

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Academic Supervision in Nigerian Public Universities in the South-West: A Comparative Study of Lecturer and Graduate Student Perspectives

Olujide Dixon, Olabisi Onabanjo University. Email: olujidedixon@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of academic supervision within Nigerian public universities by comparing the perspectives of both supervisors and graduate students. Its primary objective is to identify and quantify the perceptual gaps between these two groups across key dimensions of the supervisory relationship, including supervisor accessibility and approachability, discrepancies in the expected versus actual frequency of feedback, divergent understandings of support adequacy, and differing approaches to mentorship. The research employed a non-experimental survey design, utilising two instruments—the Supervision in Nigerian Public Universities Questionnaire (SNPUQ) and the Academic Supervision in Nigerian Public Universities Questionnaire (ASNPQU) which were adapted from the established Advisory Working Alliance Inventory developed by Schlosser and Gelso (2001). Data were collected from a sample of 292 postgraduate students and 115 lecturers across six Nigerian public universities. Analysis using descriptive statistics and an independent samples t-test revealed a statistically significant divergence in the mean scores of supervisors and students on the core constructs of supervision. The findings expose a critical misalignment in perceptions concerning accessibility, approachability, feedback, and the humanistic aspect of mentorship, indicating a fundamental weakness in the foundation of postgraduate education. In light of these results, the study strongly recommends that public tertiary institutions proactively address this issue by moving beyond assumed supervisory competence and instituting formal, mandatory professional development programmes for academic staff.

Keywords: academic support, accessibility, mentorship, supervision, supervisors

1. Introduction

Academic supervision is the foundation of postgraduate studies and academics capacity development and the strongest interface where knowledge is transferred, research skills are developed, and academic ethics are fostered. In Nigerian public universities, it is an interface in operation between graduate students (Masters and PhD candidates) and lecturers (supervisors). Effective supervision finds its origin in perpetual positive criticism, intellectual guidance, methodological guidance, and professional know-how leading to individual scholarly growth in the student. The effectiveness of the system is always in doubt, between the ideal pedagogic models and the parsimony of the Nigerian university setting. Such an environment would most likely be defined by factors such as perpetual underfunding, geometric growth in student enrolment without corresponding faculty growth, scarcity of infrastructure, and periodic industrial action by university lecturers' unions.

For the supervisor, supervision is a difficult addition to already substantial loads of teaching, paperwork, and fear of "publish or perish." Success at their supervisory task is typically discouraged by large numbers of supervisees, limiting the amount of one-to-one care each student may receive. Moreover, limitation of access to new electronic libraries, research labs, and low research budgets, also invade their ability to fund pioneering research. The majority of supervisors, particularly those of previous generations, may also lack knowledge of current tools and research methods, therefore lagging behind the scholarship requirements emerging in the developing world (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2022).

The student-supervisor relationship is probably the one most significant factor that affects their scholarship and prompt graduation. Students complain about a number of issues such as lack of sufficient student-supervisor interaction, delayed feedback on thesis chapters, lack of proper definition

of supervision process, and in some instances perceived issues of power, thereby hindering research path negotiation or raising concerns (Adeyemo, Ogunyinka & Adedoja, 2020). The anxiety and uncertainty born of inadequate supervision could result in long completion periods, high rates of dropout, and, in the worst case, academic plagiarism because the students are unable to find their way through their research work without supervision.

Though it is valued in terms of its worth globally, the system of academic supervision in Nigerian public universities is usually discovered to be functioning ineffectively, postgraduate studies being least effective. The cause of this problem lies in the enormous gap between set standards of academic supervision and actual experience of graduate students and lecturers. This is manifested in a number of critical aspects.

One particularly problematic postgraduate learning issue in Nigerian state universities may be the problem of delayed graduation and drop-out. Most of the students, particularly at the doctoral level, are not able to complete their programmes within the projected period (Ibrahim & Ogunyinka, 2021a). Rather, most are in the abiding phase normally characterized by the "all but dissertation" syndrome in which the coursework is completed but the thesis remains pending. For others, suspension persists for decades, and in most instances, results in ultimate withdrawal from the scheme entirely. All these penalties do not merely allude to a humongous wastage of individuals' initiative and effort but also wastage of national resources in creating higher-order human capital which never gets the chance to realize its full potential.

