

# “To Be or Not to Be?” The Effect of Supervisor-Supervisee Relations on Students’ Completion of Doctoral Studies

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the effect of supervisor-supervisee relations on students’ completion of doctoral studies. It argues that, whereas doctoral studies is student focused, the success of the student is hinged on their relations with research supervisors. Three type of relationships: cordial, conflictual and sandwich are highlighted as key determinants of student’s progress. The paper further argues that, whereas supervisors are usually blamed by students as major source of their non-completion, students’ factors also greatly contribute to their completion or non-completion. Hence, to limit attrition numbers of doctoral students, there is need to address negative supervisor-supervisee relational issues.

**Keywords:** supervisor, supervisee, relationship, student’s completion, doctoral studies

## 1. Introduction

The soliloquy phrase of Prince Hamlet, “To be or not to be” in William Shakespeare’s play, “Hamlet” Act III, Scene I (Baskaran, 2017), is a stunning question that equally bogs most doctoral students during critical decision making process of whether to or not to continue with their studies. Whereas factors like finance, environment, library, and others have a lot to do with completion of doctoral studies, the research process of doctoral studies is largely dependent on supervisor- supervisee relationships. A student’s “decision to continue or withdraw from” (Lovitts, & Nelson, 2000) it hinges on such relationship. The duo’s relationship can either make or break a PhD Student (Katz, 2016, Lee, 2008). Katz (2016) aptly opined that, “if the relationship is poor it will ruin a good doctoral project regardless of any or all of the other elements that may support it.” On the other hand, if the relationship is cordial it will ease the process thus leading to successful completion of a doctoral program (Protivnak & Foss, 2004; Katz, 2016). Supervisees “may tell of blissful doctoral research supervision or woeful experience depending on how a supervisor took them during the research time” (Katz, 2016). Meaning that the supervisory relationship is a major determinant of a supervisee’s “satisfaction and success or disappointment (Katz, 2016; Jiram & Kahl, 2012; Zhao, Goldie, & McCormick, 2007).

The supervisor- supervisee relationship yield better result “when it is free of pressure, and when it feels reciprocal” (Majid, 2017). The acknowledgement by both the supervisor and supervisee that they are learners “and therefore brings and givers of knowledge” (Majid, 2017) could help lubricate this process. Such acknowledgement ushers relationship where “mutual respect, clear expectation, personal connection and shared values” (Majid, 2017) are exhibited thus yielding positive dividend to graduate study process. Where a supervisor acts as a mentor, the student is bound to have a smooth ride during the research process but if not, the process will stagnate. On the other hand, if a student follows instructions and deadlines, his/her progress will be scotch free, but if he/she proves strong headed, uncooperative and arrogant, then the studies will suffers.

Depending on the prism one uses to judge supervisor- supervisee relationship, a lot has been said by both parties. Either a supervisor praises or castigates a supervisee or the supervisee does it. Whichever direction it takes, supervisees needs to be “proactive in managing their” supervisors (Katz, 2016; cf. Grover & Thatcher, 2010). If this is done well supervisor will get to know that the doctoral research is an initiative of the supervisee. Consequently, they will cease to “impose on or die for a student” (Witt & Cunningham, 1984). Rather they will start sharing “mutually acceptable goals and plans with the student” (Vikinas, 2002).

Things go a lot better for doctoral candidates when they “prepare in advance for meeting their advisors, raising possible solutions to their own issues and soliciting their advisor’s advice, use their time more effectively and get better results” (Katz, 2016). This paper therefore, sets to discuss how supervisor-supervisee relationship affects completion of doctoral studies. Below is a brief literature study before divulging to expose the effects of such relationship on doctoral students’ completion of their program.

## 2. Literature Review

There is a surge in literature on supervisor- supervisee relationship and how such relationships influence completion or non-completion of doctoral studies. In spite of this, none of the study has concentrated on itemizing the types of these relationships that affect completion or non-completion of doctoral studies. Alias Masek (2017), Pearson and Brew (2002), Ives and Rowley (2005), Pyhalto et al., (2012), and Odena & Burgess (2015) are some of the authors who have cogently documented the “significant contributions of supervisors to students’ success in research and dissertation”. Masek (2017), for example, asserts “Research supervision for postgraduate students is not merely an academic development, but quite an ordeal of establishing a good relationship between the supervisor and students.” He went a step further to delve in discussing “supervision model and supervision styles”. Among the models of supervision he identifies are “system approach, developmental models, and psychodynamic model. In regard to supervision styles Masek (2017) and Gatfield (2005) highlighted “structure-support, the directorial-contractual, and laissez-faire” styles. Whereas the current paper is neither on models or styles of supervision, the issues raised are privy to the discussion on the effects of the types of supervision-supervisee relationship on student’s completion of doctoral studies.

