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Supervisor Supervisee Snags in Public Sector University: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Research is a vital part of higher education and depends on effective collaboration between supervisors and supervisees. This qualitative study explored factors affecting supervisor-supervisee relationships at MPhil and PhD levels, including individual, human, social, and institutional influences. Data were collected through interviews and focus groups with 35 participants. Findings showed that strong relationships are built through time investment, positive attitudes, research knowledge, and regular interaction. The quality of research is influenced by both the supervisor-supervisee relationship and discrepancies of institutional procedures. This study explores the factors that make research difficult for students and identifies gaps in research design and support. Its findings will help students, supervisors, and institutions to address challenges, reduce research-related stress, and improve the quality of research work and also recommends supportive practices that encourage innovative, high-quality research and help researchers meet global standards.

Introduction

Research productivity reflects the quality of an institution's academic work. Since the supervisor-supervisee relationship plays a crucial role in higher education. The relationship between the supervisor and the supervisees is considered a key determinant of a successful supervisory process (Satara, 2026). This case study examined the challenges faced by supervisors and supervisees in a social sciences department of a public university. The study also explored how traditional postgraduate research models and institutional policies influence supervision quality, research completion, and overall research outcomes.

Concurrently, students are expected to acquire a diverse set of research competencies within constrained timeframes, while supervisors must navigate comparable challenges within a supervisory relationship characterized by high expectations and accountability. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is characterized by a delicate balance of power, with supervisors typically occupying a position of greater authority. Both parties should align on goals, responsibilities, and deadlines to promote mutual understanding (Ocheja, P.I, 2025). The supervisor-supervisee relationship is crucial to student success. Positive supervision supports academic growth and research independence, while poor supervision, personal issues, project management challenges, and limited support can negatively affect research outcomes.

Saima (2025) evaluated supervisors' behaviour within the supervisory relationship which is essential for assessing the ethical quality of the supervisory working alliance. Supervisees' anxiety and behavioral responses were examined within the learning relationship to determine the extent to which supervisors demonstrate ethical conduct in the supervisory process.

Academic writing challenges are influenced not only by English proficiency but also by students' prior educational and cultural experiences. Understanding these experiences helps supervisors develop intercultural awareness and better support international students. Since research quality depends on both the researcher and the supervisor, this study examines how individual, social, and institutional factors, as well as gaps between supervision policies and practices, affect MPhil and PhD research supervision. Wu, S., Oubibi, M., & Bao, K. (2024) a study moves beyond the traditional supervisor-student instructional relationship by a new classification based on communication modes. This perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of supervisor-student interactions and provides valuable insights for enhancing the quality of graduate education.

Additionally, burnout may lead to emotional exhaustion, disengagement from work, and feelings of inefficacy, thereby reducing academic performance and negatively affecting overall well-being (Shin et al., 2022). By seeking supervisor support and guidance promptly, they can resolve issues more quickly, preventing delays in their academic journey. This leads to smoother progress, adherence to the PhD schedule, and the production of higher-quality outputs such as research proposals, publications, and their thesis, ultim ately contributing to their academic success in the PhD journey (Yende, 2021).

Ringo (2025) emphasize the critical importance of supervisor support in enhancing PhD students' academic performance, thereby underscoring the need for higher education institutions to implement and promote effective supervisory practices that facilitate academic success.

The supervisor-supervisee relationship plays a key role in research quality, which is vital for university performance. This study explores how cultural, academic, and supervisory factors influence thesis writing and research quality among MPhil and PhD students.

Literature review

The literature highlights the supervisor-supervisee relationship as a key factor influencing research quality and student success. Studies have identified several challenges in research supervision, including topic selection influenced by funding and stakeholders, time pressure for completion, cultural differences, and limited supervisor accessibility (McCallin & Nayar, 2011). Effective supervision is associated with supportive relationships, constructive feedback, and alignment between supervisors' and students' cognitive styles (Armstrong, 2004; Handley, 1982).

