



## IRANIAN PH.D. CANDIDATES' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD THEIR SUPERVISORS' RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACTIVITIES

Farzad Rostami*	Department of English Language, Baneh Branch, Islamic Azad University, Baneh, Iran	<a href="mailto:Farzadr79@gmail.com">Farzadr79@gmail.com</a>
Mohammad Hossein Yousefi	Department of English Language, Bonab Branch, Islamic Azad University, Bonab, Iran	<a href="mailto:Mhh.yousefi@gmail.com">Mhh.yousefi@gmail.com</a>

\* Corresponding author

### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The present qualitative study examined the perceptions of Iranian Ph.D. candidates toward the responsibilities and activities that supervisors should take during the dissertation writing.
Background	Writing the dissertation is the main concern for Ph.D. candidates. In the view of doctorate students, supervisors are the main contributors to establishing a well-prepared dissertation.
Methodology	To this end, 15 Ph.D. candidates who either graduated recently or were about to have their viva sessions participated in the study. The data were collected through phone interviews as well as narrative inquiry. The current study adopted the mentorship model as its theoretical framework. The framework is well suited because the supervisors as mentors and persons that are more competent transfer their experience and knowledge to the supervisees as less competent students. The multiple case study has been applied as the design of the current study. Geared toward the objectives of the qualitative study, the data analysis process embraced Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach.
Contribution	The study has a number of theoretical and practical implications for both supervisors of Ph.D. students as well as teacher educators.
Findings	The authors presented and discussed their perceived themes, and they consented to the following four major themes: practicality, professionalism, emotional engagement, and career traits.

Accepting Editor Norma J. Turner | Received: May 21, 2021 | Revised: August, 3, 2021, January 5, February 5, 2022 | Accepted: May 17, 2022.

Cite as: Rostami, F. & Yousefi, M. H. (2022). Iranian Ph.D. candidates' perceptions toward their supervisors' responsibilities and activities. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 17, 227-241. <https://doi.org/10.28945/4974>

(CC BY-NC 4.0) This article is licensed to you under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). When you copy and redistribute this paper in full or in part, you need to provide proper attribution to it to ensure that others can later locate this work (and to ensure that others do not accuse you of plagiarism). You may (and we encourage you to) adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any non-commercial purposes. This license does not permit you to use this material for commercial purposes.

Recommendations for Practitioners	To ease the burden of writing a Ph.D. dissertation and to soothe the stress of Ph.D. candidates' experience, supervisors should take the responsibility for their task of supervision by providing moment-by-moment care and guidance to their students.
Recommendations for Researchers	The researchers utilized the two instruments of telephone interviews and narrations to collect data. It is suggested that other sources of data collection like observations and focus group interviews be included to gain further conceptions of the attendants. The researchers interviewed the dissertation writer in various majors; however, the topic was not questioned. It is recommended to evaluate the extent of the supervisor's interest in the topic on the success rate of the project.
Impact on Society	The present study revealed that students have different and varying needs and expectations of their supervisors. To meet these needs, supervisors should ask their students to submit a weekly report of their work as well as possible problems and questions.
Future Research	The findings were based on the Ph.D. candidates' perspectives; it is recommended that future research include the voices of the supervisors, too, particularly the supervisors of the same supervisees.
Keywords	Ph.D. program, Ph.D. candidate, supervisor, supervision, mentorship

## INTRODUCTION

---

Similar to all over the world (Wellington, 2013), the Ph.D. program is gaining popularity in Iran. Many graduate students apply for the program each year in Iran. Perhaps the most demanding task in front of Iranian Ph.D. students is the writing of their dissertations. To do so, they can choose one or two supervisors to provide them with directions on how to write their dissertations and publish two Web of Science (WOS)<sup>1</sup>-based papers as partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Generally, doctoral students prepare themselves for the role of teacher education faculty member (Gardner, 2007; Reich & Reich, 2006), disciplinary stewardship to be an effective teacher (Golde & Walker, 2006; Lawson, 2016), and developing a relative identity (Gregory et al., 2017). As a result, individuals attend Ph.D. courses to learn the knowledge and skills required to be an effective teacher educator as well as a moral compass relative to prioritizing the advancement of the discipline over personal success (Lawson, 2016).

Telegram is regarded as a cloud-based instant messaging software for content discussion in which the participants feel free to express themselves (Cohen et al., 2017). The polls on some Telegram channels, whose members are Ph.D. students and researchers, reveal that many Iranian Ph.D. candidates are dissatisfied with their supervisors in that they devote little time to their students. The candidates also assert that their supervisors are not cognitively and emotionally involved in the demanding and challenging task of writing dissertations, submitting two required papers, and publishing the papers in internationally recognized journals. Altogether, these factors leave a heavy burden on the shoulders of Ph.D. students in the Iranian context. Motivated by these problems, the present qualitative study aims to explore Iranian Ph.D. candidates' views on the supervisors' responsibilities and activities. The analysis of such attitudes contributes to developing doctoral courses, improving the quality of

---

<sup>1</sup> WOS (previously known as Web of Knowledge) is a website that provides subscription-based access to multiple databases that provide comprehensive citation data for many different academic disciplines. It was originally produced by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and is currently maintained by Clarivate Analytics, previously the Intellectual Property and Science business of Thomson Reuters (Wikipedia, 2020).

the supervision, raising supervisors' awareness of their duties, and prompting the way of reassigning knowledge and competency from the supervisors to the supervisees.

