster a supportive relationship between supervisee and supervisor, effective supervision is considered as an essential element among all others. Studies are evident that proper guidance is an essential element to cultivate the research progress of student that leads towards improved academic performance and the completion rates as well (Ashraf & Butt, 2020). As many doctoral research students reported, several challenges persist like lack of cooperation by their supervisor. It can result in barriers for timely completion of their research projects (Mahesar et al., 2020). In Pakistan, the research culture is different like other 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, as it is viewed a multifaceted and complex process. The situation demands an enhancement in the engagement and commitment from both supervisors and supervisees. A structural supervisory framework that may include regular meetings and also the role of mentor is recommended to ensure consistent scholarly (Khan et al., 2018). As supervisors play a significant role in enhancing academic quality and addresses the identified gaps in relationships with supervisee, are considered as a key element in fostering a more appropriate and suitable research environment in higher education institutions in Pakistani.

To explore the effectiveness of research supervision and discussing the key elements that influence research supervision is crucial for attainment of desired outcome of doctoral study. Key factors like collaborative approach, communication, mentorship, and provision of sufficient and appropriate support are important in this regard. Different strategies for effective supervision i.e., online supervision, training and skill enhancing workshops are considered important to improve doctoral completion rate. These becomes more crucial in any disaster like pandemic (Japheth et al., 2023). Additionally, the selection of supervisors is dependent on several factors specifically their expertise, demographics, and their style of supervision. It can affect the relationship between supervisee and its supervisor (Shafiq et al., 2020). Besides that, lack of engagement in research activities is also a barrier in this regard. Experienced, skilled, and trained supervisors promote research among doctoral students. They also advocate research engagement which indicates that prior supervisory experiences shape perception of barriers along with enables (Hart et al., 2022).

It is revealed that the relationship between supervisee and supervisor has a significant impact on the learning environment and the success of supervisee. The learner-centered approach in supervision focuses on the importance of supervisees-supervisors relationship. It is also the

mean to foster a shared process of learning which results in enhanced learning as well as personal growth. (Radbron et al., 2021). Systematic theories also support these relational dynamics. It indicates the interpersonal type of supervision (Moloney & Moloney, 2018). Additionally, online structured doctoral programs also rely on establishing supervisees-supervisors relationship. It aligns the personal expectations of supervisor and supervisee. It can be helpful in reducing stress during isolation of supervisee particularly in online (Lundgren-Resenterra & Crosta, 2019). Doctoral research supervision has attained a lot of attention in recent research. The situation demands supervisors to modify their style so that the diverse students demand may be met. Besides that, it is also essential it is more crucial while determining supervisee-supervisor relationship (Mouzughi & Davies, 2016). It shows the significance of supervisor-supervisee relationship which not only influences the research outputs but also indicates future academic interactions (Currie, 2019).

As already discussed, the existing practices of supervisors in Pakistan are evident as a multifaceted and more complex landscape, characterized by challenges as well as opportunities. Pakistani students are facing several difficulties in different aspects i.e. academic writing, it is coupled with inadequate supervision and compromised availability of resources provided by the institutions (Rehman et al., 2023). While facing these challenges, students still express their desires for constructive, and continuous feedback, and proper guidance from their supervisors. They consider it as the mean of academic identity and successful research (Hina Batool et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021). A study in Pakistani context indicated that many supervisors employ positive feedback mechanism, yet, the need of more structured and regular meetings with supervisors are the mean of enhancement of doctoral students research experience (Abbasi et al.). in this regard, supervisor-supervisee relationship is pivotal which is the roadmap of successful completion of research (Ashraf & Butt, 2020). There are several issues related to research mechanism, potential for improvement through different, multiple, and continuous training along with structured support system may make a significant impact on students outcomes (Ashraf & Butt, 2020; Hina Batool et al., 2022).

Other shared challenges include cultural and language barriers, inappropriate supervisory skills, and compromised communication between supervisors and supervisee. Due to the multicultural context, several supervisors struggle with aligning ethical principals at early stages of doctoral supervision (Moe et al., 2024). Lack of research culture and methodological constrains make effective guidance more complicated (Jinot, 2022). Besides that, international doctoral supervisees must face more barriers due to language and ineffective communication along with cultural differences. It leads towards isolation and anxiety, and stress in doctoral students (Bahtilla, 2022). Issues that are directly related to system i.e. policy issues and lack of adequate research environment, impede the supervision process (Lu, 2022). To address these obstacles and challenges, it is necessary to use a multifaceted approach that may include training for supervisors and to establish positive supervisors-supervisees relationships. The situation also demands to unveil the different mechanisms related to doctoral research supervision (Naicker, 2024).