On top of this, students might experience supervision that is inconsistent and variable in quality. Instead of being in a similarly uniform institutional setting, the process of supervision relies nearly entirely on the availability, willingness, and ability of the allocated lecturer. Arguably, there is inconsistency in method of supervision, while some enjoy excellent guide and vigilant mentors, others are left to contend with minimal or no direction, occasional criticism, or even desertion. Similarly, the weakened formalised structures within the universities introduce disparities that undermine the integrity of supervisees' postgraduate study and academic development.

Lecturers are expected to supervise students without any formal training in mentoring or pedagogy, relying on intuition or informal apprenticeship style they themselves were originally received. Students are compelled to suffer underfunding of research projects with little or no institutional support for grants, fieldwork assistance, or access to pertinent current research literature. In addition, technology meant to support open communication, such as secure virtual platforms for remote supervision could affect the support system for students, especially those enrolled in distance or part-time courses.

The interpersonal nature of supervision also introduces a vulnerable element. The supervisor-student working relationship is close by definition and thereby susceptible to tension. Incongruent expectations, incoherent communication, or incompatible power easily could cause misunderstanding or even discord. Students at times are perceived as being exploited, slighted, or treated unfairly, and supervisors at times perceive students as uncommitted. Arguably, the majority of the universities may not have adequate mediation avenues or codified codes of conduct for the purpose of dealing with such complaints. In the absence of the stipulated redress channels or conflict resolution, these relational disjunctures become open sores eroding trust and degrading research.

These issues reflect not only individual failings but also institutional shortcomings, highlighting the need for study on academic mentorship. Although problems in postgraduate study are widely acknowledged, more empirical, solution-focused research on academic supervision is still needed, driven by clear gaps in the existing literature.

Most existing research focuses on a single factor either the student or the supervisor. There has been a general absence of studies following and comparing simultaneously the experience and perception of the students and supervisors. Comparative evaluation is crucial in establishing mismatched expectations

that typically make up the majority of supervisory malperformance (Adeyemo *et al.*, 2020). For example, if the example is taken to be a supervisor who considers the rate of feedback to be good whereas a student considers it to be neglectful, without double-perspective research, interventions can correct only half of the issue. Also, it is unclear whether there is enough data to test the impact of specific institution policies or the lack thereof on supervisory efficiency. The disparity between describing general problems and assessing specific policy interventions and their effects must be filled (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2022).

Additionally, transformative and interactive studies are required. Studies should involve stakeholders (lecturers and students) in developing and evaluating evidence-based models for supervisory improvement rather than just identifying. While postgraduate supervision has been widely studied, far less attention has been given to the specific points where lecturers' assumptions clash with students' actual experiences. There is a need for more targeted research that uncovers some of these mismatches in some detail. This research seeks to fill that gap and provide evidence on which to base more responsive and effective supervisory practice.

1.1. Research Aim

The aim of the study is to investigate how supervision is perceived and delivered, comparing lecturers' expectations and approaches with students' experiences.

1.2. Research Questions

The study will provide answers to the following questions:

How do graduate students and supervisor differ in terms of:

- a. Supervisor Accessibility & Approachability:
- b. Frequency of feedback
- c. Supervisor support
- d. Mentorship

1.3. Theoretical Perspective

Two philosophical frameworks that are useful for analysing the effectiveness of academic supervision in Nigerian public universities serve as the foundation for this study. These are Tinto's Theory of Student Integration and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning. In the Nigerian context, where supervision issues are influenced by systemic constraints, institutional design, and expectations from society, both provide a model of how supervision functions as an academic exercise as well as an institutional and relational practice.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory focuses highly on learning as social mediation wherein knowledge is constructed through a process of interaction between the learner and the more knowledgeable other (Jaramillo, 1996). In postgraduate supervision, the lecturer plays the role of the "more knowledgeable other" in order to assist the student towards independent research capability from dependent learning. This support may be in the form of research design guidance, writing feedback, or modelling of scholarly conventions. The theory also emphasizes the zone of proximal development (ZPD) concept, which equates to the gap between what a learner can achieve independently and what can be achieved with support (Vygotsky, 1978).

In supervision, the ZPD is specific because supervisors are tasked with striking the right balance between support and gradually releasing responsibility so that students are independent, not dependent on them. In Nigerian postgraduate supervision, where quality is inconsistent and supervisors' formal

training is minimal, Vygotsky's model emphasizes the value of systematic, deliberate mentoring as opposed to leaving the student to go it alone through the research process. It reminds us that effectiveness is not just a function of subject knowledge, but relational pedagogy which closes the gap between potential student achievement and actual attainment (Adeyemi & Adeyinka, 2022).