Some studies have probed various aspects of supervisor positioning; for example, student engagement with supervisor feedback can clear the hurdle of the knowledge gap between the supervisor and the students (Zheng et al., 2019); both supervisors and students are required to lessen the anxiety by raising the awareness to view the expertise as a part of the academic life (Casanave, 2018); and the way non-indigenous students interact with their doctoral supervisors are "always colored by supervision's socio-historical circumstances" (Grant & McKinley, 2011, p. 385). However, rare studies have concentrated on the expectations and thoughts of Ph.D. candidates on the supervisors of their dissertations. Thus, the current research investigated the students' perceptions of their supervisors' duties during the dissertation supervision.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

---

Writing the doctoral dissertation, for all Ph.D. candidates, is a hard task at first glance. Students start the project referring to their experiences and hoping for their supervisor's assistance in accordance with their expectations. Since doctoral students work outside the campus, they value interaction with their supervisors outside the classroom (Skyrme, 2010). Different studies have investigated different aspects and dimensions of Ph.D. students and their supervisors' relationships. For example, a study by Filippou (2019) on Finnish master students, who mostly expanded their activities in a social setting, indicated that the supervisor's responsiveness and cultural awareness were the main expectations of students. Experience is among the key elements of the expectations that can be considered to quicken the pace of the process of writing the dissertation. Similarly, Prøitz and Wittek (2019) explored the experiences of candidates and supervisors in doctoral programs in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Their study drew on empirical data from interviews, survey data, and document analysis. The outcomes demonstrated that the new graduate doctoral students can make better connections among other researchers and between theory and practice. The study also showed how doctoral programs are plagued by structural, organizational, and conceptual vagueness; tensions embedded in the theory-practice dimension are left to the candidates to be solved.

Tension is inevitable and students expect the supervisor to defuse it through cognitive interaction with the supervisors. Casanave's (2002) study revealed how a first-year doctoral student experienced tensions about ways of knowledge production and representation (i.e., practical or theoretical/abstract) between herself and a course instructor as they were in an imbalanced power relationship, which resulted in her drop-out from the program. The activities and interactions that doctoral students expect can be met through the tight relationships between students and supervisors. In another study, Li's (2006) qualitative case study revealed how a doctoral student negotiated power relations with his supervisors and journal gatekeepers in the draft-by-draft manuscript writing process. Notably, it has been found (Halbert, 2015) that students perceive supervision to be of high quality when supervisors are available, approachable, responsive, and supportive. Ives and Rowley (2005), for example, reported that good interpersonal working relationships between supervisors and their Ph.D. students were associated with good progress and student satisfaction.

In recent research, Baydarova et al. (2021) found that students' expectations are implicit and they want to receive the necessary skills to graduate on time, whilst supervisors expect students to focus more on publishing papers. The doctoral students were not satisfied with the instructions and stayed demotivated to publish the papers. These, and many other studies, probed the supervisors' and supervisees' needs and expectations based on interviews of both sides. The current qualitative study emphasizes that Ph.D. candidates' performance is improved if the supervisors are aware of the students' expectations (Phillips & Pugh, 2000). In light of the past studies and the current evidence, this research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do doctoral students perceive their supervisors' duties?
2. What are Ph.D. students' expectations and preferences from their supervisors?

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

---

The adopted theoretical framework for the present study is the mentorship model (Olsson, 2008). It is defined as an exchange of knowledge and experience between mentor and mentee (Olsson, 2008). A similarity that should be mentioned is that both mentorship and supervision entail meetings between a competent and experienced person and a person with less competence and knowledge (Arnesson & Albinsson, 2017). A mentor is a person who contributes with her/his knowledge, experience, and perspectives; the basic idea is that the mentor gives the mentee guidance in their personal and professional development (Sawazky & Enns, 2009). Supervisees, as mentees, expect to receive knowledge and experience from their supervisors as mentors. The interaction may provide access to professional resources (Pearson & Kayrooz, 2004) and include an emotional connection (Pearson & Brew, 2002).

Although mentors need training to be qualified, the supervisors in the Iran context, contrary to Kiley's (2011) observations, do not receive any training or predefined model of instruction. Thus supervisors play a supportive role to communicate socially with mentees. The learning that we focus on is in line with Lave and Wenger's (1991) reasoning; that is, mentorship takes place in social interaction between the mentee and the mentor, learning is seen as a participation in a community, and the individual always learns something in interaction with others. The learning situation in a mentor program can, from the point of view of Lave and Wenger (1991), be defined as a relationship between a newcomer and an old-timer. This suggests that learning is an active and social process taking place in a sociocultural practice. Transferred to mentorship, learning is seen as both an actor and a social process in a meeting between a newcomer and an old-timer. A central part of the meeting is to talk about practical work, professional identity, artifacts, and theoretical understanding (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Transferred to the mentor program, the student is the novice who meets and talks with the contact person/mentor; that is, the expert. Accordingly, in the current research, supervisees as mentees are in social interaction with their mentors, and learning is happening as a result. The doctoral students, as newcomers, are learning from their supervisors as the old-timers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