Exploration of doctoral research supervision exhibits an exceptional opportunity. Different challenges which are being faced by Pakistani doctoral students that demands to be coped with adequately so that the research outcomes may be achieved. Rapid expansion in Pakistani universities can be viewed in last two decades but pool of supervisors has not been increased accordingly. Besides that, recent research is evident that research productivity is the core goal of supervision. Many universities in Pakistan are struggling to provide adequate support (Rehman et al., 2023). As supervisee has a lot of expectations from his supervisor, it is necessary to consider supervisor-supervisee relationship as the core element in academic and professional development (Hina Batool et al., 2022). Research is also evident that different complexities in research supervision exists particularly in third world countries like Pakistan, so, it is essential to explore research supervisory practices in Pakistan. There are studies indicating that the supervisors are skilled and they also provide valuable feedback, yet, there is a gap in appropriate cooperation and support that can helpful in timely completion and attainment of successful research among doctoral students in Pakistan (Abbasi et al.; Mahesar et al., 2020). The situation necessitates a comprehensive study to explore research supervision in the country. The exploration may be helpful in unveiling challenges and opportunities and thus, it will be helpful in promoting positive research environment in higher education institutes.

The engagement of doctoral students with their peers and support groups plays a significant role in developing their professional and research identity. Doctoral students' engagement with peer support groups has demonstrated that such studying environments could be shaped by the students (Stracke & Kumar, 2014). It is also evident that the students, on several occasions, preferred to engage with more experienced academics to aim at achieving their meaningful experience of research. This study is also aimed at exploring stereotypes, and modern research supervision. By using the student–faculty partnership framework (Cook-Sather, 2014), this study aims at the investigation of the doctoral research student's experiences that actively connects doctoral research students with their supervisors (faculty) in the form of supervisor-supervisee relationships.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the different opportunities, designed by supervisors and the institutions, which result in meaningful experience?
2. How are these opportunities designed to enrich the research environment among doctoral students?
3. What are the shared challenges being addressed by doctoral students and how can they cope with these challenges?

### **Research Methodology:**

A qualitative exploratory research design was used to investigate the experiences of participants about their supervisors-supervisees relationship. Exploratory research design is flexible and

permits more valuable insight into the complex, interconnected and novel issues (Creswell, 2015), instead of presenting concluding confirmation of incident.

### **Population, Sampling and Sample:**

The target population of the study consists of all currently enrolled doctoral students in all the public universities of Punjab province. Multistage sampling technique was used to draw appropriate samples. At the first stage, out of fifty-two public universities of Punjab province, five universities were selected randomly. At the second stage, out of five selected universities, ten doctoral students from each university were selected purposefully.

### **Delimitations:**

The study was delimited to the province of Punjab. Only public universities were selected due to time and financial constraints.

### **Research Tool:**

In-depth interview protocol for the current study was adapted from the study conducted by Thomas et al. (2024). The qualitative part of the tool was used to collect data from doctoral students in the public universities of Punjab province.