Researchers have categorized the factors affecting supervision into individual, human, sociocultural, and institutional dimensions. Individual factors include students' attitudes, skills, and personal circumstances, while human factors involve supervisory styles, teaching practices, and interpersonal behaviors (Wright, 2003; Pearson & Brew, 2002). Sociocultural factors, particularly language barriers and cultural differences, can create challenges for international students in thesis writing and supervision (Wang & Li, 2008; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Institutional factors, such as funding policies, administrative procedures, and program requirements, also influence research progress and completion (McCormack, 2004).

Overall, the literature suggests that research quality depends on a combination of effective supervision, supportive institutional structures, and attention to students' academic, cultural, and personal needs.

The supervisor-supervisee relationship is widely recognized as a critical determinant of doctoral success, research quality, student well-being, and degree completion. Recent studies have identified a range of factors that contribute to difficulties and conflicts within this relationship, which can be categorized into individual, human/interpersonal, social, and institutional dimensions.

At the individual level, students' motivation, commitment, self-efficacy, research competence, and expectations significantly influence supervision outcomes. David (2020) found that student-related factors, alongside supervisory issues, contribute to delayed completion and attrition. Similarly, Wu et al. (2024) reported that students' learning attitudes and self-awareness shape the effectiveness of supervisory interactions.

Human or interpersonal factors emerge as the most frequently reported causes of supervisory difficulties. Studies consistently highlight poor communication, inadequate feedback, unclear expectations, lack of trust, and ineffective mentoring as key sources of conflict. Anttila et al. (2024) demonstrated that mismatches between supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions of support and supervision frequency can negatively affect doctoral progress. Likewise, Ringo (2025) found that the quality of the supervisor-student relationship significantly influences academic performance, while Rafiq (2025) emphasized the importance

of supervisors' supportive and accommodative skills. Supervisors should be assigned based on their willingness to supervise and their knowledge of the student's research topic. A good match between the supervisor's expertise and the student's research area can lead to better guidance and support (Masood, S., Khawaja, F., & Waqar, Y., 2023).

Research further indicates that power imbalances and supervisory dominance can create tensions that undermine doctoral success (Deyrich, 2023; Gorup & Laufer, 2020).

Social factors also play an important role in shaping supervisory experiences. Doctoral students frequently experience isolation, limited networking opportunities, and insufficient integration into academic communities. Li et al. (2025) found that supervisory relationships influence not only academic achievement but also social network development and well-being. In addition, institutional cultures and disciplinary norms may discourage students from openly discussing supervisory problems, thereby exacerbating existing tensions (Gorup & Laufer, 2020).

Institutional factors have received increasing attention in recent literature. Inadequate supervisory training, high supervisor workloads, limited research resources, unclear policies, and weak grievance mechanisms can negatively affect supervision quality. Acharya et al. (2024) identified institutional demands, resource constraints, and role ambiguity as major challenges in doctoral programs. Similarly, Macharia et al. (2025) reported that communication breakdowns, delayed feedback, supervisor unavailability, and insufficient institutional support systems hinder effective supervision. Studies also show that institutional power structures often reinforce unequal relationships between supervisors and students, contributing to dissatisfaction and conflict (Jones & Blass, 2019; Deyrich, 2023). Most universities and research institutions establish clear guidelines outlining the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and supervisees. A thorough understanding of these roles can strengthen the supervisor-supervisee relationship and facilitate the timely and successful completion of doctoral studies (David, O. A., 2020).

Overall, the literature suggests that supervisor-supervisee relationship snags result from a complex interaction of individual characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, social contexts, and institutional environments. Effective supervision therefore requires not only competent and supportive supervisors but also institutional policies and academic cultures that promote communication, equity, mentorship, and student support.