---

Studying a doctoral course in Iranian universities is only possible through entrance exams as well as interviews. Many students take part in the exam; however, not all of the participants succeed in entering the program. The course is demanding and needs two years of class participation and taking a comprehensive exam. Then the students are required to choose their supervisors. The topic of the dissertation needs to be approved by both Irandoc (a website that prevents the students from redoing the same project) and the concerned department of the study. There are not any training courses for the dissertation supervisors, and the supervisors act based on their own experiences and expertise in their area of interest. There is no center to evaluate the supervisors' performance nor to receive the students' viewpoints and probable complaints about the probable negligence of the supervisors.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

This qualitative study utilized a multiple case study approach (Yin, 2003) as 12 Ph.D. candidates in receipt of supervision, and three newly Ph.D. graduates participated in this research. The participants were selected purposefully to represent different demographics, genders, and majors (Hamilton et al., 2018). To achieve validation, interviews with participants continued until data saturation had been attained rather than the number of the attendants (Morse, 2015). A threat to the validity of any qualitative study is to have a sample size so large that it exceeds the ability of researchers to conduct the intensive analysis of particulars which is the hallmark of excellent qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2006, p. 23).

To give rigor and validation to the findings, three participants were purposefully selected among recently graduated students from the doctoral course. A total number of fifteen attendants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality (Lichtman, 2006). Table 1 is an overview of the participants.

**Table 1. An overview of the demographic information of the participants**

Row	Pseudonym	Gender	Major	Status
1	Ali	Male	Applied Linguistics	Doctoral Graduate
2	Dana	Male	IT	Ph.D. Candidate
3	Eli	Female	Curriculum Development	Ph.D. Candidate
4	Hadi	Male	Computer Science	Ph.D. Candidate
5	Halin	Female	Applied Linguistics	Ph.D. Candidate
6	Hezha	Male	Social Studies	Ph.D. Candidate
7	Kazhal	Female	Educational Management	Ph.D. Candidate
8	Kochar	Male	Public Management	Ph.D. Candidate
9	Komar	Male	Applied linguistics	Ph.D. Candidate
11	Nasim	Female	Applied Linguistics	Doctoral Graduate
12	Nava	Female	Public Management	Ph.D. Candidate
13	Rebaz	Male	Governmental Management	Doctoral Graduate
14	Shabbu	Female	Applied Mathematics	Ph.D. Candidate
15	Taha	Male	Sociology	Ph.D. Candidate

### ***DATA COLLECTION***

To achieve the triangulation of the data (Howe & Stubbs, 2003), and strengthen the findings and conclusions (Merriam, 1998), the researchers conducted telephone interviews and asked the participants to narrate their stories as the primary tools for collecting the data. Selecting a telephone interview was due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the threat of spreading the virus during a face-to-face interview. Telephone interviewing is attractive as it costs less, and is performed more quickly (Shuy, 2003). As a merit of the telephone interview, the researchers were able to select the participants from a broader population without traveling as well as doing the interview with them at their convenient time. For ethical consideration, informed consent was obtained from the participants and after data collection, the whole interviews were transcribed and presented to the interviewees. The interviewees agreed on the responsibility for the content. The researchers were assured that the interviewees did not suffer any hearing impairment problems during the call. Each semi-structured interview lasted for approximately 25 minutes (Frey, 2004). For narrations, and to respect the participants' convenience and privacy, they were asked to record some remarkable stories during the process of dissertation writing and forward their recordings via the WhatsApp application. The stories were required to be noticeable in the way of (de)motivating, inspiring, and so forth. All the interviews were digitally recorded by the recording applications that were installed on the phones. The data were transcribed verbatim and sent to the interviewees via email to confirm the data. Two of the participants received extra calls for more clarifications after the transcription. The basic interview questions are presented in the Appendix.

## ***DATA ANALYSIS AND TRUSTWORTHINESS***

Geared toward the objectives of the qualitative study, the data analysis process embraced Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach. In order to establish inter-coder reliability (Armstrong et al., 1997), each researcher labeled and coded the transcribed interviews and the narrations individually. The authors presented and discussed their perceived themes, and then they consented to four major themes: *Practicality*, *Professionalism*, *Emotional Engagement*, and *Career Traits*. Microsoft Excel 2010 was used to help the researchers code and identify themes (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). As far as the interviewees were aware of the qualitative research, the emerged themes were discussed with the interviewees, which contributes to increasing the credibility of the findings in the current study. To enhance the trustworthiness, and as far as the participants demonstrated their consent and willingness to do that, the data were member-checked to verify their accuracy (Creswell, 1994). It also prompted the participants' willingness to contribute to the interpretation of the data (Sandelowski, 2006) after they were asked to share their viewpoints on the developed themes.