### **Data Collection:**

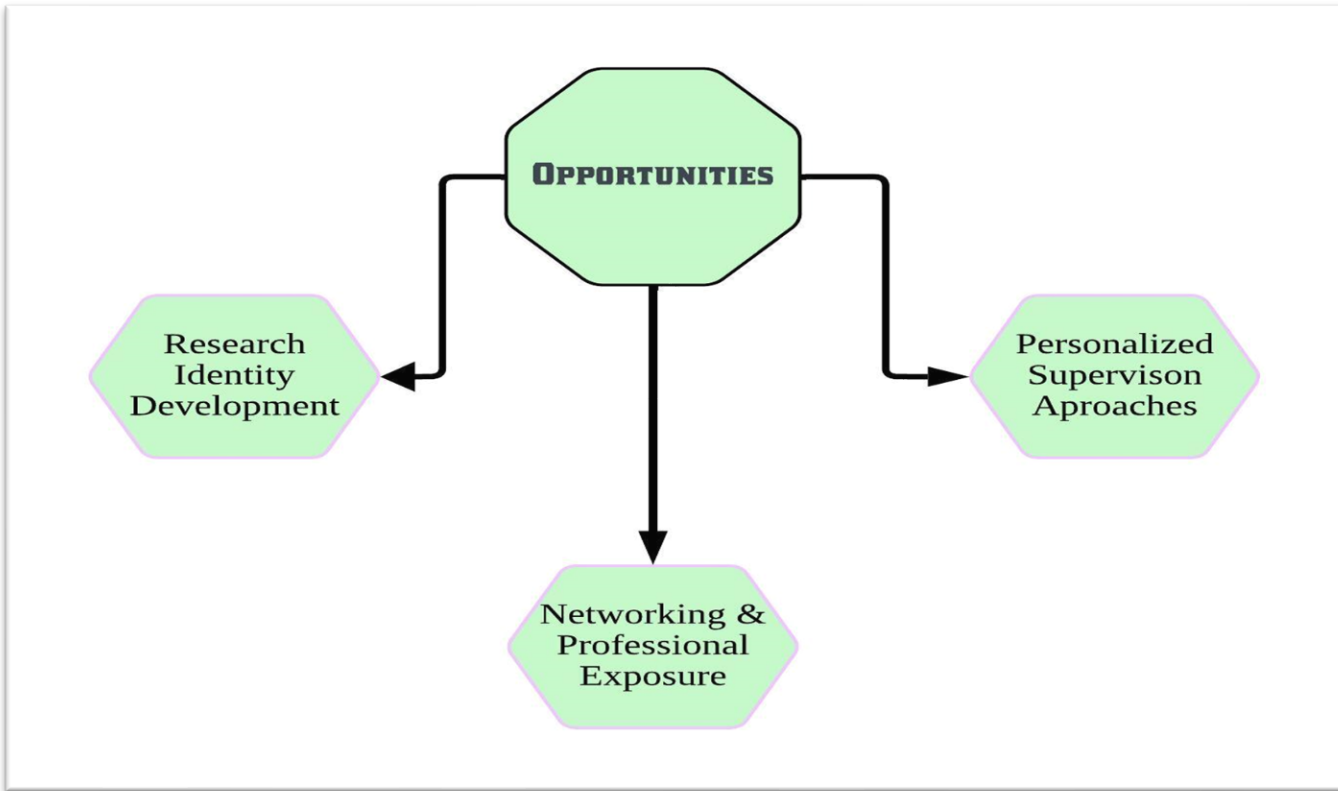
Data were collected physically by visiting the selected universities.

### **Data Collection:**

We conducted an in-depth interview with each doctoral student selected for the study, for an hour. These interviews were also recorded and were transcribed accordingly.

### **Data Analysis:**

All the five researchers analyzed at least seven interview transcripts from doctoral students individually. Then they coded it by using the app mentioned above. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the first stage, 118 open codes were generated, at the second round, all the authors of this study compared their codes and after discussion, finalized eighteen categories. In the third phase, the selected categories were refined and classified into two key categories, challenges, and opportunities. Under challenges and opportunities, three subthemes were also identified.



### **Finding of the Study:**

Findings drawn from in-depth interviews were integrated into understated themes.

Figure 1: Major Theme (Opportunities in Doctoral Research Supervision)

### **Opportunities:**

- Research Identity Development
- Personalized Supervision Approaches
- Networking and Professional Exposure

### **Research Identity Development:**

Research identity development is the goal of doctoral research supervision. It is considered as the key element in progressing through the academic journey of doctoral students. Research identity development is not only possessing competencies but also shaping a professional novice researcher with clear understanding of its role. To enhance research identity, opportunities can be fostered through mentoring attitude of the supervisor. For example, a well-structured mentorship program

may offer doctoral students' guidance. It could also help them in articulating their research interests and achieving their goals. It will support in building of professional network. One student stated, *"A well-defined mentorship program with structured milestones and consistent feedback would be instrumental in helping me establish a strong academic identity. It would give me a clearer sense of direction and purpose, making me feel more integrated into the research community."* Another doctoral student emphasized the importance of research identity and stated the importance of mentorship in this regard. He stated,