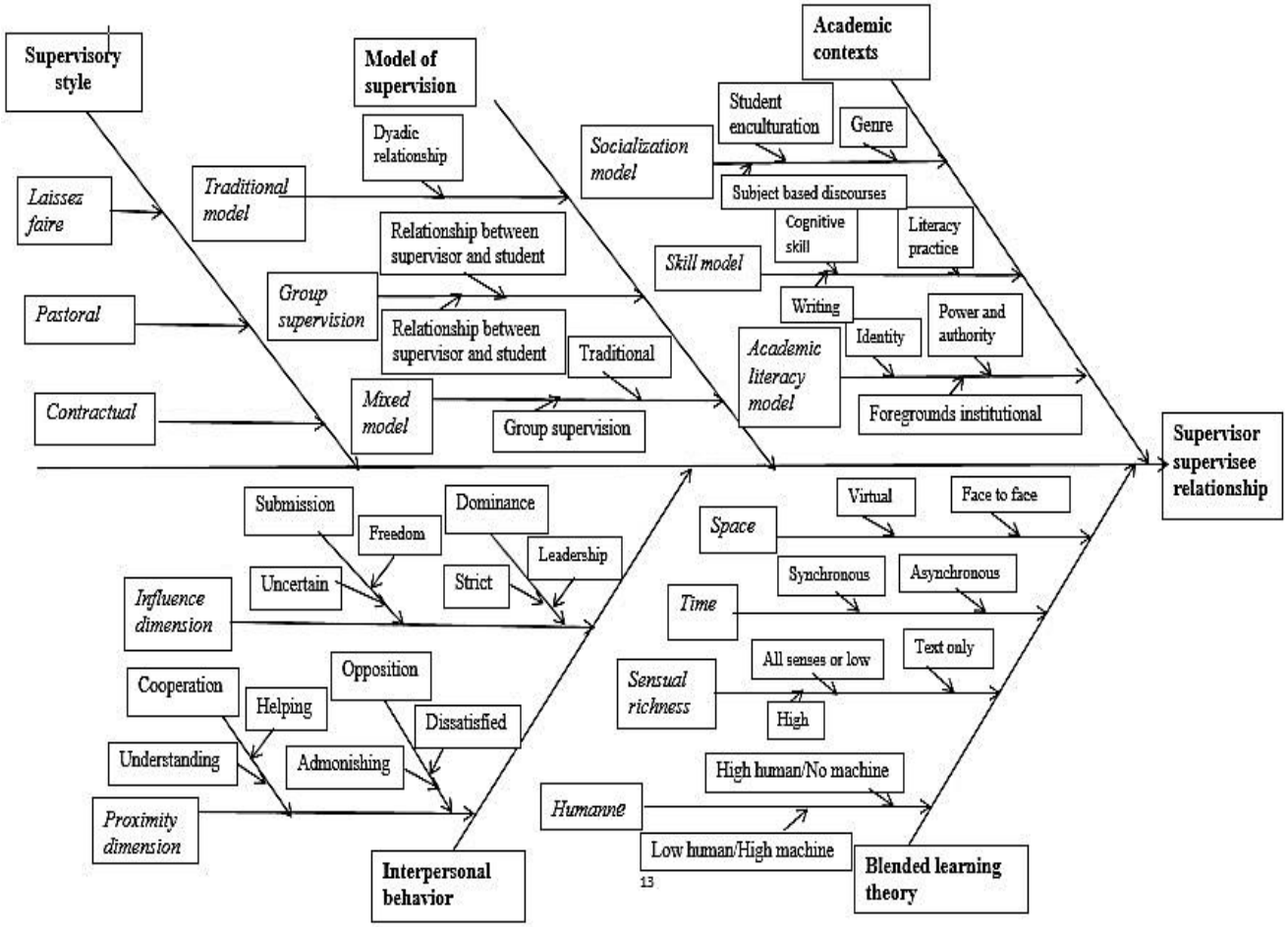
Methodology

This qualitative case study used an inductive approach, collecting data through interviews and focus group discussions to explore supervisor-supervisee issues in a social sciences department of a public university. Participants included 10 PhD scholars, 15 MPhil scholars across three focus groups, and 10 supervisors, selected based on availability and consent.

Instrument Development

Self-developed interview guides were used as an instrument for taking the data. One interview guide was used for supervisors, and another was used for supervisees. Both instruments were developed by following the five models related to supervisor and supervisee interaction, relationship and their effects on each other. Cause and effect diagram was developed by those five models as source of cause identification models which was the base of instrument.