Locke and Ramakrishna Velamuri (2009) pointed out that sharing work with participants relates to both the corrections and changes that will increase the credibility of a study. Also, Maxwell (2013) highlighted eight strategies that refer to the "credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sorts of account" (p. 122). Respondent validation is the one in which the participant gives feedback on his/her view.

## **RESULTS**

---

The findings of the study explore the doctoral students' perceptions toward the supervisors' responsibilities and qualities. The collected data from Ph.D. candidates and recent graduates through telephone interviews and narrations led to the emerging four main themes of *Practicality* (the practices which the supervisors are required to perform), *Professionalism* (the current professional identity that supervisors hold), *Emotional Enjoyment* (the interrelationship with supervisors), and *Career Traits* (the collaboration among colleagues at the same department). The themes represent the practices that the doctoral students expect their supervisors to enact or not to enact during their supervision.

### ***THEME 1: PRACTICALITY***

The theme of *practicality* refers not only to the actions that the supervisors are expected to do but also to the actions they are expected to avoid. It was apparent during the in-depth interviews and stories that methodology is a section that the interviewees were greatly concerned about, especially the collection of the data. Nasim narrated her story of the first practice of data collection:

*Once I referred to my supervisor's office to check the interview questions, he asked me to collect the data at that moment. He asked his students to cooperate and reply to my interview questions. Then he gave me some pieces of advice on how to act them. He supervised me while doing the interview and gave me some clues on how to manage an in-depth interview.*

Nasim claimed that her supervisor had genuinely known that students would act poorly in collecting the data. Since a fine data collection leads to better data analysis, the supervisor taught her how to catch ` pointed out:

*I have mailed the interview questions to my supervisor to check whether or not they are appropriate to be inquired. I waited a week, but I did not receive any response. I texted a message to him, but there was no reply from him again. I called him, again, he did answer my call. These problems happened many times; thus, I had no other way other than doing the interview and collecting the data. I was worried about the validity of data collection and data analysis.*

Shabbu, in line with other interviewees, complained bitterly about the irresponsibility of the supervisor and his/her lack of actions and directions. She was amazed by the way that the supervisor performed toward her dissertation. She thought the supervisors got paid to lead the Ph.D. candidates

during their project; however, most of the supervisors did not care about the duties that they must do. She knows this is a threat to successful completion, as during the viva there would be the possibility that examiners question the reliability and validity of the findings and analysis. Hezha, a Ph.D. candidate in social studies, is dissatisfied with the supervisor of his dissertation. He rebuked his supervisor for not following his doctoral project during the last four months. He felt lonely in doing the dissertation and hoped the supervisor had an obligation to follow the process of doing such an important academic assignment.

### ***THEME 2: PROFESSIONALISM***

The *professionalism* theme emerged from the data which highlighted the expertise of the supervisors as crucial to the students' success. One of the main codes for the current theme was the professional identity of the supervisor that can attract the journal editor's attention to accept the papers easier. Kazhal was clearly aware of the fact that publishing a paper is the most challenging phase of the viva stage and graduation. She commented that if the supervisor is among known authors, the journals' editorial boards eased the process of reviewing the papers to be published. The candidate mentioned some of her friends whose dissertations were written but were unable to publish any articles as a prior requirement for graduation. For her, the supervisor must be a distinguished scholar and direct the students on how to publish articles in the right journals.

Komar discerned the expertise in methodology as a key quality of the supervisor. He recounted:

*After I chose the topic of the dissertation, I was puzzled among several articles and books and did not know how to start. I referred to the supervisor and asked him to issue the instructions on how to begin. He just asked me to replicate similar published papers and theses. After a short negotiation, the supervisor advised some data collection instruments and software for data analysis. He declared that he was professional in the quantitative method and could not help with the qualitative approach. It was disgusting to think about the data analysis in qualitative research without the supervisor's support.*

Elicitation of the right meaning from the data for Komar, a Ph.D. candidate in applied linguistics, was crucial but hard to achieve. He expected a doctoral supervisor to be efficient and in a position to lead the students on the right path of doing the research. He noted that doing qualitative research on topics relating to humanities studies required in-depth interviews and exploring the way people perceive the investigating phenomena. Consequently, the supervisors must be well equipped to cope with doctoral students' difficulties during their dissertation.

Taha believed that experience played an active role in the process of doing the research. He stated that experience is beyond literacy that could both facilitate and accelerate the process of performing the research. He stated that he could finish the dissertation in due time and publish a paper simultaneously provided that his supervisor had enough experience in leading him on what to do and when to do with the material. He stated:

*Since publishing WOS-based papers is time-consuming, the supervisors could direct me to step forward in the way of publishing the papers prior to revising and editing the whole dissertation and engaging in its bureaucratic process.*

As the Ph.D. candidates need to spend weeks engaging in some bureaucratic issues, Taha felt that he was losing time. He could work on the paper and submit it, then during the review process of the article, he could engage in the official activities required by the university. He charged the supervisor with such problems as neglecting such a considerable issue.