*"Research identity development is the footstep towards becoming a novice researcher, the doctoral student, at this stage, learns different techniques related to their professional development as a researcher. This stage becomes more crucial in this regard. The role of supervisor, which is already particularly important, becomes more crucial at this stage. The role of mentor (Supervisor) is a key ingredient which forms a novice researcher."*

### **Personalized Supervision Approaches:**

Adapting supervision, to align with the diverse needs and strength of every doctoral student, can result in significant enhancement of overall research experience. Keeping in view, to meet the diverse and unique needs of every doctoral student, personalized supervision can play a significant role. It involves adjustments of mentoring practices which are based on individuality of each doctoral student. The prior knowledge of the doctoral students and their research interest also necessitates in this regard. These approaches help in addressing different and diverse challenges and result in personal and academic growth. For instance, frequent meetings with supervisors, individual feedback, proper guidance, and social support could be the means of a personalized supervisory approach. It plays a significant role in the success of a doctoral student. As one student stated,

*"Having regular, personalized feedback and tailored advice from my supervisor would significantly improve my research progress. It would help me address specific challenges I face and align my work with my personal academic goals."* Similarly, another student articulated, *"frequent meetings with supervisors and proper feedback enable me in cultivating my research. The challenges faced by me throughout this distressful journey can be coped with proper social support of my supervisor. Thus, it results in the achievement of my goals."*

### **Networking and Professional Exposure:**

Provision of opportunities, while doctoral student engagement with their professional and academic community, is the key element in the overall development of a doctoral student. These are the means of professional networking and exposure which can play a role as a milestone in collaboration, offering insight into emerging trends, and enhancing research skills. Through encouragement, supervisors can play the role of facilitator. Supervisors can encourage students to attend workshops, conferences and other related meetings. These meetings provide doctoral students with a diversity of experiences like sharing expertise, receiving feedback from their seniors, and building networks which will ultimately be helpful in their upcoming career as a novice researcher. For example, a student mentioned, *"Having the chance to participate in*

*academic conferences and industry events would greatly benefit my professional development. It would help me make connections with peers and experts, stay updated on current research trends, and gain practical insights that could enhance my own research work."*

Another student highlighted, *"Conferences, meetings, workshops are the ways in which we receive feedback and share our competencies with each other. By sharing our issues with seniors, we develop an insight into our research that supports us in upcoming work. The valuable information and suggestions provided by seniors and experts enable us to align our work with global standards. It also results in reducing anxiety and depression which is the part of this distressful journey."*

