

Supervisory Styles and Graduate Expectations: Perceptions of Saudi Master's Students

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Abstract

Postgraduate degree completion is significantly reliant on the guidance of the supervisors for graduate researchers. Despite the critical role of supervision in graduate research, there is limited research on the perspectives of Saudi graduate students on their supervisors' styles and whether these cater to their needs. The current research using narrative inquiry examined how Saudi graduate students view their supervisors' supervisory styles. Seven graduate students pursuing their M.A. TESOL degrees at a Saudi university shared their experiences in semi-structured interviews. Gatfield's (2005) four-styles framework was used to identify supervisory styles and the subsequent emerging themes. Participants described two main supervisory styles: the Contractual style, with high structure and high support, and the Laissez-faire style, which features low support with low structure. Additionally, two other supervisory styles were also identified, such as Pastoral (low structure, high support) and Directorial (high structure, low support). While the majority of the graduate participants expressed satisfaction with their thesis supervision, a few experienced minimal satisfaction. Thus, the study offers rich insights for program stakeholders. One of the most crucial aspects highlighted is the improvement of the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, in terms of open communication and mutual understanding. Furthermore, the study identified the need for setting clear expectations for both students and supervisors about their responsibilities in the initial stages of thesis work.

Keywords: graduate expectations, graduate students, linguistic features, supervisee, supervisory styles, satisfaction, thesis supervision, thesis supervisor

1. Introduction

Supervision in postgraduate studies is widely recognized as critical to the timely completion of the thesis, overall academic success, and student satisfaction (Ali et al., 2016). Studies indicate a strong correlation between supervisor–student relationship and the quality of graduate research experiences, thereby significantly influencing the intellectual development of students, research skills, and overall well-being (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). Effective supervision from the guides exceeds academic and methodological support into mentorship for emotional aspects, thus encouraging the students to maneuver and withstand the multitude of challenges associated with postgraduate research (Vekkaila et al., 2012).

In recent decades, the number of higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia and the broader MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region has experienced substantial expansion. Governmental initiatives, such as Saudi Vision 2030, have driven this change, which aims to develop a robust knowledge-based economy through enhanced investment in higher education, research, and innovation (Mohiuddin et al., 2023). Consequently, an unprecedented increase in enrollment into Saudi universities was observed, particularly in postgraduate programs, presenting novel concerns regarding quality supervision practices amidst rapid institutional growth.

Despite the recognized importance of supervision in postgraduate education, limited empirical research is directed at Saudi graduate students' perceptions and expectations of supervisory practices. A majority of the available literature originates from Western academic contexts, with findings and estimates that are not necessarily extensible to the unique sociocultural and educational settings of Saudi Arabia (Alshehry, 2020). The distinct cultural context, particularly the high power-distance prevalent in Saudi society, renders the graduate supervisory relationships and students' expectations remarkably varying compared to those documented in Western academic environments (Alhazmi & Al Lily, 2024; Hofstede et al., 2010).

Therefore, the current research intends to address the existing research gap by exploring Saudi graduate students' perceptions of supervisory styles and their expectations regarding ideal supervision. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) identify supervisory styles experienced by Saudi graduate students; (2) examine students' satisfaction and expectations of their supervisors; and (3) determine potential alignments or mismatches between actual supervisory practices and students' expectations. The research questions guiding this inquiry are:

1. What supervisory styles do Saudi graduate students perceive their supervisors adopt?
2. How satisfied are Saudi graduate students with the thesis supervision they receive?
3. How aligned or misaligned are supervisory styles perceived with students' satisfaction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Supervisor

The term “supervisor” is common and significant in graduate supervision studies. According to Ismail et al. (2011), supervision can be defined as “an intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student. The supervisor is designated to facilitate the student’s academic development either in terms of coursework or research projects.” Filippou et al., (2021) in their research, they assigned various other roles to supervisors such as facilitators, supporters, advisors, teachers, mentors, guides, and managers. However, the term 'supervisor' is predominantly used. Overall, the supervisor is key to students’ academic success through their guidance in research-related work and research project implementation.