Whereas a model that aligns the supervisor and students on establishing relationship remains elusive (Lee, 2007), numerous predictor variables, including age, prior educational background, gender, attendance status, intellectual environment, and funding (Rodwell and Neumann, 2007) as well as expectation (Chiappetta-Swanson and Watt, 2011; Ali, Watson, & Dhingra, 2016), are key determinants of the type of supervisor-supervisee relationship. Notwithstanding this, supervision depends on a person’s expertise guided by a particular code of practice (Masek, 2017).

Writing about supervision relationship from a supervisor’s perspective, Masek (2017) identified three types of relationships, namely deliberative relationship, skeptical relationship and trustworthy relationship. “Using the principal component analysis of Varimax (orthogonal) rotation”, Masek’s (2017) analyzed the “interaction level of supervisor-students’ relationship. In deliberative relationship of supervision, supervisors provide feedback on student’s piece of work, help students in writing, provide a clear guidance on research, is a trustable person, rectify students’ mistake, and ably handles professional discussion. Then in a skeptical relationship of supervision, the supervisor is able to manage emotional discussion, assumes students know nothing, supervise without thinking of students’ pride, keep his/her stand flexible according to students view, criticize students work, doubt on students initiative on work, put students in uncomfortable situation during discussion, and requires good clarification from students during discussion. And in a trustworthy relationship of supervision, supervisors: give freedom for students’ decision, depends on students’ research proposal, allow students to determine research direction, and seek evidence of all students’ work (Masek, 2017). Following the lead of the three relational paradigm, this paper will look at the effect of cordial, conflictual and mixed relationships on students’ completion of their studies.

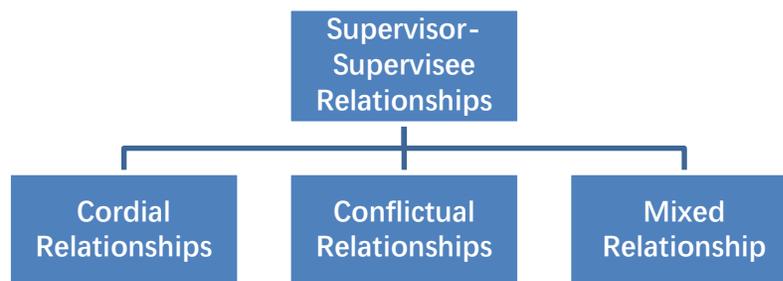
## 3. Methodology

The paper is qualitative in nature, using desk research methodology for data collection. Desk research is a form of analyzing a range of secondary data without necessarily going to the field. It is a form of non-empirical data that one gets from existing literature in form of published reports and statistics. While desk research involves getting data from archival sources, and library, this paper was compiled using secondary information derived from internet search and download slides and reading materials from CREST/DIES program that relates to doctoral supervision in general, and relationship between supervisor and supervisee in particular. Three major reasons informed the writer’s decision to adopt this form of data collection, that is: it is economical given the short time within which the paper is to be submitted, there is available breadth of data out there, and the information so included in the work involved employing expertise and professionalism (Boslaugh, n.d). The major challenge encountered with this form of data collection, though, was that given the data used was collected for other reasons, locating their aspects to suit the purpose of this paper was not easy. However, the author was able to bend the emerging information from those sources to fit the context of the present paper.

After teasing out the required information from the available literature, it was then analyzed using hermeneutical processes. This form of data analysis is where all the data gotten from other sources is put in the context of the text under study while retaining the original flavor of the writer. In doing so, ethical procedure was duly followed in that all information collected from other authors are acknowledge.