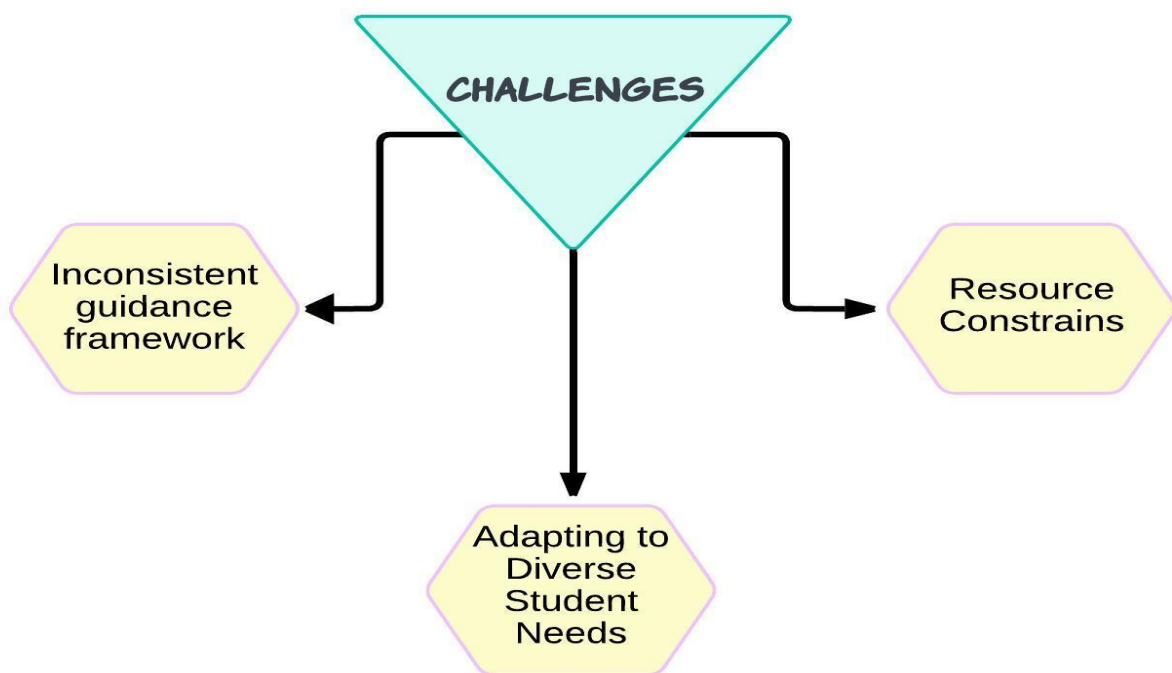


Figure 2: Major Theme (Challenges in Doctoral Research Supervision)

### **Challenges:**

- Inconsistent guidance framework
- Resource Constrains
- Adapting to Diverse Student Needs

### **Inconsistent Guidance Framework:**

Among all other significant challenges, inconsistent guidance in doctoral supervision is prominent, which should be addressed properly. A precise, consistent, and structured framework of guidance enables a doctoral student to cope with the distressful journey of doctoral research. Several



students expressed concern about the inconsistent guidance framework and emphasized the need for more formal tactics which may include concise and clear guidelines and expectations from the beginning. A lack of consistent guidance framework may guide towards confusion, anxiety, misalignment of objectives, and issues in completing research tasks successfully. Several students indicated that a structured induction process is a key element in navigating the research responsibilities of doctoral students. A student expressed, *“Without a clear and formal structure, it’s challenging to manage my research effectively. A structured induction process, with well-defined guidelines and regular evaluations, would help in understanding my role better and addressing any issues that arise, ultimately leading to more successful research outcomes.”*

### **Resource Constraints:**

Resource constraints are one of key ingredients that challenge successful doctoral research. The resource constraints are considered as a pervasive challenge in doctoral research which affects the successful completion of doctoral journey. Resources constraints also result in compromised quality, scope, and execution of research. No or limited scholarships, inappropriate access to facilities provided by the institution, and time constraints have a negative impact on the student’s abilities and competencies. These limitations also challenge doctoral students’ engagement, motivation, and overall research work. While coping with this challenge, initiative-taking strategies like proper and sufficient funding, provision of optimum resources, and proper support from institutions are the necessary elements. A respondent said, *“Resource limitations often restrict the scope of my research and affect the quality of my work. Finding alternative funding sources and better utilizing available resources are critical to overcoming these challenges and achieving successful research outcomes. “Another participant described that due to financial issues, I am unable to purchase necessary software. I must look at my peers or seniors for this software which delays my research work. Moreover, the support of the supervisor in this regard is also especially important because he has access to all the required software. The supervisor can support in this regard if he does.”*

### **Adapting to Diverse Student Needs:**

Diversity of doctoral students in learning styles, diverse backgrounds, and skills, demonstrates a significant challenge for the supervisors. As effective supervision necessities proper and adequate support from supervisors, addressing adaptive techniques to meet diverse student needs becomes more crucial. Every doctoral student, due to their different background, requires unique way of guidance and resources for a successful doctoral journey. Through involving in supportive, responsive, and flexible approach, varying needs of doctoral students may be met. By individual mentoring and tailoring supportive strategies, diverse needs of the students can be fulfilled. For instance, specific mentoring strategies like writing research objectives, preparing, working on MS Word, use of digital technology and developing research methodologies can significantly impact on students’ motivation, efficacy, and engagement. As one doctoral student indicated, *“A structured supervision approach with specific objectives and tailored mentoring in areas like research question formulation, writing, and presentation skills would increase my interest and motivation. It would make the supervision process more relevant to my individual needs and help*

*me succeed in my research endeavors.” Another respondent described, “Proper and adequate support by the supervisor in assisting challenges like research methodology can enhance motivation and engagement. My supervisor, who provides me all the support, develops virtues of confidence in me. It guides me toward the attainment of my research task. He always looks to assist me and asks for any support at every meeting. Moreover, he also directs senior researchers to assist me if I face any issue related to my research work.”*

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Suggestions:**

**Discussion:** This study explored the interplay between opportunities and challenges in doctoral research. It delves into the complex interplay between research identity development, personalized supervision, and networking. It also discusses the challenges in research supervision. It is necessary to cope with challenges like inconsistent guidance, resource constraints, and diverse needs of the students. The combination of these ingredients may significantly improve the overall quality of research experience for doctoral students.