2.2 Supervisory Styles and Frameworks

Supervisory styles and models typically indicate the interaction between supervisor and supervisee, and how the former responds to queries posted by the latter defines the supervision process (Hon Kam, 1997). Supervisory styles and models are categorized by the extent of support provided by supervisors and the structure they adopt (Doan et al., 2022). Several supervisory styles have been documented in the literature (Alshehry, 2020; Bitzer, 2010; Gatfield, 2005; Lee, 2010; Neupane Bastola & Hu, 2025). Lee (2010), for instance, identified the most popular supervisory models, i.e., enculturation, functional, emancipation, critical thinking, and developing a quality of relationship.

The supervisory styles framework developed by Gatfield (2005) offers extensive information to classify graduate supervision approaches through two key elements: structure and support. The model establishes different supervisory styles through its typology, which allows researchers in various multinational settings to investigate power relations, supervisee satisfaction, and teaching methods. This framework aids the researchers in delineating perceptions of graduates towards supervision while also highlighting the mismatch between the available and the expected supervision. The model provides valuable insights into supervisory approaches that are more suited to high power-distance cultures, such as Saudi Arabia, where the authority structures are mandatory, combined with limiting cultural norms for the graduates.

Gatfield’s (2005) framework presents a total of four supervisory styles that have been identified based on high or low engagement with structure and support. The first style is the laissez-faire style, which encourages maximum autonomy to students through minimal structure and low support. The supervisors who adopt this style rarely interfere with the students’ work and allow them to handle most responsibilities for their research work. This approach causes students with the expectation of hands-on mentorship to be confused and dissatisfied. Second, the pastoral style combines low structure with high emotional and personal support to foster the spaces that are high on emotional support and interpersonal relationships rather than structured guidance. In this style, students are likely to be emotionally secure but often find it challenging to perform well academically, especially in the case of a need for guidance for managing tasks and establishing goals. The third style is the directorial style, which involves consistent and continued interaction between supervisors and students but is not aimed at any specific task-related guidance. Supervisors who adopt this style stay actively involved through conversations, yet their instructions are non-specific and unstructured. Research states that this is an ideal for many supervisees and supports academic progress, and builds emotional resilience among graduate students. Lastly, the contractual style features tasks with defined boundaries and strict organization while providing minimal support to students. Supervisors begin by creating specific agreements that focus on precise objectives and expectations, together with minimal emotional involvement. Supervisees, in this style, may feel isolated or pressured, especially in cultures that value relational mentorship.

2.3 Global Perspectives on Graduate Student Expectations

The exhaustive international literature highlights common expectations of graduate students from their supervisors, including timely feedback, availability, emotional support, expertise, and mentorship (Ali et al., 2016; McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). A survey by Vekkaila et al. (2012) demonstrated a higher level of satisfaction and minimal distress among those students who perceived their supervisors as supportive, approachable, and responsive, ultimately translating into improved academic performance and mental well-being.

On the other hand, mismatches between graduate students' expectations and the styles followed by supervisors significantly affect students’ academic progress and satisfaction. For instance, an expectation of collaborative mentorship met with an overly directive or overly laissez-faire supervision may lead students to be dissatisfied and to experience academic delays (Ismail et al., 2011).

2.4 Supervisory Practices in the MENA Region

In the MENA region, cultural factors such as high power-distance are known to significantly shape supervisory relationships. High power-distance cultures tend to exhibit hierarchical academic relationships characterized by respect for authority, formal interactions, and reluctance among students to openly challenge or question their supervisors (Dimitrov, 2009).

There are limited studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, and a qualitative study conducted by Alshehry (2020) revealed students' strong preferences for early, structured supervision. Furthermore, students expressed significant dissatisfaction associated with academic delays or inadequacies related to timely guidance, reflecting an underlying expectation for proactive involvement from supervisors.

Similarly, another study from the UAE indicates that graduate students prefer collaborative supervisory relationships characterized by

clear guidance combined with personal and emotional support. Aldosari and Ibrahim (2019) found that the students in the UAE were most satisfied with collaborative styles, which blend structured guidance with personal support. Conversely, as overly distant or non-directive styles were perceived by supervisors as negatively affecting students' academic confidence and overall satisfaction.

2.5 Cultural Influences on Supervisory Expectations

The power difference naturally exists between supervisors and graduate students, but the degree of its impact on students varies with the cultural background of the students. The high power distance is experienced prominently by those International graduate students who come from high power distance cultures than by students from low power distance cultures (Dimitrov, 2009; Hofstede et al., 2010). For instance, the academic and social gap between professors and students in Canada is relatively low, attributable to the fact that this country belongs to the low power distance category. Students are highly encouraged to share their different perspectives through open academic discussions (Dimitrov, 2009; Hofstede et al., 2010).

