

## Does Research Background Matter? Supervisory Experiences with a Thesis and Non-thesis Post-graduate Students

Syed Abdul Waheed<sup>1</sup>, Nadia Gilani<sup>2</sup>, Tariq Ali Khan<sup>3</sup>



### Abstract

Supervision of the research students is not a trouble-free task. It becomes more challenging when supervisors confront the students of varying potential to carry out the research during the process of the thesis. The researchers sought to explore the supervisory experience of post-graduate (M.Phil) students who had done a thesis and those who had not done a thesis in their last degree. Eleven supervisors of different universities in Punjab, Pakistan participated in this study. The participants were aged from 40 to 60 years and most of them were working as assistant professors. The interview method was used for collecting the data and were analyzed through coding, categorizing and describing the emerging themes from the interview transcripts. The results indicated that M.Phil students with a thesis in their last academic degree were found to be comparatively 'better' than non-thesis students regarding the conceptual understanding of the research process, using software, confidence and communication skills and they required less supervisory support. The results were presented in the form of emergent themes that described supervisory experiences with these two types of MPhil students. The study has implications for supervisors and research students, particularly for the non-thesis students who require additional skills to pursue their research degrees.

**Keywords:** *Thesis students, non-thesis students, higher education, supervisory experience, supervisory support*

### 1. Introduction

At the master's level, some of the students complete their studies with a thesis and the others accomplish their studies by opting for coursework. The students who complete theses in their master's degree have the ability to describe a specific topic comprehensively and have a curious nature (Harwood & Petric, 2017). Also, thesis students have a healthier approach to achieving career

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Research & Assessment, Faculty of Education, University of Okara, Pakistan Email: [s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk](mailto:s.a.waheed@uo.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, University of Okara, Pakistan Email: [nadia.gilani@uo.edu.pk](mailto:nadia.gilani@uo.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup> School Education Department, Government of the Punjab  
Email: [tariqmphilepm@gmail.com](mailto:tariqmphilepm@gmail.com)

opportunities and better job performance in the future (Semejin, Velden, Heijke, Vleuten, & Boshuizen, 2006; Yildirim-Tasti, O., Yılmaz, E., Demir, C. E. & Aksu, M., 2021). It was reported that the next generation of early career researchers requires knowledge of research, novel expertise, inspiration and inventiveness, critical thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, and cooperation (Kay, 2010; Watkins & Marsick, 2016) that requires them to opt for research thesis in their master degrees. A student with thesis work and effective writing skills will be able to judge the research situation carefully, logically and be able to use research insight in a better and more effective way (Lino & Duarte, 2011). The multifaceted nature of education research focuses on many aspects like comprehensiveness, critical knowledge and refined reviews of research (Rost, 2004).

On the other hand, non-thesis students require to develop a specific set of skills and abilities (Neusar, 2015). Both types of students have different advantages and disadvantages at the master's level and in their future studies and career. The supervisors assess the competence of thesis and non-thesis students by keeping them under observation during their research studies (Harwood & Petric, 2017). They gain insights about the group of students who perform well in gaining knowledge, experience, confidence, techniques, and ideas during the process of their research work. In other words, a research thesis is a tool for gauging the value of a master's degree program and the students (Butler, Pentony & Bong, 2017; Al Badi, 2015).

In the universities and other higher education institutions in Europe, a master's thesis is considered an integral component of the program (Meeus, Van Looy, & Libotton, 2004). It is because a master thesis develops self-determining ability or confidence among the students to speak and solve many problems rationally (Harwood & Petric, 2017). A thesis should reflect the capability to "test ideas", understand appropriate techniques, make appropriate use of already published work and other source material, and exhibit awareness of different theories and approaches (Koster, Tribushinina, de Jong, & Van den Bergh, 2015). A thesis is an example of a planned learning experience of research which is like a 'tangible product'. Many supervisors perceive that master students express learning experiences to the faculty when the faculty spends time for the guidance of students during the research procedure, talking about the problems, critically analyzing and giving productive feedback on the drafts of the thesis (Stracke & Kumar, 2010; Hyland, 2013, Bitchener, Bastrukmen & East, 2011; Yıldızhan & Güçlü, 2019).

### **1.1 Objectives of the Study**

This study is an attempt to explore supervisors' experiences in supervising the M.Phil students who had done a thesis and those who had not done a thesis in their last academic degree program. These students are referred to as thesis and non-thesis students respectively in this study. The supervisors while supervising these two types of MPhil students have varying perspectives and experiences with the level of expertise students have, the challenges they face, the interest in the field of research, pre-requisite skills for thesis, writing skills, attitude towards the supervisor and research, the motivation to pursue a thesis and the overall approach the students employ for conducting the theses.