This study explored research identity as a crucial element for doctoral student’s success. Research identity influences the self-efficacy of doctoral students and their engagement in research. These findings are consistent with the study of Lamar and Helm (2017). Research identity development significantly plays a key role in research experience of doctoral students. Research supervision is the means of enhancing research identity development in doctoral students that results in a novice and a competent researcher. Similarly, personalized supervision promotes a supportive research environment that results in encouragement of doctoral students which ultimately explore the research identity. Personalized supervision fosters a supportive environment that encourages students to explore their researcher identity, particularly in diverse backgrounds. These findings are consistent with Madikizela-Madiya et al. (2013).

The supervisor plays a significant role in identifying and focusing individual needs of doctoral students. This approach of supervisors supports in mitigating feelings of isolation and confusion. The study conducted by Bager-Charleson et al. (2024) also revealed the same. Besides that, as several students stated that self-compassion plays a significant role in coping with distress and anxiety, the role of self-compassion also becomes crucial. These findings are consistent with (Ilahi et al., 2024). Adaptive support strategies are the source of establishing and flourishing supervisors-supervisees relationship which can result in improved student outcome. These findings are aligned with the outcomes of the study conducted by Albertyn et al. (2018). Similarly, the knowledge networks, which include academic and entrepreneurial links, are central for determining a student's researcher role identity. It was also argued by Gruber et al. (2023). Opportunities like collaborative projects, can enhance networks and support diverse perspectives. That will result in supplementing the research skills and promoting a sense of group among doctoral students, as stated by Madikizela-Madiya et al. (2013) also.

Although these opportunities can significantly improve the overall experiences of doctoral students, challenges remain, these challenges may be coped with the help of other supportive

elements. For example, the institutional appropriate support and improvement in supervisory practices are necessary and unavoidable elements that ensure equity and proper guidance for all doctoral students.

Furthermore, enabling networking opportunities might assist doctoral students in attaining access to required resources and desired knowledge that might otherwise be limited. The discussion explored these dynamics and their associations for improving the overall effectiveness of guidance for doctoral students in Pakistan and enhancing a supportive supervision.

**Conclusion:** Through adopting structured and personalized mechanisms in doctoral research supervision, the challenges can be addressed adequately. Structured and personalized approaches can address challenges like resource constraints. These opportunities can also address limited or lack of networking threats. Similarly, these approaches can also address the compromised quality of supervisions and delayed completion of doctoral research also. These approaches are more supportive in promoting a more supportive and applicable research environment for doctoral students in Pakistan. In local context, where these opportunities can flourish research experience of doctoral students, are necessary to be adopted. The limited resources, financial issues, and compromised research networks are the major challenges which are being faced by doctoral students in Pakistan, which can be addressed appropriately through the strategies mentioned.

Based on discussion and conclusion, the following recommendations in improving doctoral research supervision are suggested.

Implementation of formalized induction process for new doctoral students may be initiated in which clear guidelines and proper training may be provided. It will be helpful in establishing a consistent framework for doctoral students which may flourish the research experiences and engagement. Personalized supervision strategies may address doctoral student individual needs and its goals. The regular face-to-face meetings and constructive feedback may play a significant role in this regard.

Additional funding sources and proper usage of existing fundings may be ensured. Optimized resources may be provided to overcome different constraints and conduct a smooth doctoral research experience. It will also be helpful in supporting comprehensive and successful doctoral research. Moreover, research supervisors may facilitate doctoral students in establishing research networks and professional exposure through providing opportunities in participating in conferences, workshops, and other research industries. It may enhance doctoral students' academic alongside professional development.

**Ethical Considerations:** To ensure all the ethical guidelines, informed consent from all the concerned participants was obtained before the conducting of the phase (Data Collection). All the participants were assured that their provided data will be kept confidential and safe and will be used for research purposes only. They were also ensured that their physical and psychological safety would not be compromised as they will be provided safe place and appropriate environment to record their responses. All the participants were treated with dignity and respect. The team of

researchers followed all the formal and informal codes. Furthermore, all the ethical guidelines and requirements for safety measures were also followed.

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