### ***THEME 3: EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT***

*Emotional engagement* was the most prominent theme that emerged from several codes like feelings, support, responsible, intimacy, and so forth. Ali, a recent graduate student, stressed that a supervisor must be more effective than cognitive. He commented:

*I had done most parts of the dissertation, and then I extract an article for publication. I emailed it to the supervisor and asked him to submit it as a corresponding author. He asked me to do it myself, but I reminded him it is a rule the supervisors are required to submit papers. However, he requested me to use his username and password and submit it on his behalf. It was my first time, and I needed his help, but he did not do anything. Two months after submission, the editor rejected it. I informed him, but he just asked me for another journal. He did not even comment on the paper on how to improve it. Two more times, it was rejected, and I was about to resign from my Ph.D. course forever. He did not help reduce my stress during the viva session.*

Ali ascertained that his supervisor was widely blamed for his irresponsibility and ineffectiveness by other students as well. He put the fault on the supervisor that his Ph.D. course took six years to be finished. He added if the supervisor calmed him after paper rejections and supported him by checking the reviewers' comments, and directing him in the right way, he could have finished his course sooner and found a better job.

Nava, a Ph.D. candidate in public management, admired her supervisor as a supportive person who established an intimate atmosphere with her. She remarked that two years of interactions with her supervisor made them members of the same family, siblings. He was supportive of both cognitive and affective modes. After the first submission, he recommended she should be prepared for rejection more than acceptance of the paper. When the paper was rejected after the initial review, he asked me to consider the reviewers' comments and not to lose my energy on negative signals of rejection as it happened to each Ph.D. candidate during the research.

Eli, a Ph.D. candidate in Curriculum Development, expected her supervisor to be up to date in using the last communication media in order to ease the way of interaction. She told the interviewer that he used Telegram and WhatsApp applications, but never read our messages. He was modern in using the applications; however, he was irresponsible and ineffective in paying attention to several messages that we sent to him. Eli added that the supervisor was not concerned about our project, and we had to meet him on the days that we were assured he was teaching at university. Nevertheless, when we referred him to evaluate our progress, he merely pointed out that a doctoral student must find ways of finishing the dissertation.

#### ***THEME 4: CAREER TRAITS***

The participants mentioned some extra features in the supervisors that led to the emerging *Career Traits* theme. Rebaz, a doctoral graduate in Governmental Management, recalled a situation in which students were the casualties of the disputes among the professors of the same department. He remarked:

*When I was about to defend my proposal, the internal examiner raised many questions and criticized my work. He rejected my proposal because my supervisor both was in disagreement with him and once criticized the novelty of the proposal of one of his students. It took one more month for me to revise my proposal according to the examiner's demands.*

Rebaz mentioned that close and tight relationships among colleagues contribute to the development of the course, particularly Ph.D. courses. He anticipated the supervisor to be gentle enough and cooperative with other professors so that the students, as future professors, learn from their manner rather than be a victim of the supervisors' conflicts. He believes, however, that some supervisors hold neither manner nor method in their educational and classroom environment.

Halin preferred to work with a young supervisor rather than an old one. She pointed out that: *although the old professors are more experienced, the young ones are more energetic*. She thought if a supervisor were young, he would find more ways of coping with the project and become less tired while the old ones were often tired of spending time with Ph.D. students and commenting on their projects. In addition, a young supervisor may be more modern and more understanding of the young students.

Hadi's remarks were in agreement with Halin's. Hadi stated that he was more comfortable with a young supervisor and found some shared interests with him. Talking about shared passions, for Hadi, makes the environment more intimate with the supervisor; consequently, he felt more comfortable solving the problems that are raised during the research. He commented:

*Sometimes we talk about the recent and beneficiary mobile applications that are more related to education, for example, dictionaries or office and reader applications. It makes us more intimate and comfortable with more inquiry. He has always been available when I call him, if not, the supervisor calls me back. Feeling like a friend with the supervisor facilitates and speeds up communication and solving the rising problems.*

Hadi, a Ph.D. candidate in computer sciences, is satisfied with his project due to the desired trait of the supervisor; intimate and easy to access. He knows many doctoral students cannot make remarkable progress in writing their dissertations due to the fact their supervisors are difficult to access via telephone, email, or meeting in their offices. He mentioned he would not make considerable improvement in his dissertation if he had to work with such supervisors.

## DISCUSSION

---

Although the relationship between students and supervisors have been studied, none of them, to the best of our knowledge, achieved the data through qualitative research and utilized narratives and in-depth interview as the key tools for data collection. Besides, the findings of the current research were gained through interviews with the students in humanities and social studies majors in which a supervisor-student dyad is critical. The results represent the qualities that are expected to be held by the supervisors. The features and traits are reflected in the Ph.D. candidates' viewpoints.

Notably, our results confirm Halbert's (2015) findings that students perceive supervision to be of high quality when supervisors are available, approachable, responsive, and supportive. The interviewees' remarks are in accordance with Heath (2002) that supervisors play a significant role in students' success if they provide time and expertise to promote the Ph.D. candidate's capabilities, especially with regard to methodology. The candidates were more willing to receive quality comments instead of meeting their supervisors; however, they declared that fostering supervisor-doctoral interpersonal relationships is vital to producing a standard dissertation (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). The relationship can be expanded into the two dimensions of content and relationship messages (Mainhard et al., 2009). Relationship, according to the utilized theoretical framework of mentorship, also can be shaped as a social interaction between the supervisor as a mentor and the Ph.D. candidate as a mentee and is one of the key tenets of the model theory.