A competing strategy is also offered by Tinto's Theory of Student Integration, which emphasises the circumstances in which students persevere and succeed in university. According to Tinto, student perseverance and timely graduation depend heavily on social integration (belonging to the academic community) and academic integration (engaging with learning, faculty and research) (Davidson & Wilson, 2013). According to Tinto's theory, professional identity illustration, academic socialisation to disciplinary communities, and conference participation are all components of effective supervision that go beyond technical research guidance (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010).

Supervision is thus a key integrating device: inadequate or intermittent supervision results in disaffection and isolation of academics, with increased risk of extended completion times or withdrawal. In Nigeria, where students would often complain of feeling disconnected as a result of communication breakdown, resource shortages, or paucity of mentorship, the Tinto model helps understand why even as students start off being motivated, attrition is high. By means of improvement of supervisory practices for increasing intellectual challenge and sense of belonging, the university can directly improve the completion rate and minimize wastage of talent and resources (Ibrahim & Ogunyanka, 2021b).

Complementary aspects of efficient supervision are clarified by both theories. Vygotsky shows how scaffolding in the ZPD builds capacity by examining the micro-level dyadic interactions between a supervisor and a student. On the contrary hand, Tinto illustrates how persistence is maintained through integration into university life by situating supervision within broader institutional and social processes. Because both models recognise both the underlying forces that determine whether students achieve success or failure, in addition to the proximal relational processes of supervision, they are therefore highly helpful in the study of the postgraduate situation in Nigeria.

2. Methodology

The survey utilised a non-experimental survey design, which was suitable in collecting data from a large group of postgraduate students and lecturers in selected public universities of Nigeria. A multistage sampling method was utilized to provide sufficient representation of the study population. Nigeria's South-West geopolitical zone was the focus area, covering six states: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo and Ekiti.

As made available by the National Universities Commission (NUC), Nigeria boasts 283 universities in total, comprised of 69 federal, 66 state, and 148 private universities. There are 135 public universities if federal and state universities are counted. Precisely, this study was conducted from public universities in the South-West.

In the initial stage of sampling, three states Ogun, Lagos, and Osun were selected randomly from among the six South-West states. At the second stage, stratified random sampling was applied in choosing two universities from every one of the three selected states in a manner that incorporated state-owned and federal universities equally. This led to a total of six universities that were involved in the research. At the third and last level, proportional random sampling was used to recruit participants from selected universities. In each institution, 50 postgraduate students and 20 lecturers were randomly selected, and a total of responses from 292 postgraduate students and 115 lecturers were obtained from the six universities.

Two instruments were utilised for data collection: the Supervision in Nigerian Public Universities Questionnaire (SNPUQ) and the Academic Supervision in Nigerian Public Universities Questionnaire

(ASNPUQ). The two instruments were adapted from the Advisory Working Alliance Inventory developed by Schlosser & Gelso (2001), which measures the quality of the student-supervisor working alliance. The ASNPUQ was created to reflect supervisors' perceptions of supervision with regard to such factors as accessibility and approachability, how often they receive feedback, supervisory support, and mentorship. The SNPUQ was, nonetheless, created to reflect the same facets of students to enable comparative analysis across the two groups' perceptions.

All the items were placed on a 5-point Likert-type scale and consisted of 20 items with five subscales: (i) Supervision Approachability and Accessibility (4 items), (ii) Feedback Frequency (4 items), (iii) Supervisor Support (4 items), (iv) Quality of the Supervisor-Student Relationship (4 items) and (v) Mentorship (4 items), while demographic attributes had 4 items. The instruments were found to be reliable. The validity of the questionnaire was ensured by having it checked by experts as well as conducting a pilot test with reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient having high values. The computed Cronbach's Alpha values for the subscales were found to be high: Accessibility and Approachability ($\alpha = 0.83$), Frequency of Feedback ($\alpha = 0.79$), Supervisor Support ($\alpha = 0.81$), quality of the supervisor-student relationship ($\alpha = 0.85$) and Mentorship ($\alpha = 0.88$). The questionnaire was distributed online as well as manually to lecturers and graduates of selected universities. Non-response bias is removed by sending reminders to participants while also checking for significant differences between early and late respondents to ascertain representativeness.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the respondents' data. The responses were reported using descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages, and range (minimum and maximum). To determine if the mean responses of faculty members as well as postgraduate students to the crucial aspects of academic supervision differed significantly, a paired samples t-test was employed.