On the other hand, students from high power distance cultures, such as African, South American, East Asian, and Arab cultures, including Saudi Arabia, are likely to reflect greater deference respect to academic authority (Dimitrov, 2009). Students are less likely to challenge their supervisors or inquire about their demands due to cultural norms. Students hailing from these cultural contexts are more likely to follow instructions from their supervisors without challenging them, despite demands exceeding reasonable expectations. This can be attributed to their cultural background, which teaches them to avoid confronting authoritative people such as supervisors. These power dynamics between students and supervisors often create communication barriers and reduce the autonomy of the students, thereby transforming the academic relationship into a negative experience that students often hide their dissatisfaction about and lack personal control over (Dimitrov, 2009). Typically, Saudi Arabia's academic culture reflects broader societal norms with a clear emphasis on authority and hierarchical relationships, consistent with high power-distance dimensions. Students who are accustomed to teacher-centered educational systems tend to look for structured guidance from supervisors, as they tend to perceive supervisors as authoritative figures responsible for providing detailed directions. International comparative studies conducted in academic settings highlight potential challenges arising from cultural mismatches. For instance, Middle Eastern students studying abroad frequently encounter supervisory styles less directive than expected, causing initial confusion and dissatisfaction until expectations are explicitly clarified (Alabdulaziz, 2020). Thus, a clear and explicit alignment of expectations prior to the beginning of graduate programs is essential to prevent misunderstandings and dissatisfaction.

2.6 Research Gaps and Contribution of this Study

Literature that is primarily focused on supervisory roles and relationships is relatively scarce (Nangimah & Walldén, 2023). Existing literature underscores the urgent need for culturally contextualized research into graduate supervision practices. Specifically, the gap is significant as is evident from the limited practical evidence regarding Saudi graduate students' supervisory perceptions and expectations (Alabdulaziz, 2020; Alshehry, 2020). Furthermore, few studies have explicitly applied structured supervisory frameworks to analyze supervisory relationships within Saudi and broader MENA contexts.

In order to address these gaps, the present study employs Gatfield's (2005) supervisory styles as a theoretical lens to systematically analyze Saudi graduate students' supervisory experiences and their expectations. Through this approach, the study aims to provide nuanced insights into Saudi Arabia's sociocultural influence on supervisory practices, informing potential improvements in graduate supervision training approaches and policy implementation within Saudi higher education institutions. Thus, the results can be recruited into universities and faculty members' approaches as they highlight the importance of aligning supervisory styles and approaches with supervisees' needs and expectations. Furthermore, it can aid in designing professional development programs for supervisors and the present-day policy recommendations aimed at improving the overall quality of graduate supervision.

3. Method

The current study is a pilot for a larger project to investigate graduate students' experiences in writing for publication. The present study employed a narrative inquiry method (Barkhuizen et al., 2014), which is "an established umbrella term for research involving stories" (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 3). It also refers to "research in which narratives, or stories, play a significant role" (Benson, 2014, p. 155). This approach focuses on revealing to the readers that storytelling goes beyond mere narration and involves deriving meaning from life experiences. It refers to the process of collecting an individual's personal thoughts about events, including the reasons for them and their consequences. The study used narrative inquiry to thoroughly investigate graduate students' perceptions and satisfaction with supervisory styles.

3.1 Participants

The study sample comprised students pursuing a Master of Arts degree in the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program at a university in Saudi Arabia, 7 graduate students, with 3 males and 4 females. The study targeted students who recently initiated their M.A. thesis work with their supervisors. Table 1 shows the demographic details about the participants. Participants were enlisted via an invitation that was disseminated to M.A. students and their professors via a Google Form. The individuals who indicated their readiness to take part in this research were enlisted. The participants were second-year students. Pseudonyms are used in the study to protect students' privacy and confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

| Names ^a | Gender | Current study status |
|--|--------|----------------------|
| Fahad | M | 2 nd year |
| Amal | F | 2 nd year |
| Rawan | F | 2 nd year |
| Mustafa | M | 2 nd year |
| Nada | F | 2 nd year |
| Hussain | M | 2 nd year |
| Reem | F | 2 nd year |
| ^a Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identity | | |