Fig 1:

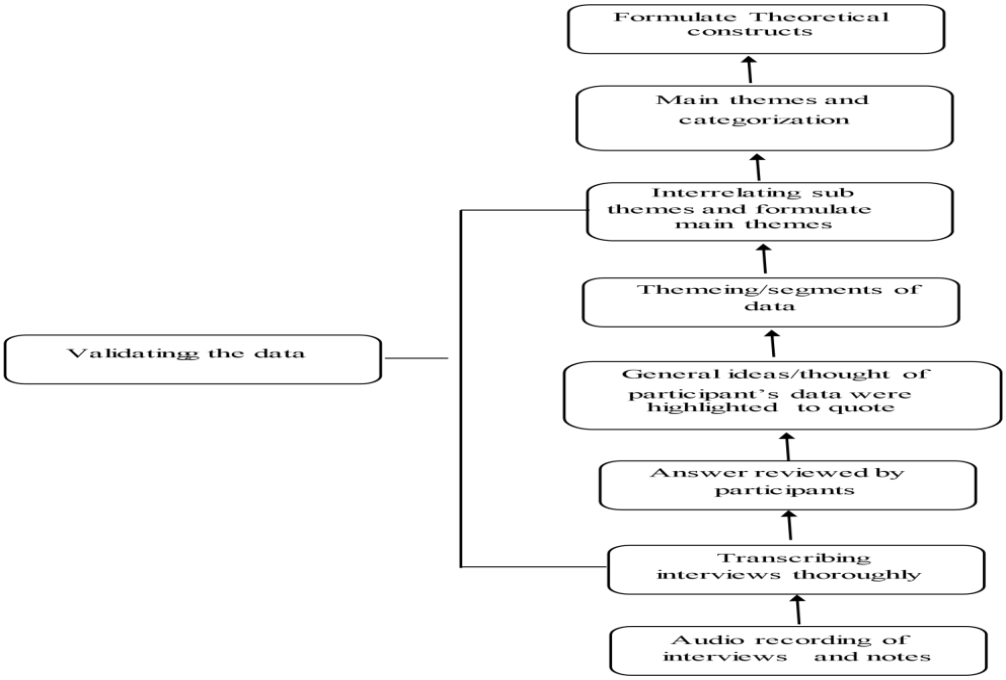


Note. Five theoretical models were employed as frameworks for identifying the causes of supervisor-supervisee relationship issues and were presented on the branches of the fishbone diagram. As these models focus on the interaction and relationship between supervisors and supervisees, they informed the development of the interview questions.

Data analysis

Data were organized and transcribed after collection. Through thematic analysis, the researcher coded and categorized the data, identified key themes, developed theoretical constructs, and supported interpretations with evidence from participants' responses.

Fig 2:



Note. The data analysis procedure adopted in this study was based on the framework presented by Creswell (2009) in Research Design.

Findings

Participants' interviews revealed both positive and negative views, which are reflected in the study findings. All themes were derived from the interview data and comprehensively elaborated under each major factor aligned with the primary objectives of the study.

Supervisor-Supervisees Relationship

Both supervisees and supervisors highlighted the importance of supportive supervision, flexible guidance, regular communication, and motivation in the research process. Regular meetings and constructive feedback from supervisors enable students to identify challenges at an early stage and make timely adjustments to their research and academic work (Wang et al., 2022).

Objective 1

To explore those factors, affect the supervisor supervisee relationship at MPhil and Ph.D level.

Theme 1: Supervision methodology.

Theme 2: Effect of supervision

Theme 3: problem solving

Theme 1: Supervision methodology.

Supervisors used various strategies, including individual or group meetings, resource sharing, and skill development, although some relied on traditional methods, while issues such as limited availability, poor communication, and excessive strictness occasionally affected the supervisory relationship.

He has flexible style, didn't make hard and fast rules. He allowed me to do my work independently. (P13)

My supervisor has behavioristics and constructivist approach. In behavioristics manner he pressurizes and gives tough time as well as he motivates intrinsically. (P23)

I motivate and support them for improvement of their work. (S3)

One strategy which is very much successful is that, I call all advisees in off days of week, they discuss methodologies and their experiences with each other. (S10)

Change in supervision strategy.