Of the 292 graduate students surveyed, a slight majority (55.8%) were females. In addition, a total of 161 representing 55.1% are between 30 years and 39 years old while 131 or 44.9% are between 40 years and 49 years old. The respondents were evenly distributed among Master's (44.2%), Ph.D. (44.9%), and M.Phil./Ph.D. (11%). The areas of specialisation of respondents also showed wide variation and included Arts and Social Sciences (32.9%), followed closely by Education, Humanity/Management Science disciplines.

In contrast, of the 115 lecturers, a total of 79 or 68.7% are male while 36 or 31.3% are female. The age distribution of the lecturer shows that 60 or 52.2% are between 50 years and 59 years old, 50 or 43.5% between 40 years and 49 years old while 5 or 4.4% are 60 years old and above.

3. Results

The independent samples t-tests presented in Table 1 reveal significant differences between supervisor and graduate student reports on all measured dimensions of support. Supervisors consistently rated the supervisory environment as more supportive, with statistically significant higher mean scores for accessibility ($t = 10.17$, $p < 0.05$), approachability ($t = 3.26$, $p < 0.05$), responsiveness ($t = 5.73$, $p < 0.05$), and availability ($t = 5.59$, $p < 0.05$). This result demonstrates a clear gap, suggesting that supervisors perceive themselves as providing substantially greater accessibility and approachability than is experienced by their graduate students.

Similarly, evidence from Table 2 indicates that supervisors reported experiencing significantly higher levels of feedback than graduate students. Specifically, supervisors rated their interactions as being markedly higher in timeliness ($t = 4.110$, $p < 0.05$), frequency ($t = 3.92$, $p < 0.05$), delays ($t = 15.520$, $p < 0.05$), and consistency ($t = 4.050$, $p < 0.05$). These results indicate a statistically significant disparity in feedback—received as perceived between the two groups.

Variable	Respondents	N	Mean	Std dev	t	df	Sig.P	Remark
Accessibility	Student	292	3.35	1.16	10.17	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	4.33	0.73				
Approachability	Student	292	3.57	1.42	3.26	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	4.03	0.72				
Responsiveness	Student	292	2.89	1.60	5.73	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.79	0.82				
Availability	Student	292	3.01	1.16	5.59	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.69	0.94				

Table 1: Mean Differences in Perception of Supervisor Accessibility & Approachability between Students and Supervisor; source: Original Research

Variable	Respondent	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	Sig.P	Remark
Timeliness	Student	292	3.12	1.199	4.110	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.64	1.078				
Frequency	Student	292	3.12	1.199	3.920	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.62	1.064				
Delays	Student	292	2.00	0.668	15.520	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.53	1.172				
Consistency	Student	292	3.11	1.200	4.050	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.63	1.087				

Table 2: Mean Differences in Perception of Feedback Frequency between Students and Supervisor; source: Original Research

Furthermore, Table 3 reveal significant differences between supervisor and graduate students in terms of support. Supervisors consistently rated with statistically significant higher mean scores for guidance ($t = 3.490$ $p < 0.05$), emotional support ($t = 9.570$, $p < 0.05$), professional development ($t = 7.730$, $p < 0.05$), and problem-solving support ($t = 2.570$, $p < 0.05$). This result demonstrates a clear gap, suggesting that supervisors perceive themselves as providing more support than is experienced by their graduate students

Variable	Respondent	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	Sig.P	Remark
Guidance	Student	292	3.23	1.232	3.490	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.69	1.095				
Emotional support	Student	292	2.67	1.339	9.570	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	4.01	1.055				
Professional Development Support	Student	292	3.12	1.104	7.730	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.95	0.916				
Problem-Solving Support	Student	292	3.01	1.058	2.570	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	4.16	0.779				

Table 3: Mean Differences in Perception of Supervisor Support between Students and Supervisor; source: Original Research

As shown in Table 4, a significant difference was reported between supervisor and graduate mentorship. Supervisor consistently rated with statistically significant higher mean scores for encouragement ($t= 8.365$, $p<0.05$), active mentorship ($t= 5.735$, $p<0.05$) and institutional opportunities ($t= 3.911$, $p<0.05$). However, there is no significant difference in the mean scores of the supervisor and graduate students in alternative mentorship ($t= 0.636$, $p>0.45$).