#### 4. Types of Supervisor- Supervisee Relationships: Their Affect Doctoral Students' Completion of Their Course

Early scholarship on supervisory relationship have concentrated on highlighting the styles and modes of supervision, yet types of supervisor- supervisee relationship is key to success or failure of a students' completion of doctoral studies. Following Masek (2017) who came up with three types of relationships, namely deliberative relationship, skeptical relationship, and trustworthy relationship, in this paper three types of relationships are coined and their effects on completion of doctoral programs is discussed. Where there is symmetrical power relations, there will be cordial relationship, if there is power asymmetry, conflictual relationship is bound to crop in, and if power oscillates between symmetry and asymmetry, a sandwich relationship is bound to develop. With this in mind, let us turn to looking at three types of supervisor supervisee relationships, which I have coined as: cordial, conflictual, and mixed relationships. In each of these type of relationship, there are both supervisor and supervisee factors that are responsible for such relations.



Source: Author

Figure 1. Types of Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship

##### a. Cordial Relationships

A cordial relationship is that where there is “freedom and friendship” (Waghid, 2006), and “respect and trust” (The Universities Australia, *et al*, n.d) in the supervisor- supervisee relationship. In other words, a cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship is a pleasant, genial, affective, warm, jovial, and amiable relationship characterized by respect and trust, and freedom and friendship. Freedom and friendship in supervisor- supervisee relationship enables the supervisee to feel “free to pose questions to the world and to reflect on what is presented in experience/that is, in communication they imagine new initiatives, construct alternative possibilities, open more texts and establish friendships” (Greene, 1998; Waghid, 2006). And if there is freedom and friendship in supervisor-supervisee relationship, the supervisor will be concerned of a supervisee’s progress. Such concern the supervisor express could help reinforce the supervisee’s sense of self-worth (Katz, 2016) thus making him/her to push towards achieving his/her ultimate goal.

In a like manner, a reciprocal respect and trust in supervisor-supervisee relationship facilitates each of them to work hard to ensure that quality work comes out. Accordingly, as opined in a joint document of the Universities Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, and the Australian Council of Graduate Research (n.d), relationship of respect and trust is a “critical foundations of a high-quality, supportive and safe university learning environment. Students are more likely to achieve their academic goals in an atmosphere built on these values.”

My own experience during doctoral studies attests to the importance of cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship. Right from the day I was allocated to my lead supervisor up to the time I completed, we maintained a cordial relationship, He used to tell me “let us finish the research quickly so we start doing better things together.” Such encouraging words from my supervisor created between us an atmosphere of freedom, friendship, respect and trust. It enabled me to work hard and achieve the desired target. To date, whenever I went to where he leaves, I alert him and we meet for a chat. The simplicity he portrayed made me to pick a leave from him and be a source of encouragement to my research students. In some circumstances, as a doctoral program coordinator in the faculty, I

encourage students who are losing hope because of the rocky relationships that exist between them and their supervisors to take heart and continue pursuing their studies.

Cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship, to some extent, yield required dividend depending on the supervisor's knowledge and related skill, management and interpersonal skills (Beasley, 1999). The supervisor's knowledge and related skill enables him/her "to be: innovative, creative problem solver, resource oriented, work focused, technical(*ly*) expert, decisive and dependable" (Vikinas, 2000). Tricia Vikinas (2000) equates supervisor to business managers. According to her, like business managers, supervisors ought to dispose good supervision qualities "at any particular time." Like a good business manager, "during the student's journey through the doctoral program", to facilitate students' completion, supervisors need to "deliver each of these qualities with expertise, ease and care" (Vikinas, 2000).

It suffice to note that having cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship is not a magic bullet to successful completion of doctoral studies without hard work. On the part of the supervisor, alongside cordiality, to facilitate a smooth supervision process, he/she needs to be a person who:

- Has vision (who can see the wood for the tree so to speak);
- Is creative in the supervision process;
- Has the ability to acquire the necessary resources;
- Is able to motivate the student to produce;
- Can direct the work of the students;
- Can check on and coordinate the various activities that need to be undertaken in the research journey;
- Monitor the student's progress; and
- Is able to foster growth of individuals. (Vikinas, 2000)