Sometimes they need more time so, it changed. (S2)

Sometimes due to surprise meeting, colleagues come to office to meet on the day of meeting with supervisees so, this kind of schedule got problem. (S6)

Theme 2: Effect of supervision

When students get scared, they don't come to supervisor. (S2)

It negatively influenced when teacher more and student is not motivated. (S3

Positive influence of supervision.

Speedy task given by my supervisor were really helping to me to meet deadlines by which I complete my work on time. (P17)

His interaction is very helpful, that whenever I stuck in my work, he picks that point and guide me very well. (P21)

Negative influence of supervision

When I stuck or felt difficult, my supervisor has done that part of work, due to which I could not learnt that part. (P11)

Sometime Sir has committed for meeting and decide the day and time, but didn't fulfill his commitment. (P13)

I could not feel comfortable to ask questions in group meeting with my supervisor, on the other hand he didn't give me separate time for discussion. (P24)

Theme 3: Problem solving.

The findings revealed a significant association between lower levels of satisfaction with supervision and increased experiences of stress, exhaustion, and cynicism. Students who were dissatisfied with supervisory support reported higher levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, perceived their workload as more burdensome, expressed greater concern about their thesis progress, and exhibited stronger cynical attitudes compared with those who were satisfied with the supervision they received (Cornér, S., Löfström, E., & Pyhältö, K., 2017).

He referred some teachers for validity. (P6)

She helped me by using her name in management. (P11)

Discussing the problems.

I don't feel any reluctance to share my problems with him. (P17) Yes, I have shared, and he always satisfied me. (P18)

I give them supportive materials. (S1)

I give them feedback; they learn on that way. (S5)

Objective 2

To find out the supervisor supervisee snags due to different factors i.e. individual, human, institutional and social factors.

Theme 4: Issues encountered in research.

Theme 5: Effect of supervisor's attitude.

Theme 6: Supervisor supervisee interaction

Theme 7: Skill development.

Theme 8: Institutional procedures.

Individual Factors

Supervisees reported challenges such as limited supervisor availability, delayed feedback, insufficient guidance, and difficulties with topic selection, research skills, and data collection. Supervisors, in turn, highlighted supervisees' lack of commitment, research knowledge, critical thinking, and innovative work, along with personal and professional responsibilities that often-hindered research progress.

Theme 4: Issues encountered in research.

Instrument development and its validation takes more time due to no response of supervisor and research teachers on time. (P6)

Delays in management issues i.e. supervisor allotment and so much wait for viva turn. (P8)

There is no proper culture and network of research available in the department. (P19)

They don't try to be very much involve in research activity. (S3)

Students expect immediate response. (S6)

Sub theme: Academic issues.

Students stuck on write up because they lack of academic writing skill. (S1)

Some students have not clear idea about research, when they come after study the course of research. (S8)

Sub theme: Stuck of supervisees.

In choosing the area of interest, topic selection and research design. (S5)

They stuck in interpretation and writing discussion and findings which is the vital part of the research study. (S6)

Theme 5: Effect of supervisor's attitude.

Not satisfactory. I felt fear to talk him due to his strict attitude. I can't ask one question again, for second time. (P10)

His personal attitude is very kind and cooperative. As well as he is highly professional in dealing with students and their schedule. (P23)

If advisees' behaviour is not positive and they are not serious, then it affects the quality of work. (S10)

Theme 6: Supervisor supervisee interaction

Sub theme: Way of interaction.

He didn't been strict ever with us on our mistakes. (P4)

I'm job holder and married so that my supervisor gives me comfort zone for my work. He is lenient and not strict with me. (P20)

I have allotted two days of week for my research students and spend half of the day in my working hour with them. (S6)

Sub theme: Schedule of meeting.

He calls us for meeting when he has time and check the work on that time. (P5)

Not a specific schedule for meeting. (P6)

Sub theme: Availability of supervisor.

No, he didn't give time other than schedule. (P1)

Cooperate well, he gave instruction on text or call when I have problem. (P6)

Theme 7: Skill development.