Variable	Respondent	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t	df	Sig.P	Remark
Alternative mentorship	Student	292	3.89	1.599	0.636	405	0.45	Not Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.99	0.922				
Encouragement	Student	292	2.67	1.493	8.365	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.92	0.929				
Active mentorship	Student	292	3.12	1.446	5.735	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	3.95	0.877				
Institutional opportunities	Student	292	3.45	1.424	3.911	405	0.00	Significant
	Supervisor	115	4.02	0.973				

Table 4: Mean Differences in Perception of Mentorship between Students and Supervisor; source: Original Research

4. Discussion, Recommendations and Implications of the Study

The main finding of this study, which is that supervisors and graduates perceive a substantial difference in accessibility, approachability, feedback, and the interpersonal aspect of mentoring, points to an important weakness in the postgraduate university system. This conflict suggests that the supervisory relationship, ideally a partnership of guided intellectual development, is often fraught with unspoken expectations and mismatched understandings.

From the perspective of Tinto's theory, this relational disconnect reflects a breakdown in academic integration, where weak faculty–student interaction could increase the risk of dropout. From Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning, this also represents a damaged ZPD: students cannot access the responsive guidance and feedback needed for learning. The problem is therefore not only interpersonal but structural, as the system fails to provide the academic and social support necessary for effective postgraduate socialisation and academic development.

The discrepancy in supervisor accessibility and approachability indicates that an open-door policy is not merely a physical reality but a psychological one; students may perceive supervisors as intellectually or emotionally unavailable even when they are physically present. This aligns with research highlighting that ineffective communication and infrequent contact are primary drivers of student anxiety and dissatisfaction (Jepchirchir & Ogula, 2022), potentially stalling research progress and fostering a sense of academic isolation.

The divergence in perceptions of feedback, support and mentorship is particularly telling, pointing to a fundamental conflict in the very definition of the supervisory role. Supervisors may conceptualise their duty as providing periodic, high-level academic critique, operating from a traditional, hierarchical model of expertise transfer. Students, however, increasingly seek a more holistic and humanised mentorship relationship. This encompasses not only timely and constructive feedback on their work but also supportive guidance for their professional development and empathetic recognition of the profound

personal challenges inherent in the PhD journey. As Barnes and Austin (2009) argue, effective supervision must transcend technical direction to foster the student's growth into an independent scholar, a process that is inherently relational and psychological. When feedback is perceived as delayed, vague, or overly critical without supportive scaffolding, it can erode the student's confidence and intellectual risk-taking, undermining the core of the educational enterprise.

To bridge this gap, a multi-pronged approach is recommended. First, institutions should move beyond assuming supervisory competence and implement mandatory, ongoing development programs. These should equip supervisors with skills for providing structured, formative feedback and emphasise the importance of the relational, human aspects of mentorship. Second, the adoption of a formal supervision compact or agreement at the start of the candidature is essential. This living document would facilitate a dialogue to align explicitly expectations on meeting frequency, communication protocols, feedback turnaround times, and the scope of pastoral support, thereby pre-empting many common sources of conflict.

The implications of these findings are profound. For students, persistent negative experiences can lead to decreased well-being, imposter syndrome, and thesis non-completion. For institutions, this represents a significant loss of talent, diminished research output, and reputational damage. Conversely, by humanising the supervisory relationship by recognising that a graduate student is not merely a junior academic but a whole person navigating a complex life stage universities can cultivate a more inclusive, productive, and equitable academic culture. This shift from a purely transactional model of supervision to a relational, person-centered one is not a soft option but a strategic imperative. It is the key to enhancing completion rates, improving research quality, and, most importantly, ensuring that the arduous journey of a graduate degree is a transformative and empowering experience rather than a solitary ordeal.

5. Conclusion

Based on the comparative analysis of lecturer and graduate perspectives, this study concludes that a significant perceptual gap exists regarding the effectiveness of academic supervision in South-West Nigerian public universities. The findings have shown that graduates have consistently reported lack of accessibility and lack of mentorship and supervision, which is largely unrecognized by their lecturers and is critically affecting postgraduate education.

A key limitation is the study's geographical focus on South-West Nigeria, which constrains the generalisability of the findings to other regions. It is also subject to response bias because it is based on self-reports.

Future studies should thus adopt a longitudinal design to follow the development of relationships between supervisors and students over time. It is also crucial to widen the scope of the study to cover private universities and other geo-political zones across Nigeria to gain insights into supervisor-student relationships at the national level.

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