While the supervisor does the above, the supervisee needs to reciprocate in the affirmative. As the student version of the Graduate Supervision Guideline of the University of Toronto (2016) stipulates, a supervisee has to reciprocate by: being pro-active, keeping his/her supervisor informed of emerging issues or upcoming events that may affect his/her academic progress, being sure to have regular meetings with *his/her* supervisor, and preparing a realistic timeline for your program. Further still, he/she needs to review and adjust when needed, seeking conflict resolution as early as possible, participating cooperatively and responsibly in the supervisory relationship, and understanding that graduate supervision is a shared responsibility. In other words, a cordial relationship is not a guarantee to easy completion of studies if the supervisee does not exploit it for doing serious business. Cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship could only translate into positive deliverable if the supervisee concentrates to doing what is due to him/her.

In a cordial supervisor-supervisee relationship, a supervisor can even go a mile further to "modify or rewrite a student's final text out of concern for their own reputation or the reputation of the university" (Aitchison, Cuttler, Rose, and Burgin, 2012). However, good it can be, cordiality between opposite sex needs to be guided otherwise it might end up into sex scandals that could easily affect completion of doctoral programs.

#### **b. Conflictual Relationships**

A conflictual supervisor-supervisee relationship is where there is no harmony between the parties. Whereas conflict is part of human life from time immemorial, experiencing it during doctoral studies is a great set back to the whole process. Conflictual supervisor-supervisee relationship emanates from age differences, content knowledge, gender, power dynamics, lack of emotional awareness, unethical behavior, disrespect, lack of motivation, and cultural issues. Besides, issues like miss-communication, sexual harassment, differing supervisor-supervisee expectations, evaluation process, and organizational dysfunction also have a lot to bear in emergence of conflictual relationship. The supervisor's progress is curtailed in terms of promotion and that of the supervisee is reflected in taking longer time to complete the doctoral program or dropping out of the course out rightly.

Conflictual supervisor-supervisee might arise during communication processes. Perhaps because of age differences, gender, cultural issues, content knowledge, or power dynamics, some supervisee go through a lot of pain to communicate their ideas or concerns clearly with supervisors. This is even worse if the supervisee is a novice to doctoral supervisory experience. I have ever seen doctoral students feeling intimidated whenever they have appointment with their doctoral supervisors basically because they know they are going to meet with a person who is not a friend but a terrorist. It worsens if the administration leave the student at the mercy of the supervisor, or the student does not know how to play cool for the sake of going through the supervision process. Such experience can

increase the supervisee anxiety, decrease productivity, and increase conflict (Neils, *et al*, 2011) that eventually affect the outcome of the study.

Differing expectation is also overtly seen to be a source of challenge in supervisor-supervisee relationship. Once a person enrolls for doctoral program, some supervisors expect them to be perfect, write clearly and argue their points at doctoral level. Yet this might be an over expectation by supervisor because, as Aitchison et al (2012) observes “even doctoral students who had considerable publication experience prior to coming for doctoral studies” might not be able to argue at the level of experienced members of the profession. Whereas in doctoral studies supervision process, “it is not uncommon for supervisors to express frustration, irritation, and even anger over a student’s writing” (Aitchison, 2012), if such emotions are not packaged well, it can affect the study process. On the other hand, there are doctoral students who feel whatever they write should not be challenged given it is their work. And others expect their supervisors to look for resources for them. In either way, unless care is taken, it can cause a dent in supervisor-supervisee relations that will eventually impact negatively on the completion of the student.

Furthermore, lack of emotional awareness, unethical behavior like seeking financial or sexual favor can lead to strained supervisor-supervisee relationship. Such conflicts can kill respect for each other and motivation to work together thereby affecting completion of doctoral studies.

### c. Mixed Relationships

This is a kind of circumstantial relationship that is characterized by both cordial and conflictual experiences. The basic determinants of this type of relationship are the mood swing, behavioral change, and attitudes of either the supervisor or the supervisee. At one point the supervisor and supervisee can be on the same page, and at another they are on different pages. As a coordinator of doctoral programs, I witness such relationships every other time. At one time, it is a student reporting a supervisor and at another time it is the supervisor castigating a student. While some of the disagreement emanate from objective criticism, others are merely relationally based. Of course, at the end of it all, it is the progress of the student that is put on edge.