3.2 Data Collection

Data was obtained through semi-structured interviews. Demographic data, supervisory practices and processes, including the development of research problems, writing different chapters, were inquired in the interviews (i.e., literature review, results, discussion), research method decisions, feedback process, and writing the whole thesis, to name a few. Additionally, perspectives and experiences of participants in writing for publications, and the related challenges encountered while studying the M.A., were recorded. TESOL program-related aspects included language obstacles, issues unique to constructing arguments, and those specific to writing in different genres. The interviews were conducted either in person or over Zoom in English, audio-recorded, transcribed, and had a duration of around 30 to 40 minutes each.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data obtained through interviews were then analyzed based on the research objectives and emerging themes to obtain stories about students' experiences in supervisory practices. I employed Barkhuizen et al.'s (2014) thematic analysis model, which comprises three sequential steps: (1) repeated reading of the data, (2) coding and classifying the data extracts, and (3) identification of the thematic headings. These themes included graduate students' perceptions about supervisory styles and supervisees' satisfaction with these supervisory styles. The final procedure involved refining and interpreting the obtained data and themes, accompanied by consulting published articles in the field where necessary.

4. Results and Discussion

The participants identified similarities and differences in their supervisors' styles with varying degrees of expectations. The findings are presented and discussed in the following sections corresponding to the three themes emerging in relation to previous studies.

4.1 Perceived Supervisory Styles

The interviews of participants revealed several supervisory styles (i.e., laissez-faire style, pastoral, directorial, and contractual) by their supervisors, reflecting remarkable differences in alignment with their own expectations. The nature of the supervisor–student relationship, the degree of structure and support given, and the communication techniques used all helped to shape these perceptions.

Several participants expressed that their supervisory experiences were under a laissez-faire style. One of the participants, Rawan, perceived her supervisor's support as limited and not well-suited to her needs. This is due to a more hands-off approach, with limited support and structure offered by her supervisor, which could be interpreted as leaning more towards a laissez-faire style (low support, low structure). Despite the supervisor's suggestion to have meetings, Rawan felt "anxious" and chose not to attend. The feedback was limited to "comments on word count", but with no associated extensive explanations or guidance. Overall, Rawan's expectations included a more direct, clear feedback from the supervisor rather than open-ended questions. In the case of Nada, the supervisory style appears to be a mix of low support (lack of detailed feedback and training) and considerably low structure (general approval of the writing so far). Nada perceived her supervisor's approach as a rather hands-off, minimally involved approach to supervision, with little feedback and guidance compared to the expectations and necessities of the student. The supervisor appeared to favor independent work by the student rather than actively mentoring them through the thesis writing process. Nada expressed a need for "more targeted support and feedback" from the supervisor, particularly around "academic writing for publication". Therefore, the supervisor's style seemed to align with laissez-faire. The results match earlier studies, which demonstrate that the laissez-faire style is well aligned with self-regulated learners, and, on the contrary, leads to frustration among students who prefer hands-on support and guidance (Alabdulaziz, 2020; Gu et al., 2015). Literature highlights the Saudi students' cultural preference for direct instruction, whereas formal authority with unstructured support systems in their learning environment causes anxiety, which further hinders their academic progress (Alabdulkarem et al., 2021).

Students who received pastoral supervision from their supervisors described their experiences as positive because their supervisors offered significant support without excessive direction. Fahad described his supervisor's style as the pastoral style. The supervisor appeared to provide guidance and feedback, but Fahad expressed his intent to receive this "high support" approach. Furthermore, Fahad prefers a relatively more hands-on, supportive approach from the supervisor, rather than a directive or hands-off style. This kind of preference demonstrates that affective supervision elements, including trust, empathy, and encouragement, play a major role in student satisfaction and well-being (Aldosari & Ibrahim, 2019; Vekkaila et al., 2012). A small number of students in this group expressed dissatisfaction due to a lack of additional academic direction, indicating the high emotional support from the pastoral approach, but it might not provide enough guidance by itself.