Reading skills, as well as teaching skills, because he brought us along with him to their research classes. (P6)

I learnt how to communicate or deals with others. He attached some students with us to guide them that built research skills. (P25)

I give them regular feedback so that they can have a look to collect their mistakes. (S6)

So, related to their concepts and understanding, I prefer to give ownership to do work by their own self. (S9)

Theme 8: Institutional procedures.

The final viva takes much time in two to three months. (P5)

Delay in DPC and instrument validation is really wastage of time. (P9)

Administrative delays are the main hurdles. (S5)

Sub theme: Research facilities.

Modern software and techniques know how are not to supervisors. (P22)

Objective 3

To identify the discrepancies in procedures related to policy and process of research work.

Theme 9: Incompletion of thesis.

Theme 9: Incompletion of thesis.

Due to the unavailability of supervisors, thesis work does not complete on time. (P7)

Delays in supervisors' allotment and in institutional procedures is one of the reasons that students can not complete research work on time. (P13)

Our population of study is school, colleges or universities, if they are not close, they can't collect data. (S10)

Their own negligence mainly. Because they are not serious to do that, system could also be reason in delays. (S5)

Human Factors

Supervisees generally perceived supervisors as supportive and motivating, though excessive strictness sometimes created fear and hindered open communication. Supervisors noted that motivated supervisees made better progress, while lack of commitment and leniency often delayed research completion. Furthermore, studies by Sverdlik et al. (2018) and McAlpine et al. (2020) indicate that students who perceive their supervisors as supportive are more likely to demonstrate greater motivation and stronger commitment to their academic pursuits.

Social Factors

Supervisees and supervisors emphasized the importance of regular meetings, guidance, and skill development in the research process. Supervisors supported supervisees through scheduled interactions, feedback, training, and resource sharing, while supervisees valued their accessibility, flexibility, and assistance in improving research, analytical, and writing skills. Hutchings (2017) identified that group supervision can nurture mutual and sustained support and can add value, affording location-independent interactions to facilitate participation, and reduce isolation.

Institutional Factors

Supervisees reported that slow institutional procedures, unclear guidelines, submission deadlines, inadequate research facilities, poor internet access, and delays in supervisor allocation and thesis evaluation negatively affected their research progress and motivation.

Jones, A. (2019) explained that supervisory support plays a pivotal role in facilitating the completion and endorsement of doctoral research. For those seeking careers in academia, ongoing support from supervisors was equally important in fostering professional development through scholarly networks, publication prospects, and recommendations. Though, institutional priorities and increasing academic workloads were found to substantially affect supervisory practices.

Discussion

The study examined the individual, human, social, and institutional factors influencing supervisor-supervisee relationships and identified procedural gaps in research supervision. Findings showed that effective communication, timely feedback, supportive supervision, and flexible supervisory practices enhanced students' motivation, research skills, and academic progress. In contrast, limited supervisor accessibility, conflicting expectations, poor coordination, and inadequate institutional support created challenges that slowed research progress and affected the quality of students' work. According to Li, Y., Xu, W., & Chen, J. (2025) the dissatisfied category encompassed both submissive and oppositional behaviours, with a stronger tendency toward opposition than submission. Consequently, supervisors often reported feelings of disbelief, dissatisfaction, and disappointment.

Saleem, T., & Mahmood, N. (2017) suggested implementing effective supervisor allocation procedures, ensuring alignment between supervisors' areas of expertise and supervisees' research topics, and providing discipline-specific supervisory training.

The study also revealed that social and personal factors, such as hesitation in seeking guidance, lack of peer support, and competing personal responsibilities, negatively influenced research performance. A positive supervisor-supervisee relationship produces better outcomes when it is based on reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, personal connection, and shared values (Majid, 2017). Supervisors who act as mentors facilitate students' research progress, while students who adhere to guidance and deadlines are more likely to achieve successful outcomes.