## 5. Best Practices for Minimizing Non Completion of Doctoral Studies

Doctoral studies is a field of its own kind that requires a lot of adjustments. Since the research period is a critical phase of the doctoral studies, it requires of tact in management so to minimize attrition rates. In most cases, during this period, doctoral candidates, “experience disorienting dilemmas through shifts in their frames of reference, such as when learning results in altered ways of thinking or perceiving reality” (Keefer, 2016). Indeed as Keefer (2016) argues, “experiencing a new way of seeing his or her understanding or place within the area study” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009) can present real challenge to many doctoral candidates. It is incumbent upon the supervisors to identify and resolve such difficulties/frustrations so as to enable doctoral candidates to have the ability to develop an intellectually coherent and methodologically plausible doctoral thesis (Botha, 2018).

Most, if not all, universities and research institutions have defined guideline on the roles of supervisors and supervisee. Knowing such roles, to a greater extent, could help lubricate supervisor- supervisee relationship thereby facilitating smooth completion of doctoral studies. If, for instance, the supervisor knows his/her sole responsibility is to act as a mentor to the doctoral candidate, he/she will be able to:

- a. Provide an environment that stimulates and encourages candidates to learn and work independently.
- b. Provide guidance on the planning and execution of the research project.
- c. Guide the candidate on ethical considerations and intellectual property rights.
- d. Advise the candidate on relevant conferences and peer reviewed journals where the candidate can submit papers for publication.
- e. Create an ethos of collegiality so that learning takes place within a community of scholars.
- f. Respect student’s reasonable views and ideas on his/her research. (NCHE, 2015).

On the other hand, as stipulated in *the memorandum of agreement for academic supervision of postgraduate students* of Gordon Institute of Business Science- University Pretoria, the supervisee ought to follow what is required of him/her, namely:

- a. Abiding by the relevant rules and regulations of the University...
- b. Working independently under the guidance of the supervisor, and ensuring that she or he stays abreast of the latest developments in the field of study.

- c. Agreeing with the supervisor, and abiding by, a time schedule which outlines the expected completion dates of various stages of the research work...
- d. Attending pre-scheduled meetings with the supervisor, and being adequately prepared for these consultation sessions....
- e. Submitting written work at times agreed upon by the student and the supervisor.
- f. Taking account of the feedback provided by the supervisor before subsequent submission of written work.
- g. Undertaking to submit the dissertation or thesis within the prescribed time for the completion of the degree unless exceptional circumstances arise, and to plan accordingly.
- h. Accepting responsibility for the overall coherent structure of the final dissertation or thesis and, as far as possible, submitting written work that is free of spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and incorrect punctuation...
- i. Undertaking to submit draft papers for publication, taking into account advice provided by the supervisor.
- j. Informing the supervisor of any absence or circumstances that may affect the research progress and time line. (GIBS 1D, n.d.).

Although to some extent having such guideline is not a guarantee that it will be observed by the parties in question, but if both the supervisor and supervisee heed to observing it they will be able to work amicably towards smooth completion of the task assigned to them.

Given power dynamics is a key determinant of supervisor supervisee relationship, working at such dynamics early enough can help to avoid frustrating experience during doctoral studies. In the academia, no one can claim to have known it all. Everyone is on the part of learning and unlearning. Since, “most doctoral supervisors today lack adequate supervisory capabilities and tend to largely outlook fundamental roles as mentors” (Katz, 2016), organizing short courses or “workshop training in advisory styles in order to learn how to effectively advise doctoral students (Gatfield, 2005; Katz, 2016) is a good route to tread. Sharing experiences during short courses or workshops can help make novice doctoral supervisors to scale down toughening on students, and instead treat students with courtesy, become sensitive to emotional challenges, and follow ethical principles while commenting on students’ work. Left to themselves, some doctoral supervisors can easily transfer bitter supervision experiences during their studies on innocent students, just to let the students know they are in-charge.

## 6. Conclusion

The foregone discussion overtly reveals supervisor-supervisee relationship is key to successful completion of doctoral studies. For, such relationship can either make or break a good intended end. A cordial relationship, if maintained can translate into quality work and completion of studies in record time, but a conflictual relationship dents the progress of doctoral studies. Delayed or non-completion of doctoral studies could be averted through establishing guideline that is followed by both supervisor and supervisee.

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