Students who received directorial supervision with frequent contact, but minimal task-based structure, reported diverse results. Amal, for example, expressed her challenging experience with her thesis supervisor. The supervisor adopted a directorial style, i.e., providing high structure in terms of the assignments, but very low on detailed feedback that hones the skills of a graduate researcher. These findings contradicted the more collaborative and guiding "pastoral" style the student seems to need. According to Amal, the feedback she received was vague on both the thesis and research papers, often just writing "what?" or "so what?" without any further details. The student expressed feeling "lost" and needed more substantive feedback and guidance from the supervisor to improve their academic writing skills and research approaches. These findings indicate that the directorial style achieves its best results through the combination of open feedback systems and specific academic targets based on necessity. Students are likely to perceive this approach as intellectually engaging, yet they might feel uncertain about the direction when these essential elements are absent.

Lastly, contractual supervision from experienced supervisors was focused on deadlines, progress reports, and clear expectations, but offered minimal emotional or interpersonal support. For instance, Mustafa expressed his satisfaction in terms of the extensive guidance and support from his supervisor, but with little flexibility in terms of the specific structure and direction of the thesis writing process. This aligned with the contractual style. Mustafa also mentioned that the supervisor provided "more recommendations", "suggestions on how to approach the literature review (e.g., using Google Scholar, looking at citations)", and "step-by-step guidance on the thesis writing process", indicating a high level of support. In the same vein, Hussain described the supervisory style as contractual, which included detailed feedback to students, consistent collaboration, and specific guidance to hone their academic writing abilities. For instance, the supervisor provided guidance on the "overall structure" and "flow of the writing", such as starting with general ideas and then moving into the literature review. The supervisor generally welcomed Hussain's questions and was open to providing comments and suggestions. The supervisor appeared to take an active, engaged role in the student's thesis writing process. Lastly, Reem also reported that the supervisory style was contractual. The supervisor provided ongoing guidance and feedback on her thesis writing, reviewing drafts, and offering suggestions to improve the work. Reem described her supervisor as "a great person" who "contributed" to the student's "passion and love for academia". The supervisor also encouraged Reem and her friends to publish and present their work. Overall, the supervisor seemed to have taken a hands-on, collaborative approach in guiding the student through the thesis writing and publication processes. The research results confirm Alshehry's (2020) study which demonstrates that structured supervision methods promote efficiency but fail to meet students' emotional and developmental needs.

Overall, the findings of the study show that no single supervisory style works for all students with different circumstances. The alignment between supervisory styles and students' needs at their research stage determines their satisfaction levels and expectations. Students at early stages need direct guidance but students who have progressed further can handle more independent work. The concept of developmental supervision by Ali, Watson, and Dhingra (2016) supports this finding because it shows that supervisory styles and approaches should adapt to students' academic development.

4.2 Supervisees' Satisfaction with the Supervisory Styles

The second theme discusses the satisfaction of students with the supervisory styles. Typically, several students reported high satisfaction with the supervisory styles. For example, Fahad appeared somewhat satisfied with the supervision received, but would benefit from more targeted support, particularly for the more difficult aspects of academic writing for publication. Fahad found the his supervisor to be "informative and helpful" during the thesis journey. In particular, the supervisor helped provide "guidance on categorizing data" and "identifying appropriate journals to target for publication". However, Fahad reported struggles with certain sections of the thesis writing process, particularly the literature review and discussion sections, where he had "difficulty linking his findings to the existing research".

Similarly, Mustafa appeared moderately satisfied with the supervision he received, but expressed the need for a more dedicated time to focus on the thesis without competing coursework demands. The supervisor seemed to be providing "useful guidance", but he could potentially improve by discussing all sections of the thesis, including the discussion. During the time of writing his thesis, Mustafa had been meeting regularly with his supervisor, which he described as "perfect for now."

Hussain had a generally positive experience with his thesis supervision, with a few challenges. For instance, Hussain experienced the writing process to be an "exciting journey" and a "good experience", indicating overall satisfaction. He received comments and feedback from the supervisor on all sections of the thesis, supported with regular meetings to discuss the progress of the thesis, indicating good communication and support from the supervisor. However, Hussain mentioned there had been a delay in receiving final comments from the supervisor after completing the full thesis draft, as Hussain was still waiting for the thesis to be published.

Reem seemed very satisfied with the thesis supervision provided by their supervisor. The supervisor had been very helpful and supportive from the very beginning of the graduate program. The supervisor also "encouraged" Reem to publish her first paper and present it at a conference. This suggests that the supervisor actively mentored the student in academic writing and publishing.