The core expectations of the attendants went around the roles of the supervisors: directing the students during the project and giving feedback on the quality, which Murphy et al. (2007) refer to as the dual roles of assessor and guide. Their findings are in line with the interviewees' expectations in which they anticipate the supervisors to control the process of doing the research and be task-focused. The Ph.D. candidates are expected to be considered newcomers by the supervisors that are well placed as old-timers (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The doctoral dissertation writers and perhaps their supervisors are exercising the actions of better writing; therefore, their performances cause stress and anxiety. This matter does not relate to only non-English speakers; even Anglophone doctoral students working in their first language are not protected from these challenges (Hyland, 2016). The source of difficulty mainly traces back to receiving no training during their educational course. Most of the universities that hold Ph.D. courses in Iran do not consider the doctoral dissertations as performances in knowledge construction, but only as products to be wrapped well and delivered to examiners in the viva session (Starke-Meyerring et al., 2014). It is a fact that academic departments cannot turn graduate students into real experts during their Ph.D. courses, but they can help them to be aware that their demanding learning must be

ongoing to perform like experts (Casanave, 2018). Since the doctoral student is not trained as expertise nor is supported emotionally and effectively, they feel more anxiety during the process of writing the dissertation. These issues are perceived as the sources of attrition among doctoral students.

Supervisors, mostly, ignore the major concerns of the supervisees during the project and Casanave (2018) regards this behavior as an unethical matter. The analysis of theme three, emotional engagement, asserted that a successful supervisor is both people-focused and task-focused, and supports students intellectually, emotionally, and structurally (Vilkinas, 2008). The students believed younger supervisors are more committed and responsible for the allocated duties. They assumed the older supervisors are less modern and held fewer interests in common. Thus, the interviewees feel more comfortable while posing questions and expressing feelings.

## CONCLUSION

---

Our study aimed at understanding the accountabilities of supervision that contribute to the promotion of students' doctoral works. The qualitative study has an advantage in that it comprises data from students majoring in different disciplines through in-depth interviews and narration. The emergent themes directed the researchers to tease out the Ph.D. candidates' perceptions of their supervisors' responsibilities, virtuous traits, and full-fledged performances. The researchers gave their consent to utilize mentorship as the best conceptual framework because it focuses on the exchange of knowledge and interaction between the dissertation writers and the supervisors.

Only a few dissertation writers were satisfied with their supervisors' performance. They generally considered the tasks that the supervisors are expected to act. The supervisors interacted with the students on how to start the project, provided them with related resources like articles, held regular meetings or gave regular feedback, followed the progress of projects, and acted effectively as well. On the other hand, many dissertation writers were dissatisfied with their supervisors. The students identified the actions that the supervisors were expected to refrain from doing. Supervisors, in the view of the students who were dissatisfied with them, rarely interacted with the students and avoided replying to messages. Submitting papers, as a common publish or perish (Lee, 2014) discourse, is the duty of the supervisors, but they were rarely helpful on this point. In addition, they were not concerned with the scientific and emotional situations of the students.

The supervisees were willing to learn from the supervisors in a reciprocal process (Regan, 2012). The learning occurred from the expert supervisors through developing both the individual relationship and the project (Roberts & Seaman, 2018). The mentees declared they could exercise agency (Rostami & Yousefi, 2020) and learn academic issues from the mentors who held the potentiality of enough expertise in the working topic. However, in the view of the participants except three out of fifteen who called their supervisor a full-fledged person, they did not learn what they anticipated to learn. These points were continuously mentioned as a threat to attrition.

## IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the supervisees' attitudes highlights the significance of more collaborative and learning events for supervisors by holding formal supervising courses. The faculty team of the college must be aware of the place of publication of the papers as they contribute to shaping the values of students (Yuan & Yang, 2020) and the department to which they affiliate. Thus, the course designers are required to put the right materials in the expertise courses so that the supervisors would be obliged to support the dissertation writers cognitively and effectively. Moreover, Colleges must provide the background for the doctoral students to raise their awareness of research. Supervisors and supervisees need to track their reflection on the dissertation writing project to discuss the challenges, enact agency to meet the practices, and adjust their practices to benefit their academic research in a learning environment.

The current study raises our understanding as teacher educators as to how to educate committed and expert supervisors. The study shows that Ph.D. candidates experience demanding and adverse conditions due to some sort of undue attention to their academic needs in writing their dissertations. The study also raises our understating of how Iranian Ph.D. dissertations take responsibility for their supervision task and how they establish relationships with their Ph.D. students as well as what Ph.D. students expect their supervisors to do and what types of personality traits they should possess.