Furthermore, delays in administrative processes, including supervisor allocation, proposal approval, and viva examinations, contributed to extended completion times. Consistent with recent literature (Halse & Bansel, 2012; Lee, 2020; Wisker, 2026) the findings highlight that positive supervisory relationships and efficient institutional procedures are essential for improving research quality, student satisfaction, and timely degree completion.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it was concluded that research quality is significantly influenced by factors related to supervisors, supervisees, and their academic environment. The study identified four key factors, namely individual, human, social, and institutional factors, that contribute to supervisor-supervisee challenges. Through in-depth interviews with MPhil and PhD supervisors and supervisees, both positive and negative experiences were explored. Since the primary objective was to identify supervisory challenges and their underlying causes, a cause-and-effect diagram was used to illustrate the key issues and their impacts.

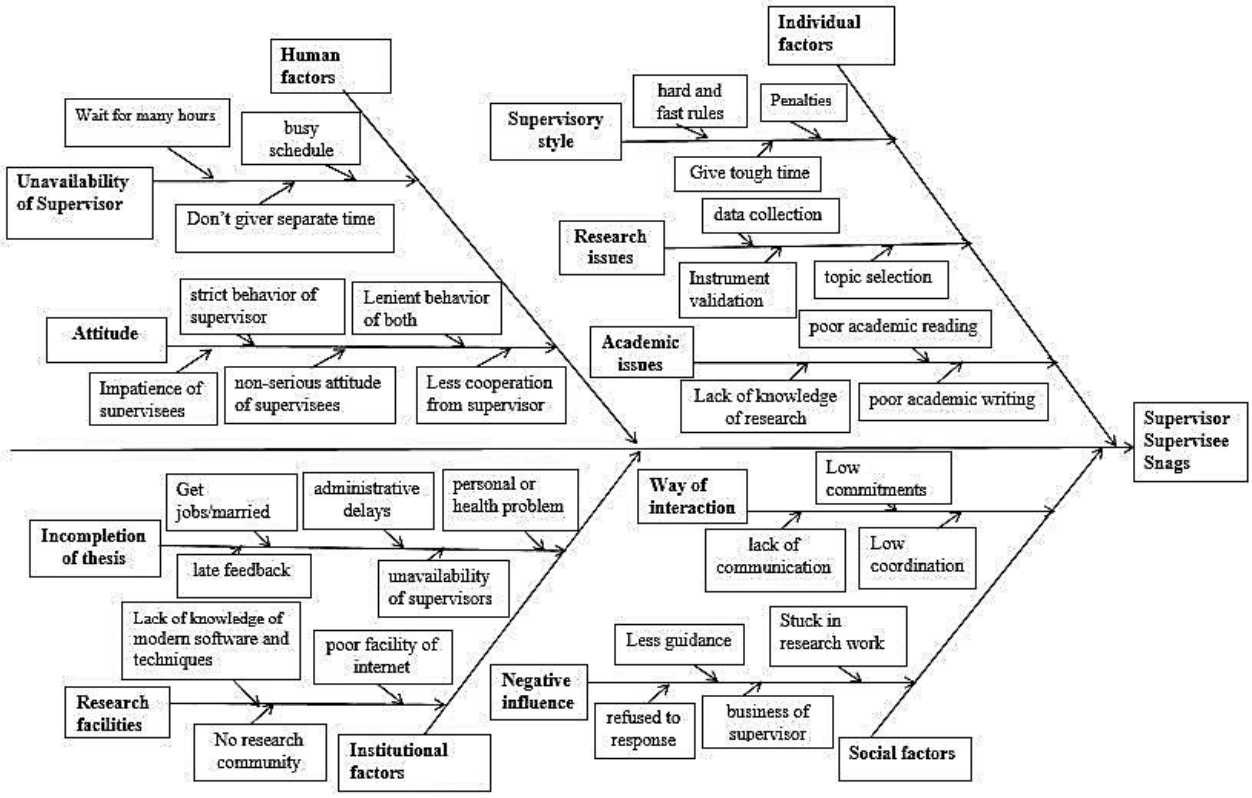


Fig 3:

Note. Four major factors were identified as the primary branches of the fishbone diagram, each connected to the central backbone and collectively contributing to the effect, namely supervisor-supervisee relationship snags.

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