On the other hand, Amal expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the supervision she received from her supervisor. She felt unsupported, lacked meaningful feedback on her work, and was planning to seek alternative solutions, like "finding a second supervisor to get the guidance" she needed. Furthermore, Amal said that the feedback she received in the past from her supervisor had been very vague, just "words" like "what do you mean?" with no clear guidance. This suggests a significant issue with the quality and adequacy of the thesis supervision provided.

Rawan seemed not very satisfied with the thesis supervision she ~~is~~ was receiving from her supervisor. Rawan found the written feedback

and comments from her supervisor "*unclear and difficult to understand*". Although the supervisor provided some basic guidance, the supervisor did not offer more substantive support or explanations about Rawan's writing process and progress.

Finally, Nada did not appear very satisfied with the level of supervision and support she was receiving from her thesis supervisor. She expressed a need for more guidance, feedback, and training on academic writing and publication. For instance, Nada mentioned that she had been "*suffering*" and "*haven't received much feedback or guidance*". The supervisor just said the overall work is "*good*" without providing more detailed feedback. Also, Nada reported that when she asked for recommendations on good journals to publish in, the supervisor directed her to ask other professors instead of providing that guidance directly.

The participants used several linguistic features to express satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and hesitation in their narratives about their supervision experiences. For instance, Reem used the following strategies as signs of satisfaction: positive statements (i.e., "*I already published a paper*", "*I find it not easy, not difficult in between.*"), enthusiasm (i.e., "*I think it's great*"), and confidence: "*Now, I think I can provide answers as long as I understand the whole thing.*" As for dissatisfaction, expressing uncertainty is common. Amal used phrases like "*I can't really remember*", "*I don't know*", and "*I think*" to express uncertainty. Amal also used words like "*lost*", "*didn't like*", and "*really bad feedback*" to describe her supervision experience. Lastly, the participants used several hesitation strategies, such as filler words ("*let's say*", "*uh*"), which indicate the student is thinking or unsure. Rephrasing is another strategy, "*I'm not saying that it is difficult, but how to conclude the paper.*" Mustafa used qualifiers like "*uh*", "*like*", and "*I mean*" to express hesitation. Overall, the linguistic features highlight a mix of positive and negative sentiments about their supervision experience.

The level of satisfaction that supervisees experience during their thesis supervision directly depends on their perceptions of their supervisors' supervisory styles. Graduate students achieve higher satisfaction when their supervisors use supervisory styles that address both academic requirements and emotional needs (Gu et al., 2015). Supervisees in the Saudi context seem to prefer supervisory styles and approaches that combine structured guidance with interpersonal support (Alshehry, 2020). These supervisory styles minimize unclear expectations while building trust relationships and making supervisors more accessible to their students. The satisfaction level of students decreases when they receive minimal feedback and lack support from their supervisors. Students who experience this type of supervision often become confused while facing delays and developing increased academic stress (Alabdulaziz, 2020). The satisfaction of supervisees depends on both academic results and the quality of communication, along with the clarity of roles and emotional climate that their supervisors create. The postgraduate research experience will improve when supervisory practices match the expectations of supervisees.

4.3 The Relationship Supervisory Styles Perceived and Students' Satisfaction

The results demonstrated that graduate students' perceptions of their supervisors' styles directly influenced their thesis supervision satisfaction levels. This relationship is evident in the case of Fahad, where he mentioned that his supervisor was generally cooperative in areas like journal classification and scope. However, he expressed a desire for more direct support, particularly in writing sections he found challenging, like literature review and discussion. In the case of Amal, key points such as lack of timely and substantive feedback suggest that the supervisory style of the current supervisor is contributing to the student's low level of satisfaction with the thesis supervision she received. The student felt the need to seek out additional supervisory support elsewhere to get the guidance she required. The combination of structured academic guidance with interpersonal support in supervisory styles produces higher student satisfaction according to Gatfield (2005) and Alshehry (2020). Students felt more satisfied when their supervisors maintained availability for meetings and provided prompt feedback while showing active interest in their academic progress and emotional health. Students demonstrated dissatisfaction when they perceived their supervisors as distant or inconsistent or when they displayed overly rigid contractual styles or laissez-faire approaches. The results indicate that student satisfaction depends on both academic competence and the quality of their relationships with their supervisors. The relationship between students' expectations and supervisory actions determines how students feel about their research success and their motivation and confidence levels (Alabdulaziz, 2020). The study further demonstrates that graduate students need responsive and adaptive supervision to achieve a positive educational experience.