Objectives of this study included to;

1. explore university teachers' experiences of supervising thesis and non-thesis students.
2. suggest ways to bring reforms for non-thesis students who face many difficulties and challenges during the entire research process.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

The following research questions were designed to achieve objectives:

1. What were supervisors' experiences of how do M.Phil students with thesis and non-thesis degrees in their last academic program differ from each other in their approach to conducting research?
2. What were the commonalities in M.Phil students' approach to conducting thesis who had done a master's degree with thesis and non-thesis in view of their supervisors?
3. What additional skills do M.Phil students with non-thesis in their last academic degree need to acquire to complete their thesis satisfactorily?

## **2. Literature Review**

The researchers described the possible benefits of research projects as a thesis or as independent or group projects (Harwood & Petric, 2017; Tasti et al., 2021). Thesis students gain more confidence to manage time, complete the diverse research projects, make efforts independently, improve their professional and interpersonal abilities and skills, develop collegial communication with a supervisor and gain intellectual development through seeking and creating the knowledge. On the other hand, non-thesis students do not have such ability to perform the tasks critically, skillfully, professionally, and effectively in the process of research (Butler, Pentoney & Bong, 2017).

A supervisor is assigned to assist the student in maintaining a quality research process for the best possible output in the form of a good thesis or dissertation. Because ending up with a thesis or dissertation with the best output is not as easy as someone thinks. The studies (Ekpoh, 2016; Ismail, Abidden &

Hassan, 2011; Yıldızhan & Güçlü, 2019) demonstrate that students have various problems and experiences when they conduct a thesis. The problems faced by the M.Phil (Master of Philosophy in a particular field of study) students are different when they conduct a research thesis. These problems may include the selection of topic, financial or economic problems during proceeding the research, less experience or research expertise, low tendency towards the research work, reading less literature in the research area, family issues, lack of funds and time, shortage of library resources, students failure to visit the supervisors regularly, language problems, demographic differences, shortage of research facilities, shortage of material, less attention by the students and lack of guidance by a supervisor (Claudius & Vincent, 2016).

Kaakinen, Suhonen, Lutovac and Kaasila (2017) reported that friends, seniors, peer groups and course-mates can also overcome the challenges and problems of graduate and post-graduate thesis students. It is a very complex phenomenon to handle and guide thesis students. Every supervisor has a different type of research experience and expertise in his field (Pearson, 2005). For example, supervision of qualitative theses is more comfortable for some supervisors but others prefer the quantitative theses. It is stated that poor coordination and lack of understanding between the student and supervisor generate some problems in the post-graduate and PhD supervising process (Watkins, & Marsick, 2016).

While conducting research by the students, the role of a supervisor is vital and critical. Better interaction with the students creates positive and a creative way of learning and leading the research project. When supervisors perceive that their students can perform research independently, they feel happy and excited (Ismail, Abiddin, & Hassan, 2011; Tahir, Ghani, Atek, & Manaf, 2012; Talebloo & Baki, 2013). An efficient supervisor requires leadership skills and a mixture of three skills approach; technical skills, human skills, and theoretical skills to facilitate a student in producing research work of appropriate quality. A supervisor's role should be more effective not only in the flourishing of students' abilities but also in the development of the academic career of a researcher (Northous, 2010; Yıldızhan, & Güçlü, 2019). Most of the studies described above have investigated either the students who have not done a thesis in their previous degree or the students who have already gone through the research process. However, this study explored supervisory experiences in supervising the M.Phil students who had done a thesis and those who had not done a thesis in their last academic degree program.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Qualitative methods are widely used in education for researching the process of teaching, learning and supervising students' theses (Divan, Ludwin, Matthews, Motley & Tomljenovic-Berube, 2017) and they have been extensively appreciated the world over (Rosenthal, 2016). They explore different aspects of human behavior and experience in a particular context. These methods are inductive in nature and the researcher usually investigates phenomena by assigning the meanings to the experiences and developing insights into the phenomenon in a given situation (Gopaldas, 2016; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study aimed to explore supervisory experiences while working with M.Phil students who had a thesis and non-thesis background in their last academic degree and were studying in public universities in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. Such studies require qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2006) to investigate the phenomenon. A qualitative research approach with a phenomenological research design was used to determine the fundamental nature of the phenomenon of supervisory experiences with a particular group of research students (Creswell, 2013).