The study suggests that to ease the burden of writing a Ph.D. dissertation and to soothe the stress of Ph.D. candidates' experience, supervisors should take the responsibility for their task of supervision by providing moment-by-moment care and guidance to their students. It was well evident that the task of writing a Ph.D. dissertation in the Iranian context, like many parts of the world, is highly demanding and challenging that cannot be attained solely by students. Assuming things in this way, supervision of dissertations in every stage and in every lapse of time is an inevitable responsibility for dissertation supervisors. It is suggested that to facilitate the task of supervision, supervisors should have written plans for their supervising period before viva sessions plans for their students. Ph.D. students should not be left high and dry in the time taking and demanding phases of writing dissertations. The present study revealed that students have different and varying needs and expectations of their supervisors. To meet these needs, supervisors should ask their students to submit a weekly report of their work as well as possible problems and questions.

### ***LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS***

The findings were based on the Ph.D. candidates' perspectives; it is recommended that future research get the voices of supervisors, too, particularly the supervisors of the same supervisees. The researchers utilized the two instruments of the telephone interview and narrations to collect data. It is suggested that other sources of data collection like observations and focus group interviews be included to gain further conceptions of the attendants. The researchers interviewed the dissertation writer in various majors; however, the topic was not questioned. It is recommended to evaluate the extent of the supervisor's interest in the topic on the success rate of the project.

### ***FUNDING***

No funding was available for the present study.

### ***CONFLICT OF INTEREST***

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

## **REFERENCES**

---

- Armstrong, D., Gosling, A., Weinman, J., & Marteau, T. (1997). The place of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research: An empirical study. *Sociology*, *31*(3), 597-606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038597031003015>
- Arnesson, K., & Albinsson, G. (2017). Mentorship – A pedagogical method for integration of theory and practice in higher education. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, *3*(3), 202-217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2017.1379346>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analyses in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.
- Bree, R., & Gallagher, G. (2016). Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyze qualitative data: A simple, cost-effective approach. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, *8*(2).
- Baydarova, I., Collins, H. E., & Saadi, I. A. (2021). Alignment of doctoral student and supervisor expectations in Malaysia. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, *16*(1). <https://doi.org/10.28945/4682>

- Casanave, C. P. (2018). Performing expertise in doctoral dissertations: Thoughts on a fundamental dilemma facing doctoral students and their supervisors, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 43, 57-62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.02.005>
- Casanave, C. P. (2002). *Writing games: Multicultural case studies of academic literacy practices in higher education*. Erlbaum.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). *Research methods in education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315456539>
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Sage.
- Filippou, K. (2019). Identifying thesis supervisors' attitudes: Indications of responsiveness in international master's degree programmes. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(3), 274-284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1621764>
- Frey, J. H. (2004). Telephone surveys. In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. F. Liao (Eds), *The Sage encyclopedia of social science research methods*. Sage.
- Gardner, S. K. (2007). "I heard it through the grapevine": Doctoral student socialization in chemistry and history. *Higher Education*, 54(5), 723-740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-006-9020-x>
- Golde, C. M., & Walker, G. M. (Eds.). (2006). *Envisioning the future of doctoral education: Preparing stewards of the discipline – Carnegie essays on the doctorate*. Jossey-Bass.
- Grant, B., & McKinley, E. (2011). Colouring the pedagogy of doctoral supervision: Considering supervisor, student and knowledge through the lens of indigeneity. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 48(4), 377-386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2011.617087>
- Gregory, K. H., & Burbage, A. K. (2017). Exploring faculty development identity through self-study: Teaching philosophies, reflective practice, and critical friendship. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 12(2), 110-124.
- Halbert, K. (2015). Students' perceptions of a 'quality' advisory relationship. *Quality in Higher Education*, 21(1), 26-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2015.1049439>
- Hamilton, J. B., Best, N. C., Wells, J. S., & Worthy, V. C. (2018). Making sense of loss through spirituality: Perspectives of African American family members who have experienced the death of a close family member to cancer. *Palliative & Support Care*, 16(6), 662-668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951517000955>
- Heath, T. (2002). A quantitative analysis of Ph.D. students' views of supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21(1), 41-53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360220124648>
- Howe, A. C., & Stubbs, H. S. (2003). From science teacher to teacher leader: Leadership development as meaning making in a community of practice. *Science Education*, 87(2), 281-297. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sce.10022>
- Hyland, K. (2016). Academic publishing and the myth of linguistic injustice. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 31, 58-69. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2016.01.005>
- Ives, G., & Rowley, G. (2005). Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: Ph.D. students' progress and outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(5), 535-555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070500249161>
- Kiley, M. (2011). Developments in research supervisor training: Causes and responses. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(5), 585-599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.594595>
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511815355>
- Lawson, H. A. (2016). Stewarding the discipline with cross-boundary leadership. *Quest*, 68(2), 91-115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1151449>
- Lee, I. (2014). Publish or perish: The myth and reality of academic publishing. *Language Teaching*, 47(2), 250-261. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000504>