The interpretation of Saudi graduate student experiences in the present study can be better understood within the broader sociocultural and geopolitical contexts that affect supervisory relationships in Global South countries with high power-distance cultures. The practice of graduate supervision exists within power structures which combine institutional culture with hierarchical systems and authority dynamics (Le et al., 2021; Manathunga, 2007).

In high power-distance societies such as Saudi Arabia, the supervisor holds a higher authority. This position may create an environment where students feel less likely to challenge their decisions or negotiate their roles. The Western contexts, such as Canada and the UK, follows different supervision models which focus on collaborative work, student autonomy, and feedback exchange (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). Therefore, the way Saudi students view supervisory styles depends on both their supervisors' individual choices and the institutional and cultural expectations of their environment.

In addition, several studies from the Global South have highlighted that limited resources, heavy teaching responsibilities, and insufficient supervisor training have shaped supervision practices in universities rather than pedagogical frameworks. The institutional barriers within the system create situations where students receive unstructured or irregular supervision which stems from institutional limitations rather than supervisor failure.

5. Conclusions

The study investigated the perceptions of Saudi graduate students on supervisory styles and expectations. Gatfield's framework indicated different supervisory styles by participants, including the contractual (high structure, high support), followed by the Laissez-faire style (low support, low structure). Other participants also experienced Pastoral (low structure, high support) and Directorial (high structure, low support). A majority of participants expressed their satisfaction with the thesis supervision they received, although a few students reported some challenges and a low level of satisfaction.

The study provides several practical implications for both graduate students and their supervisors. Students are required to establish clear communication with their supervisors, where they discuss their preferred supervisory styles and expectations. A clear understanding of this supervisory process can help students navigate the supervision relationship more effectively. Supervisors must adopt a flexible and responsive supervisory style and approach to accommodate individual students' preferences, rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all model. Supervisors can enhance the supervision experience by providing opportunities for regular dialogue, timely feedback, and emotional and academic support. Supervisors should create personalized supervision plans that specify communication protocols, academic targets, and procedures for managing delays and academic difficulties. Supervisors need to evaluate their supervisory style using frameworks like Gatfield's to determine whether their styles lean more toward laissez-faire, pastoral, directorial, or contractual and make appropriate changes for different student needs. In addition, institutions can offer orientation programs and training sessions that help both students and supervisors set their roles and expectations to establish an engaging relationship. Mid-program evaluations are critical to ensure continuous quality, which allow students to provide secure feedback to trigger immediate interventions when needed. Furthermore, the implementation of promotion criteria, excellence awards, and teaching load reductions serves as a method to motivate supervisors through recognition and reward programs. Supervisors should not bear the entire responsibility of supervision because institutions need to establish comprehensive support systems which include writing centers, peer mentoring programs, and discipline-specific workshops. These strategies will create supervisory practices that promote fairness and responsiveness and achieve institutional targets and student satisfaction goals.

There were several limitations in the study. First, the study adopted a one-sided approach with only supervisees' perceptions of supervisory styles, hence blinding the exposure to supervisory dynamics. While the study provided student-centered insights into their experiences, it excluded the supervisors' perspectives on their supervisory experiences, including roles, intentions, and constraints. Future research could involve the perceptions of supervisors to provide a comprehensive picture of the supervisory relationship in graduate instruction and potential mismatches in expectations. The study sample consisted of only M.A. students enrolled in a TESOL program, which provided depth and contextual specificity in Saudi Arabia. However, the limited sample size and disciplinary scope constrain the generalizability of the findings. Including students from a wider spectrum of disciplines in future research could offer richer insights and improve the relevance of the results throughout graduate programs. Finally, the study used narrative inquiry to investigate student perceptions, which may limit the ability to generalize findings across larger populations. Future recommendations could employ mixed-methods strategies to combine the generalizability of quantitative analysis with the depth of qualitative data, allowing for triangulation of study findings. This would enable a more complete knowledge of graduate education's supervising policies and expectations.

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