#### **3.2 Criteria for Sample Selection**

Different academic departments in different public universities in the province of Punjab, Pakistan constituted the context where the research supervisors who were supervising M.Phil students' theses were approached purposively. Those supervisors were included in the sample who were supervising the postgraduate students at least for the last 5 years and they were supervising the students who had done thesis (thesis students) and those who had not done thesis (non-thesis students) in their last degrees. Also, the supervisors were working at least as assistant professors in the faculty of social sciences of public sector universities. They aged from 40 to 60 years.

#### **3.3 Instrumentation**

The interview guide was comprised of seven main questions along with other probing questions asked to elaborate on the supervisor's response in more detail. The interview questions were validated keeping in view the purpose and research questions of the study and expert opinion from two qualitative interview experts working in the field of education in two different public universities.

#### **3.4 Data Collection**

In-depth interviews were conducted for gaining a rich understanding of supervisors' perspectives and experiences in supervising two types of students with a different research backgrounds. These interviews were conducted in

different universities in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. Each interview lasted from sixty to ninety minutes and was audio-recorded, transcribed, read many times, and analyzed. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken with professors, associate professors, and assistant professors who were working in the nearby cities while telephonic interviews were conducted with those participants who could not easily be approached due to certain limitations such as uncertainty of their availability at a certain time. Thus, eleven participants were contacted for interviews.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The basic purpose of qualitative analysis was to find out the likeness and unlikeness in the perspectives and experiences of supervisors while supervising thesis and non-thesis postgraduate students and to compare their supervisory experiences in these two distinct groups of students. The three Cs of data analysis i.e., coding, categorizing, and description was used as described by Lichtman (2010). In this regard, the process of thematic analysis was used for identifying patterns or themes in the interview data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). It is the foremost qualitative method that should be well-read and appropriately used. The main purpose of thematic analysis is to assess the salient features of emerging themes i.e., they should be essential, relevant, attractive, and interactive (Creswell, 2013).

For analysis of the interview transcripts, first, the coding was completed inductively from the transcript data. After coding, the researchers found a large number of codes and it was inferred through the analysis what was the most relevant and what was irrelevant. After the initial analysis, the necessary categories and sub-categories were keenly observed and irrelevant data were eliminated. The researchers used their judgment to determine the worth, significance, and relevance of the emerging categories. After deep observation, the relevant data were developed into themes (Lichtman, 2010).

Essential themes emerged from the data and described keeping the identity of the participants confidential. The basic and the main themes described from the experiences of supervisors were conceptual understanding, using software, confidence in researching, supervisory support, and communication skills. The themes are described and interpreted below:

##### **4.1 Conceptual Understanding**

For conducting quality research, researchers need to know the basic concepts of the research process. It not only enhances their understanding but also contributes to the integrity of the research process. The understanding of the research process includes knowledge of research design, research methodology, and report writing. Most of the research supervisors described that the thesis

students had better knowledge about the research process as compared to the students who did not conduct research in their last degree (non-thesis students).

One of the supervisors “S” who was an assistant professor in a public university and had been conducting research and supervising the master's and M.Phil students for the last eight years were interviewed. Recollecting his eight years of experience supervising thesis and non-thesis students, he stated that *“Research is a practical work, not a theoretical one. Thesis students had about 70% knowledge of research related aspects as compared to non-thesis students”*. Commenting on the non-thesis students, he added that *“Non-thesis students also studied research courses in their master's degrees but they didn't know much about practical aspects i.e. How to cite? How to give a reference? How do make a theme in the research? etc.”*

Another research participant “A” who was working as an assistant professor in a public university and had a PhD degree from Austria, described his experience with thesis students:

The students who had done theses in their last degrees had reasonable knowledge about writing a thesis and doing research. These students were relatively better to complete the various research-based assignments given by the supervisors. Most of them were able to complete their thesis within the given period because they were already acquainted with the research process.

On the other hand, he remarked about the non-thesis students that:

Non-thesis students did not know much about the research process. A supervisor had to tell everything i.e., what is a research problem? How will they do the research literature? What are methodology and sampling? They didn't have the conceptual understanding of these terms to utilize them in the research.

Most of the participants stated that thesis students were able to proceed properly due to going through the whole process in their last degree. They knew how to identify a research problem, in which paradigm their research would fall, how to develop a thesis proposal, and how to develop a tool for that particular research. They were in a better position to arrange and conduct all the research steps within the given period. One of such participants “M” called thesis students *“more disciplined and responsible”* whereas non-thesis students were lacking a sense of responsibility in doing research. He elaborated that *“one of my non-thesis students was at the stage of tool development and had not sufficient knowledge about its process. At that point, I became helpless because I could not teach him theory”*.