- Li, Y. (2006). A doctoral student of physics writing for publication: A sociopolitically-oriented case study. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25(4), 456-478. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2005.12.002>
- Lichtman, M. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. Sage.
- Locke, K., & Ramakrishna Velamuri, S. (2009). The design of member review: Showing what to organization members and why. *Organizational Research Methods*, 12(3), 488-509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428108320235>
- Mainhard, T., van der Rijst, R., van Tartwijk, J., & Wubbels, T. (2009). A model for the supervisor-doctoral student relationship. *Higher Education*, 58(3), 359-373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-009-9199-8>
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- McAlpine, L., & Norton, J. (2006). Reframing out approach to doctoral programs: An integrative framework for action and research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(1), 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360500453012>
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass
- Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analyses of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212-1222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501>
- Murphy, N., Bain, J. D., & Conrad, L. M. (2007). Orientations to research higher degree supervision. *Higher Education*, 53(2), 209-234. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-005-5608-9>
- Olsson, M. (2008). *Mentorskap* [Mentorship]. Liber.
- Pearson, M., & Brew, A. (2002). Research training and supervision development. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(2), 135-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070220119986>
- Pearson, M., & Kayrooz, C. (2004). Enabling critical reflection on research supervisory practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 9(1), 99-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144042000296107>
- Phillips, E. M., & Pugh, D. S. (2000). *How to get a Ph.D.: A handbook for students and their supervisors* (3rd ed.). Open University Press.
- Proitz, T. S. & Wittek, L. (2019). New directions in doctoral programmes: Bridging tensions between theory and practice? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 25(5), 560-578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1577813>
- Regan, J. (2012). The role obligations of students and lecturers in higher education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46(1), 14-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2011.00834.x>
- Roberts, L., & Seaman, K. (2018). Good undergraduate dissertation supervision: Perspectives of supervisors and dissertation coordinators. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(1), 28-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2017.1412971>
- Reich, S. M., & Reich, J. A. (2006). Cultural competence in interdisciplinary collaborations: A method for respecting diversity in research partnerships. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(1), 56-62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9064-1>
- Rostami, F., Yousefi, M.H. (2020). Iranian novice English teachers' agency construction: the complexity dynamic/system perspective. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 5, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40862-020-00082-2>
- Sandelowski, M. (2006). "Meta-jeopardy": The crisis of representation in qualitative metasynthesis. *Nursing Outlook*, 54(1), 10-16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2005.05.004>
- Sawazky, J.-A. V., & Enns, C. L. (2009). A mentoring needs assessment: Validating mentorship in nursing education. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, 25(3), 145-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2009.01.003>
- Shuy, R. W. (2003). In-person versus telephone interviewing. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (pp. 173-193). Sage.
- Skyrme, G. (2010). Is this a stupid question? International undergraduate students seeking help from teachers during office hours. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(3), 211-221. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.02.012>

- Starke-Meyerring, D., Paré, A., Sun, K. Y., & El-Bezre, N. (2014). Probing normalized institutional discourses about writing: The case of the doctoral thesis. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*, 8(2), A13-A27. <https://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/295>
- Vilkinas, T. (2008). An exploratory study of the supervision of Ph.D./Research students' theses. *Innovative Higher Education*, 32, 297-311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-007-9057-5>
- Wellington, J. (2013). Searching for 'doctorateness'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(10), 1490-1503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.634901>
- Wikipedia. (2020, August 14). *Web of science*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Web\\_of\\_Science&oldid=972862721](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Web_of_Science&oldid=972862721)
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *In case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Sage.
- Yuan, R., and M. Yang. (2020). Understanding university-based teacher educators' boundary crossing experiences: Voices from Hong Kong. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice*, 26(2), 193-213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1777961>
- Zheng, Y., Yu, S., Wang, B., & Zhang, Y. (2019). Exploring student engagement with supervisor feedback on master's thesis: Insights from a case study, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(2), 186-197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2019.1617181>

## APPENDIX

---

### MAJOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

---

- 1 What were the reasons behind your graduating in due time?
  - 2 Based on what criteria, you have selected your supervisor?
  - 3 What are the responsibilities of a Ph.D. dissertation supervisor?
  - 4 Is supervising a dissertation a cognitive or a cognitive task as well as an effective one?
  - 5 What was good about your supervisor?
  - 6 What were the disadvantages of your supervisor?
  - 7 To what extent are you satisfied/dissatisfied with your supervisor?
  - 8 If someone asks you to tell a metaphor for your supervisor, what would be your answer?
- 

## AUTHORS

---



**Farzad Rostami** has a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics. He has been teaching in Iranian universities since 2014. He has held some workshops on 'doing research' and 'academic writing' for M.A and Doctoral students. Currently, he is a lecturer at the Islamic Azad University of Baneh. Farzad Rostami has many publications in various high-ranked national and international journals. His main areas of interest are teacher education, qualitative research, second language acquisition, and ESP. He is Fluent in three languages of Kurdish, Persian, and English and is familiar with the basics of Arabic and Chinese languages.



**Mohammad Hossein Yousefi** is an assistant professor of TEFL at the Islamic Azad University of Bonab, Iran, where he teaches teacher education, qualitative and mixed methods for postgraduate students. His areas of interest include Teacher Education, L2 Vocabulary teaching, and Meta-analysis. He has recently selected as a top researcher in Humanities at Bonab Azad University. He is Publons academy mentor and a member of editorial board of Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies.