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SUPERVISORY FEEDBACK PRACTICES AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES DEVELOPMENT IN PAKISTANI POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISION

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ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, supervisory feedback for postgraduate studies is of critical importance particularly because the classroom environment is within an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. This means that scholars must adapt to a learning environment where the main medium of instruction is not their native language all the while developing disciplinary knowledge, proficiency, and research competence in their subject matter. Irrespective of this significance, supervisory feedback practices themselves remain mainly unexamined in Pakistan. This study investigates the nature, delivery, and tangible impact of supervisory feedback amongst Master's and MPhil scholars and supervisors in Pakistan. This research also particularly examines the contribution supervisory feedback practices make to development of academic literacy. 83 research supervisors and 220 postgraduate research scholars from both private and public universities in Pakistan were questioned via a cross-sectional survey in order to collect data. Two structured surveys covered supervisory practices, how feedback is delivered, how the communication for feedback takes place, how the scholars then engage with it, and how supervisors and scholars see the role of feedback in research work. Academic Literacies Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Dialogism, and Scaffolding were applied for interpretation of data that were analysed using statistics. Supervisory feedback is mostly developmental and multimodal as it is not limited to language correction but also encompasses concerns regarding conceptual understanding, organisation, methodology, and the discipline itself. The feedback is delivered in multiple forms: in person, via written or digital commentary, and through online interactions and online platforms. Regular interaction is deemed important by both supervisors and scholars as it allows effective feedback. The findings also point out to how supervisory feedback strengthens academic literacies development by enhancing disciplinary socialisation, research competency, and academic writing, all of which contribute significantly towards fostering academic independence. This study posits that supervisory feedback is simply not a corrective procedure but a dialogic and scaffolded process that is essential to participation of postgraduate students in academia. The findings have implications for supervisory practice, research training, and academic writing support within Pakistani higher education and comparative ESL contexts.

Keywords: *supervisory feedback, academic literacies, postgraduate supervision, research writing, scaffolding, dialogism, sociocultural theory, Pakistan*

1. Introduction

Globalisation has made academic writing the core component of postgraduate research. English has become the international language of scholarly communication across disciplines. This means that research proposals, theses, dissertations, journal articles, and conference papers have to be produced in English. For postgraduate scholars in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, this entails a mastery of language suited enough to

create academic writing in English that conforms to expectations and disciplinary conventions. This has led to academic writing itself becoming an important facet within postgraduate education, one that requisitions development of academic writing competence.

At postgraduate level, writing goes beyond simple grammatical coherence and lingual fluency. Scholars are expected to be able to be critical when engaging with literature, make strong arguments, use proper methodologies, and place their work within the contemporary disciplinary contexts. This is exactly where the concept of academic literacies comes in, developed by Lea and Street (1998). Academic literacies is a complex set of socially situated literacy practices involving knowledge construction, disciplinary participation, identity formation, and engagement with institutional expectations. ESL scholars are naturally challenged when developing these said literacies because they have to deal with disciplinary practices and research knowledge on one hand and demands of academic English on the other.

In Pakistan, English has a privileged position in higher education and research. Majority of postgraduate programmes in English languages, linguistics, and literature, and related disciplines make it compulsory for scholars to exclusively research in English. The problem here is that numerous studies have shown that Pakistani scholars do struggle with English in relation to academic writing. These difficulties include use of language suited for argumentation, academic coherence and organisation, and familiarity with disciplinary jargon. Scholars might have ample knowledge of their discipline, the problem lies in the fact that the students then do not have the appropriate diction to communicate their knowledge coherently. These issues become incandescent during dissertations and theses, where students are expected to demonstrate both disciplinary expertise and advanced academic literacy practices.

In this context, research supervision assumes a pivotal role. Research supervisors serve not only as evaluators of student work but also as mentors, guides, and mediators who facilitate students' participation in academic discourse communities. Through written comments, verbal discussions, consultations, and other forms of interaction, supervisors help students understand disciplinary expectations, improve their research writing, and develop greater independence as researchers. Supervisory feedback therefore constitutes one of the most significant pedagogical mechanisms through which postgraduate students acquire academic literacy practices and learn to function as members of scholarly communities.

Feedback in higher education is deemed highly important, an importance accepted in the worldwide academia. Effective feedback lets students be aware of their academic weak spots, improve their argumentation, and improve their overall writing. Feedback also contributes to student motivation, confidence, and academic identity formation, not only to textual improvement. Contemporary perspectives increasingly view feedback as a dialogic and developmental process, not as a one-way transmission of corrections. Through this entire process, participants negotiate meaning and facilitate learning. Such perspectives emphasize interaction, collaboration, and students' active engagement in interpreting and responding to feedback.

Existing research on feedback in Pakistan either mainly focuses on undergraduate contexts or it assesses feedback mainly pertaining to correction, learning outcomes or faculty performance. Thus supervisory feedback remains unexamined even when its need and significance is globally acknowledged. Furthermore, most of this work limits feedback to a confined role enhancing written proficiency and correcting language. Similarly, limited attention has been given to postgraduate research supervision. Feedback in research supervision performs a more broad role encompassing methodological guidance, academic identity formation, and disciplinary socialisation, all go beyond simple language correction.

In addition, past research has been conducted on either supervisors' or students' perceptions separately. Consequently, the available knowledge on supervisory feedback as a relational and developmental process in postgraduate research

supervision is still rather limited. There are still a number of questions that need to be addressed, such as the nature of the supervisory feedback, how the feedback is given, how do students react to it, and what does it do for the development of academic literacies for postgraduate research scholars? These problems are of special significance in the context of ESL students' experience, especially in Pakistan where postgraduate students often need guidance from their supervisors in considering new academic conventions and the expectations for them in the fields of their study.

In order to fill this void, the present study investigates the practices of supervisory feedback at MS/MPhil level in the universities of Pakistan. The study is based on the survey responses obtained from both research supervisors and research scholars, highlighting the process of giving feedback, the content of the feedback, students' perceptions of and reaction to the feedback provided by their research supervisors, and the impact of such feedback on students' academic growth. The study provides a more holistic perspective of supervisory feedback than as a one-way instructional activity by including the voices of both supervisors and supervisees.

This study is based on four complementary theoretical perspectives. The Academic Literacies Model (Lea & Street, 1998) treats writing as a social activity that is influenced by disciplinary, institutional, and ideological factors. The focus of Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is mediated interaction and collaborative learning in intellectual development. Both Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic approach and Bruner's (1983) theory of scaffolding emphasize the mutual construction of meaning through interaction and dialogue, and the provision of structured support for the learner to master something more complex than his or her current level of competence. These two views offer a foundation to the concept of supervisory feedback as a developmental experience that fosters learning, participation and academic development.

This study aims, therefore, to look into the nature of supervisory feedback practices in post graduate research supervision and to examine the role of such feedback in the development of academic literacies of the research scholars in the context of ESL in Pakistani universities. The study focuses on the nature of supervisory feedback practices, postgraduate scholars' response to feedback and the impact of feedback on academic literacy development. In this process it provides empirical evidence from an under-researched field in higher education research and suggestions that can be used for supervisory practice, post graduate research training and academic writing support programs in Pakistani universities and other ESL contexts.

The study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What supervisory feedback practices characterize MS/MPhil research supervision in Pakistani universities?

RQ2: How do postgraduate research scholars perceive and engage with supervisory feedback?

RQ3: How does supervisory feedback contribute to the development of academic literacies among postgraduate research scholars?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Supervisory Feedback in Postgraduate Research Supervision

Research supervision is recognised to be one of the most important parts of post-graduate education. Supervision provides an introduction to the disciplinary knowledge, research practice, academic writing conventions, and academic identities of novice researchers. Feedback is a crucial component of supervision, standing as one of its key dimensions, as it is the primary tool for supervisors to convey expectations, assess performance, and support learning. As a result, supervisory feedback has been the focus of sustained scholarly interest for the last twenty years (Wisker et al., 2003; Lee, 2007; Charteris, 2016; Guerin, 2023).

Lee (2007) suggested one of the most influential conceptualizations of postgraduate supervision, whereby he described a number of supervisory orientations which are functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and relationship-development. All of these views imply that supervision is more than just about project

management; it is about intellectual, social, emotional and disciplinary aspects. Of particular interest to the current study is the enculturation perspective of Lee who considers supervision as a process of socialization into disciplinary communities and scholarly practices. Feedback is an integral part of this process in that it allows supervisors to share with students expectations for discipline and to help students develop appropriate academic activities.

In recent years the complexity of supervisory feedback has come to the fore in much of the scholarship. Feedback has been defined as a multidimensional process, not just a process of fixing, and includes evaluation, conversation, mentoring and academic growth (Chugh et al., 2022; Guerin, 2023). It is expected that supervisors will comment on a wide range of elements in the students' work, such as conceptual development, conceptual framing, method, argumentation, structure, presentation and language. Thus, effective supervisory feedback should not only be disciplinary but also teaching and learning oriented and promote intellectual growth.

The multi-dimensionality of supervisory feedback is evident in Kumar and Stracke's (2007) influential typology, which classified supervisory comments into three types: referential, directive and expressive. Referential feedback refers to content, structure and organization; Directive feedback, refers to instructions, suggestions and questions that will help students to revise; Expressive feedback, refers to praise, criticism and evaluative judgments. Further investigations have always shown that effective supervision generally combines these types of feedback, rather than any one of them (Saeed et al., 2021; Al Khatnai, 2023).

2.2 Feedback and Academic Writing Development

One of the most difficult components of post-graduate studies, especially for learners using English as a Second Language (ESL), is academic writing. The ability to write research proposals, theses, dissertations, and scholarly publications involves more than just being fluent in the language; it also involves understanding the conventions of that discourse, research practices, and the accepted conventions of academic argumentation. Supervisory feedback is thus an important element in helping students' writing to progress.

According to Hyland and Hyland (2006), feedback is a tool for development, which helps learners make progress through drafting, revision and reflection. Feedback should not be a device for judging the work but should be used to help students reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and to improve their writing techniques. Likewise, Evans (2013) suggests that feedback ought to be interpreted as a process of supporting understanding of quality and connecting the learner's actual performance with his desired performance. Supervisory feedback is consistently found to be an important part of writing development in studies in postgraduate settings. As a view of dissertation writing as something more than a production of text, Paré and Starke-Meyerring (2008) propose that it is a process of entailing one's participation in the disciplinary communities. Students develop rhetorical conventions, epistemological assumptions, and communicative practices within their disciplines through feedback and revision. Similarly, Kamler and Thomson (2006) highlight the pedagogical function of supervisors as mentors who help students build their academic voice, arguments, and craft their scholarly identities.

Supervisory feedback has always been found to be a significant factor in the learning of writing in postgraduate studies. According to Paré & Starke-Meyerring (2008), the dissertation writing process is not just a text production process, but is also a process of participation in disciplinary communities. Feedback and revision helps students master the rhetorical norms, epistemological beliefs, and communication practices of their disciplines. Kamler and Thomson (2006) also stress the pedagogical function of supervisors in assisting students to develop their academic voice, bolster arguments, and build up their scholarly identities.

Clear, specific, and developmental feedback has been proven in empirical studies to be especially

appreciated by students. Effective supervisory feedback is able to offer students actionable guidance, and to encourage students to critically engage with their own work (East, Bitchener, & Basturkmen, 2012). Ambiguous or critical feedback on the other hand may make learning difficult and may diminish student confidence. According to Neupane Bastola (2021), if the feedback was mostly critical, it caused anxiety and demotivation among the students, while if the feedback was mostly constructive and supportive, it boosted student engagement and learning.

Written corrective feedback is also of great importance, as indicated by research that emphasizes the need to balance correction with development. Bitchener and Ferris (2012) believe that corrective feedback is important to linguistic accuracy but effective feedback should also help to build up general writing skills. In post-graduate supervision, this difference is of particular importance because the student is required to learn how to write properly as well as how to think, argue, and communicate like a researcher.

2.3 Feedback, Academic Socialization, and Enculturation

The current way of thinking about the supervision of postgraduates is that it is a process of academic socialisation, not just a management system. Academic socialization is how students acquire norms, values, identities, and communication practices to engage in academic communities (Duff, 2010). In this view, feedback is considered as an important means of sharing and negotiating disciplinary expectations.

Enculturation is especially significant in postgraduate research writing. Supervisors are considered to be a key factor in the enculturation of students into disciplinary communities, according to Lee (2007). Feedback from supervisors allows them to impart what is legitimate knowledge, acceptable evidence, persuasive argumentation, and effective scholarly communication. These expectations are scaffolded and over time, students internalize them, and gain the skills necessary to engage in academic discourse. Numerous studies have shown that supervisory feedback plays a role in students' development as researchers and writers through the process of socializing with the discipline.

Anderson (2020) claims that supervisory comments are social practices which situate students in specific academic identities and communities. Likewise, Kim (2018) discovered that feedback is a key factor in doctoral students' academic writing development, in relation to the conventions and expectations of the discipline. In the case of ESL, this socialization is of great importance as students are required to deal with both linguistic and disciplinary issues at the same time. Supervisory feedback serves as a tool for students to learn from not only the improvement of their own texts, but also how to engage in the larger knowledge creation process of their disciplines.

2.4 Dialogic and Developmental Perspectives on Feedback

New research has begun to question the conventional idea of feedback as a transmission, in which students are passive recipients of feedback from the supervisor. Feedback, however, is now broadly understood as a dialogic process, in which interaction, negotiation and active engagement of the learner play a key role (Carless, 2015; Charteris, 2016).

Carless (2015) suggests that dialogue is important in the development of effective feedback, not one way communication. Students need to understand feedback, ask questions about it, discuss comments and implement suggestions when creating later work. Likewise, Charteris (2016) sees feedback as a relationship based process which is formed through interaction between teachers and learners and not just through the comments provided.

Feedback dialogue has gained more traction in the realm of higher education research. Carless, Jung, and Li (2024) point out that the interactive processes are essential for meaningful feedback to be generated, and that it allows students to actively interact with feedback and contribute to the co-construction of understanding. This view is very similar to Bakhtinian conceptions of meaning-making in which meaning is created when

meaning is shared through multiple voices, not transmitted.

Dialogic feedback can be important in postgraduate supervision where research writing can be ambiguous, complex and often have multiple interpretations. Ongoing conversations, questions and problem-solving activities facilitate students' opportunities to clarify expectations and build more sophisticated understandings about their research.

Dialogic feedback is also a strategy for fostering learner autonomy. Supervisors can ask the student to think critically, consider other options and choose what they want to do, instead of offering them the solutions upfront. This practice helps build independent researchers, who can engage with scholarly discourse with confidence.

2.5 Feedback as Scaffolding and Academic Literacies Development

Scaffolding and academic literacies can be used as lenses to better understand the developmental role of supervisory feedback. A sociocultural point of view on learning is that it takes place when learners interact with more competent people who facilitate them in achieving more than they can do independently (X). In postgraduate supervision, this role is undertaken by the supervisor who offers guidance to facilitate learners' intellectual and academic growth.

Scaffolding is a construct developed by Bruner (1983) that can provide an understanding of how supervisory feedback supports learning. Supervisors offer temporary support in the form of comments, suggestions, questions and discussions, allowing students to build more complicated research and writing comprehension. Increased responsibility will be given to students as they become more proficient, and they will become more independent.

The literature shows that scaffolding is crucial in the context of research supervision. Wisker et al (2003) believe that effective supervision is the ability to set up positive learning contexts to guide students to become independent learners. Similarly, Zhang and Hyland (2021) highlight that a supervisory feedback is a 'scaffold' for thesis development and researcher development. Students engage in cycles of interaction and revision and acquire the skills needed for independent research, and academic writing skills are developed as well.

The Academic Literacies Model is a more comprehensive approach to understanding these processes. As Lea and Street (1998) claim, academic writing should not be considered a technical skill but rather a socially constructed activity that is a part of a community of practice. In this view, supervisory feedback plays a role in the academic literacies of students, which can be explained in terms of the conventions of the discipline, negotiating scholarly identities and dealing with the expectations of the institution. Feedback from supervisors can therefore be considered as a pedagogical and a social activity. It promotes textual improvement, and it helps students enter into communities of scholars and become independent scholars.

2.6 Research Gap

Although there has been a significant amount of research into feedback and post graduate supervision, there are still some significant gaps. Most of the existing research work has been confined to classroom and undergraduate level—postgraduate supervision has been left relatively light. Research also tends to look at the supervisor's perspective or the student's perspective, but not both at the same time and in the same place, which is what feedback is: a relationship. Academic literacies work does focus on socialization and disciplinary participation, but empirical studies following the processes of those behaviors using supervisory feedback to drive the processes are still relatively scarce. There is even less focus on postgraduate education in Pakistan, and very few studies that include the perspectives of both supervisor and student.

This study expands into that territory. In the Pakistani context, at the MS/MPhil level in Universities, it studies the feedback practice of the supervisor and the supervisee without giving emphasis to either of them. Based on the academic literacies, sociocultural learning, dialogism, and scaffolding analysis of the nature, delivery, and perceived impact of feedback, the study moves

toward a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of how supervisory feedback actually works within a higher education context in which English language learners are the students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional survey design with the vision of mapping supervisory feedback practices and role of supervisory feedback in the development of academic literacies for post graduate research scholars of Pakistani universities. Surveying was sensible here because it allowed for the study to include a large sample of respondents from many institutions, and to include the viewpoints of the supervisor and supervisee in the same study. The sampling of both was intentional as the nature of feedback delivery, experience and interpretation requires listening from both of the relationship, i.e. postgraduate and supervisor.

The study was conducted in the pragmatic research paradigm. The survey design was a choice of pragmatism, not a single definitive approach, as it was best suited for the research questions. It revealed the dominant supervisory practices, identified patterns of interaction, assessed the effectiveness of feedback, and explained how feedback influences research and writing progress, all with one, easily replicable tool.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the present study were divided into two groups, namely research supervisors and post-graduate research scholars in MS/MPhil Programme in the English language, linguistics, literature, ELT and related fields. Purposive and convenience sampling was employed for recruiting from public and private universities of Pakistan. To be eligible, supervisors had to be actively supervising MS/MPhil research; scholars had to be currently enrolled in—or recently finished with—an MS/MPhil thesis in English language, linguistics, literature, ELT, or a related field.

A total of 83 faculty members were the supervisor sample. All were involved in the supervision of postgraduate students in their research at the time of the study. The range of disciplinary backgrounds in the group was broad and so too was their experience from the early career manager still establishing their practice to the more experienced academics with many postgraduate theses completed.

Table 1A: Supervisor Characteristics (n = 83)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Supervision Area	Literature	35	42.2
	Linguistics	19	22.9
	Linguistics & ELT	9	10.8
	Interdisciplinary	7	8.4
	Other Areas	13	15.7
Supervisory Experience	Less than 5 years	33	39.8
	5–10 years	36	31.3
	More than 10 years	24	28.9

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding and aggregation of smaller disciplinary categories.

The spread of the supervisor sample is presented in Table 1A. The largest discipline group were literature specialists (42.2%) followed by linguistics specialists (22.9%). The distribution of experience was fairly even 39.8% less than five years, 31.3% between five and ten years, and 28.9% over ten years. That spread is important, because it ensures that the discoveries don't only come from a particular corner of a discipline, or a particular point in a career.

A sample of 220 MS/MPhil research scholars of the students was considered. All had theses either in progress or recently completed, for the most part comprising a large portion of the research. The range in universities and research specializations within the group is wide, which

provides a broad spectrum for reading postgraduate supervision practices within the higher education system in Pakistan, instead of a narrow view of the same.

Table 1B. Institutional Distribution of Student Participants (n = 220)

Institution	n	%
NUML	58	26.4
COMSATS Islamabad	32	14.5
IIUI	28	12.7
Foundation University Islamabad	22	10.0
Rawalpindi Women University	19	8.6
Air University	6	2.7
Other Universities	55	25.0

Note. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

The presence of both supervisors and supervisees allowed for a complementary perspective on supervisory feedback, and for cross-comparison of feedback practices reported by supervisors and feedback experiences reported by students.

3.3 Research Instruments

Data was collected using two structured survey instruments, both of which were designed for this study.

The first was the Supervisor Survey (SpS) that directly focused on the feedback process of supervisors. It included supervisory arrangement, communication channels, frequency of meeting, accessibility, method of providing feedback and how supervisors determine its effectiveness. The survey questions were composed of both demographic and practice oriented questions and multiple response questions were used for which more than one answer was possible as appropriate.

The second, the Supervisee Survey (StS), was sent to post-graduate students and illustrated their lived experience of supervision and feedback. It explored access to supervisors, modes of interaction, frequency of feedback, clarity of feedback comments, opportunities to ask for clarification, feedback effectiveness, and students' understanding of the feedback function with respect to enhancing research performance and academic writing.

Research supervision, feedback practices, academic writing development and post graduate learning all contributed to the design of both instruments, which began with a literature review. The items for the survey were then aligned with the research goals of the study and theory used—thus covering tight and avoiding any central phenomenon of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

All data collection was done via the internet. All the respondents were informed about the study and participation was voluntary. Professional networks, departmental contacts, academic groups and direct approach to potential participants in various universities of Pakistan were used for distribution. The decision to go online was a practical one—it allowed for participation of people hailing from geographically distant institutions, and it meant that the gathering of data from both supervisors and scholars was made much easier. Answers came in over several months giving enough time to recruit respondents and allow them to work through the instruments without being rushed.

The respondents were assured before they were asked to participate that they could refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. No personally identifying information was reported in the analysis, and all responses were kept confidential.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis was based on descriptive statistics. To reveal patterns in supervisory practices and students' experiences, frequencies, percentages, and comparative summaries were computed; the frequency of each type of feedback and

communication mode, supervisory arrangements, and the students' and supervisors' judgments of the effectiveness of feedback.

Those numbers had to be translated into a meaningful structure, presenting the findings in themed groups, according to the major areas of a postgraduate supervision. The interpretation was organized in five categories: type of institutional supervision, ways in which feedback is provided, how often and how easy supervision is, how students engage with feedback, and how supervision helps students develop academic literacy.

Supervisor and supervisee responses were then juxtaposed against one another; looking for areas of convergence and divergence. That comparison did work: it revealed where supervisors said they actually ended up on the student side, and where they were not.

The findings were then analyzed using four theoretical frameworks: Academic Literacies Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Dialogism and Scaffolding Theory to extract the developmental and social aspects of supervisory feedback that could not be captured by frequencies alone.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of educational studies were followed in the study. There was complete voluntary participation—all respondents were given information about the purpose of the study, the use of their information, and an opportunity to leave without any repercussions.

All communication has been kept confidential and anonymous. There was no identifying information that ended up in the findings and all information was retained securely. The researchers remained focused on participants' experience and perception of supervisory feedback, which was very low-risk territory, by design.

These procedures were not just merely ticking of the boxes. They represented postgraduate research supervision in Pakistani universities, in terms of providing a transparent, responsible and defensible way to collect and analyse data in the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Institutional Conditions of Research Supervision

The overall situation of supervisory arrangements in the Pakistani universities at the postgraduate level was stable. Majority of the research scholars (85.9% (n = 189)) had a single supervisor throughout the entire research programme, only 11.4% (n = 25) changed supervisor once and only 2.7% (n = 6) changed two or more times. The institutional mechanisms keeping postgraduate supervision on track were also reflected in the responses of supervisees on how well their own departments run the process: 77.3% (n = 170) of the supervisees indicated that their department was good at running the supervision process.

Student agency was a feature of the selection of supervisors too. They chose their own supervisors for research, as opposed to being assigned a supervisor, around 63.2% (n = 139) of students, and this was confirmed by the responses from the supervisors as well, which indicated that there was a common trend of matching students to supervisors based on their research interests throughout institutions. Such alignment probably actually works – shared intellectual ground is more conducive to productive supervisory relations.

But the figures do not make for a complete story. Supervisors detailed the differences in workloads and intermittent re-assignments, pressures within the institution that impacted on supervisory practice, regardless of the individual's skill or desire to do so. Academic Literacies theory comes into use here: it firmly posits that learning and academic development are ever embedded in wider institutional settings (Lea & Street, 1998). Supervisory feedback isn't a standalone process, it relies on institutional conditions that allow sustained interaction to occur in the first place.

4.2 Modalities and Mechanisms of Feedback Delivery

Feedback to supervisors was very multi-modal. The leading category of comments and annotations on student drafts was written comments and annotations with 80.7% (n = 67) of supervisors using them. The other types of feedback included during meetings were discussion-based (66.3%, n

= 55), verbal comments (48.2%, n = 40), general written feedback (47.0%, n = 39), and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and telephone calls (42.2%, n = 35).

Table 2. Supervisors' Reported Feedback Modes (n = 83)

Feedback Mode	Frequency	Percentage
Comments/Annotations on Drafts	67	80.7%
Discussion during Meetings	55	66.3%
Verbal Feedback	40	48.2%
General Written Feedback	39	47.0%
WhatsApp/Phone Communication	35	42.2%

Note. Participants could select more than one response.

An internal dissemination of written feedback strategies was evident. Direct instructions was the most frequent method with 63.0% (n = 51) of supervisors using this approach. The top three items were identifying patterns of error or weakness (56.8% = n = 46), bracketed comments (53.1% = n = 43), and track changes in word-processing software (51.9% = n = 42). Less frequent (but not uncommon) were end comments (38.3%, n = 31), positive or negative reinforcement statements (34.6%, n = 28), and only 21.0% (n = 17) reported using simple highlighting without explanation.

Table 3: Written Feedback Strategies

Strategy	n	%
Direct instructions	51	63.0
Pattern identification	46	56.8
Bracketed comments	43	53.1
Track changes	42	51.9
End comments	31	38.3
Reinforcement	28	34.6
Highlighting only	17	21.0

Note. Participants could select more than one response.

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The results indicate that the feedback given by the supervisor is not necessarily limited to correcting particular text problems, but often contains explanatory and developmental content. It is evident that supervision is not simply the transmission of corrections, as the use of comments and annotations and discussion feedback shows. The results confirm Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic approach that views learning as a process that develops as a result of interaction between multiple voices. Feedback seems to be a process for communication between supervisor and student, which serves to negotiate meaning, expectations and what is understood in the discipline.

4.3 Frequency, Accessibility, and Feedback Cycles

Supervisory feedback was not a single occurrence, but was a continuous process of revision and interaction. Supervisors said that they met with students face-to-face at least once a week, consulted with students on-line, and communicated with students via electronic means. Many remained available outside of regular meetings as well, so that students could ask questions at other times after the meeting, but not waiting for the next meeting.

Table 4. Selected Indicators of Supervisory Engagement

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
Students reporting supervision continuity	189	85.9%
Students reporting departmental facilitation	170	77.3%
Supervisors establishing deadlines	59	71.1%
Supervisors reporting effective communication with most/all students	75	90.3%

This picture was enhanced by structured timelines. Most supervisors (71.1%; n = 59) had a deadline for submitting drafts and for revisions; 26.5% (n = 22) said the deadline was dependent on the stage of the project or research. Only 2.4% (n = 2) didn't use them at all. Combined, these patterns suggest a model for supervised work that has cycles of submission, feedback, revision, resubmission, and so forth.

Theoretically, that's the structure that matters that much, not practically. Sociocultural perspective, recurrent feedback loops: students don't have to struggle to come up with ideas on their own; somebody has to work with them, through successive drafts and show them the distance between where their work is and where it is supposed to be (Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner (1983) can be directly mapped to this: repeated interactions with a supervisor progress the student from relying on supervisory guidance to becoming a fully-fledged autonomous researcher and writer.

4.4 Nature and Focus of Supervisory Feedback

Supervisory feedback was not only related to language—it was on various aspects of the quality of the research. The language use was the most popular at (90.4%, n = 75), followed by the organization and structure (85.5%, n = 71), and the theoretical content (85.5%, n = 71). Formatting and presentation were also mentioned: 65.1% (n = 54) of supervisors identified this was a focus area.

Table 5. Supervisors' Reported Areas of Feedback Focus (n = 83)

Feedback Area	Frequency	Percentage
Language Use	75	90.4%
Organization and Structure	71	85.5%
Theoretical Content	71	85.5%
Presentation and Formatting	54	65.1%

These numbers contradict the notion that feedback is largely corrective. While the use of language was important - particularly in the context of ESL - the higher order issues of conceptual clarity, theoretical positioning and organisational coherence seem to have received attention from supervisors. That's not proofreading. It's intellectual development. And it dovetails into previous studies that reveal the benefits of supervisory feedback go far beyond just correcting text.

Supervisors were largely confident that their feedback landed. Over half—57.8% (n = 48)—said most of their students understood and acted on feedback effectively; another 32.5% (n = 27) went further, believing all of their students did. Only 9.6% (n = 8) felt effective communication was reaching just some students. From the supervisor side, then, feedback was generally seen as understandable, constructive, and something students could actually act on.

The focus on organization, theory, and conceptual development communicates something important, from a dialogic perspective, because the feedback is not only about the use of language in terms of its cleanliness, but it is also influencing scholarly thinking. These supervisors were not assessing, but rather serving as intellectual coaches, engaging students in the depths of discipline, knowledge and research process.

4.5 Feedback and Academic Literacies Development

Table 6A Supervisor and Student Perceptions of Feedback Focus

Feedback Area	Supervisors (%)	Students (%)
Language	90.4	45.9
Organization	85.5	63.6
Theoretical Content	85.5	75.0
Presentation	65.1	33.6

Table 6A adds to the picture. There was also an extremely high level of language-related feedback, far higher than students felt they received, with scores of 90.4% and 45.9% respectively and the same figures also emerged for organization and theoretical content and presentation. Students and supervisors were not engaged in the same kind of feedback interaction. That disconnect strengthens the dialogic argument directly: if there is no continuing interaction and clarification, then the supervisor's message and the student's message can be quite different.

However, developmental data is the most important. Feedback was a regular theme in which students consistently reported that it advanced their research skills, improved their writing skills, and strengthened their understanding of what is expected of them in the discipline. These, together, did not just make one skill better. They delivered academic improvement on several fronts simultaneously.

Table 6B:
Students' Perceptions of the Developmental Role of Supervisory Feedback (n = 220)

Indicator	Response Category	n	%
Feedback improves research performance (R24)	Always/Often	194	88.2
	Sometimes/Rarely/Never	26	11.8
Feedback is supportive and encouraging (R25)	Always/Often	189	85.9
	Sometimes/Rarely/Never	31	14.1
Feedback varies across research stages (R16)	Yes	119	54.1
	No	66	30.0
	Don't know	35	15.9
Most emphasized feedback areas (R17)	Theoretical Content	165	75.0
	Organization	140	63.6
	Language	101	45.9
	Presentation	74	33.6

Note. Data compiled from StS items R16, R17, R24, and R25. Multiple responses were permitted for R17.

Table 6B makes it clear that feedback was developmental and supportive to an overwhelming degree for all of the supervisees. Just under 90% reported that feedback enhanced their research work and a comparable number were encouraged by feedback. Theory/content and organization received the greatest emphasis in the feedback, and were cited to emphasize supervision beyond language correction towards disciplinary thinking and scholarly argumentation. One catch: more than half of respondents reported that they had observed the feedback varying depending on the stage, which means adaptive scaffolding was occurring, albeit not uniformly so as to be a commonly experienced phenomenon.

Feedback had three key strands in how it influenced the development of academic literacies. First, it provided students with a working knowledge of the conventions of the discipline (how research is organized, how scholarly communication works, what is expected on the page in the field. Second, it developed research skills in a direct way: it wasn't a coincidence that it gave guidance on theoretical framing,

argumentation and methodological decision making, it was due to feedback. Third—and most dramatically over the longest journey—iterative cycles of revision and reflection led step by step from dependence to independence, from novice researcher to a scholar who can stand his own work's creation in judgment.

All of these findings fit well into the Academic Literacies model (Lea & Street, 1998), which views writing as a socially situated practice rather than a technical skill to be drilled. From this perspective, supervisory feedback is the mechanism by which students are able to access disciplinary mode(s) of thinking, writing, and constructing knowledge. It's not a correction, it's a dialogue. Bruner's scaffolding is also parallel: support is given temporarily, but in specific areas that will be removed as the student becomes able to plan and carry out increasingly difficult research tasks independently.

Supervisory feedback, taken as a whole, is not a correction tool. It's a process—guidance, dialogue, socialization, and academic development running together across the full arc of a research programme. Through sustained interaction with supervisors, postgraduate scholars build the academic literacies they need to participate meaningfully in disciplinary communities—not just to finish a thesis, but to function as researchers.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study examined supervisory feedback in Pakistani post-graduate universities and investigated the nature of supervisory feedback in the context of academic literacies development of MS/MPhil research scholars. It included information from supervisors and scholars about the institutional environment for supervision, the nature of feedback, the sources of feedback, the focus of supervisory comments and the perception of the role of feedback in academic development.

The results are unequivocal - supervisory feedback extends beyond language correction. Supervisors indicated that they worked on several aspects of students' inquiries, including conceptual, organizational, theoretical, methodological, and academic aspects of students' writing. For the students, feedback was a real source of guidance, an improvement of their research performance and a strengthening of their writing and would make the expectations of post graduate research legible. What arose was not feedback itself as a single moment of instruction but a dynamic process of interaction, consultation, revision, and negotiation of meaning between supervisors and supervisees.

There was no single channel for supervisory feedback. All written comments, all face-to-face meetings, online interactions, and informal digital communication was in play and quite important. Various types of engagement generated long-term discussions and attracted students to the world of the disciplines instead of keeping them on the fringes. The feedback was effective and engaged students, as a result of the availability of the supervisor, frequent communication, and actual opportunities for clarification.

With the lens of Academic Literacies Theory, supervisory feedback is not simply correctional, but it is a portal through which students are able to acquire disciplinary modes of writing, thinking and knowledge construction. The feedback here was not about cleaning up text: it was all about academic socialization, making students part of the academic discourse communities and helping them read the expectations of the discipline. Rather than merely highlighting what is wrong, shift to a sociocultural view, and feedback should be understood as an act of supervising students' learning process to ensure they become competent and independent.

Move to a sociocultural perspective, and feedback will be understood as action of supervision, assisting students to move toward competence and independence in their learning process. The dialogic dimension crosses both, meaning was not delivered by the supervisor to the student, but was constructed in the interaction. It is tied together by scaffolding theory – structured support, repeatedly and gradually, students become free to research independently.

These results are very relevant to the practice of postgraduate education. Universities should not see supervisory feedback as an administrative activity as part of a thesis, it is a pedagogical

practice and should be treated as such. Here, concrete work is needed in professional learning activities that are designed to strengthen supervisors' capacity to support students' academic learning, as well as research quality: constructive, dialogic, and genuinely developmental feedback practices.

Supervisory arrangements, at the departmental level, should be in place to enable regular interaction and timely feedback, not just in policy, but in practice. Continuity of supervision, clarity in the supervisors' research expertise to incoming students and maintenance of communication channels between supervisors and students can positively influence students' learning and research outcomes. The feedback cycles this study identified are not just natural occurrences but instead involve persistent interaction between supervisors and supervisees, as well as institutional policies that actively safeguard the conditions for such interaction.

Postgraduate programmes need to stop assuming students will pick up advanced research writing skills on their own—academic literacies development is a shared responsibility, and programmes should name it as such. Supervisory feedback can anchor that process, but it works better when it's not carrying the full load alone. Research writing workshops, academic literacy programmes, discipline-specific writing support—these institutional structures don't replace supervisory feedback; they reinforce it.

The study has real limitations. Self-reported survey data captures what participants perceived and remembered—not what actually happened inside supervisory interactions. That gap matters. Future research would benefit from pairing surveys with interviews, observational studies, or direct analysis of actual feedback comments—methods that get closer to how feedback is enacted and interpreted in practice, rather than how it's recalled after the fact.

Disciplinary variation in supervisory feedback is still largely unmapped—that's one direction future research could push. Longitudinal work tracking how students engage with feedback across the full arc of the research process would add something surveys can't capture. So would studies that tie specific feedback practices directly to postgraduate research outcomes, rather than relying on perceived impact. And comparative work—across different institutional contexts or international settings—could open up what supervisory feedback looks like when the higher education environment itself changes, building a broader picture of how feedback supports academic literacies development across genuinely diverse contexts.

Supervisory feedback sits at the heart of postgraduate research supervision—that's what this study keeps coming back to. It improves research texts, yes, but it does far more: guidance, socialization, dialogue, scaffolding—all of it runs through the feedback relationship. Sustained interaction with supervisors is how postgraduate scholars build the academic literacies, disciplinary understandings, and research competencies that let them participate fully in academic communities. As universities keep expanding postgraduate programmes, getting supervisory feedback right may be one of the most direct investments they can make in the scholars and researchers they're trying to produce.

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