It was interesting to note that a couple of study participants were having a different view about thesis and non-thesis students during their research thesis. They remarked that there was not much difference between the research practices of students with thesis and non-thesis backgrounds. Although thesis students had gone through the research process practically they did not practice it “*in a true sense*”. One of the supervisors “N” recounted that:

Thesis students and non-thesis students were found to be the same at the time of admission in M.Phil (Master of Philosophy in Education) classes. They were like blank paper when they entered their first class. Both types of students were at a very basic level of understanding of the research process. Later, even the thesis students were incapable of conducting research properly.

The participants explained that all the students study courses of research every semester in the master’s program. The students were more worried about their percentage/CGPA (cumulative grade point average) in the whole year. They cared less about gaining theoretical and conceptual knowledge and its implications for conducting research. Most of them utilized the time in memorization of research terms to achieve a high percentage and CGPA. At that time, understanding the practical aspects of the research process was “*secondary*” to them. It may be inferred that the basic knowledge of the research process was a primary requirement for conducting quality research for both thesis and non-thesis students.

#### **4.2 Using Software**

The use of various software for data analysis, knowledge organization and reference management has made the research process more convenient and faster. When questions were asked about the use of software, it was stated by the supervisors that the use of the software is highly recommended for researchers. The software has facilitated the researchers in carrying out difficult tasks successfully and efficiently with less time. Different knowledge organizers and reference management software help researchers in writing up while data analysis software makes them able to analyze and report their results with more accuracy.

One of the research supervisors “K” having ten years’ experience of supervising research thesis remarked on students’ skills in using various software that thesis students were a little better as compared to non-thesis students having the knowledge and use of various research-related software. They had a basic knowledge of *SPSS*, *MENDLEY*, *ENDNOTE*, etc. Another participant “J” added about non-thesis students that “*Non-thesis students do not know much about this software. They may know about the simple software like Microsoft Office, and*



*Excel but don't know much about the specific research software which is specially used for data analysis". He recollected his memories and described that "When we had been doing research in university, there was no facility of software and computer technology. The research was possible without using software but no doubt the software has made it easy and precise".*

Most of the supervisors reflected a similar opinion one of them named "L" described that *"The use of software has saved time of both types of students along with their supervisor".* They stated that it would help them to perform their task more precisely with fewer efforts. The students do not need to go to other people to seek their assistance and can report their research results in the best and multiple possible ways. One of the study participants "M" reflected that *"use of reference management software was a big relief to the student otherwise most of them had wrong reference list which would lead to a great trouble to correct them manually".* A thesis can be accomplished sitting at the home in front of a computer by using the most suitable software.

#### **4.3 Confidence in Researching**

It is rightly said that "knowledge is power". Pre-requisite knowledge of the research process help students carries it out with more confidence and enthusiasm. The same was the case with a thesis and non-thesis students. Almost all the participants of the study stated that thesis students carry out the research with more confidence as they had already gone through the whole process. One of the supervisors "N" explained that *"the thesis students are confident when they carry out their research. They believe that they can do it as they had already done it. This confidence leads them to enjoy their research work".*

Another supervisor "F" described his experience of supervising the non-thesis students that as they simply did not know the practical aspects of conducting research and made a lot of mistakes in the beginning, at the stage of selecting the topic and were not able to develop confidence for conducting a research. He elaborated that *"Sometimes it had unpleasant consequences as one of the students at the stage of selecting the research problem faced serious issues and ended in giving up. It also shakes the confidence of supervisors and made them demotivated.*

The supervisor "W" who was performing his duties in a public university and was near to his retirement explained about the non-thesis students:

Non-thesis students had not done a thesis in their last degrees and remained worried and confused at every stage of the research process. In this way, a lot of their time gets wasted. They started thinking that they would not be able to complete it ever and this was the point when they lost their confidence and energy.

When discussing the thesis students, he remarked that they remained confident during the whole process. They enjoyed the research activities, being a good researcher, and wanted to do more. According to him, *“Research is a very productive activity and the thesis students were confident that they would make a good addition to the existing body of knowledge through their research”*.

#### **4.4 Supervisory Support**

A supervisor plays an important role in the completion of students’ research projects. He is the person who guides the students throughout the research process and keeps them on the right track. He shares and transfers his knowledge and expertise with the students to make them independent researchers. For completion of research work, a supervisor arranges meetings and workshops for assisting at the various stages of the process.

The supervisors experience that some students take the research as a trouble-free process but some perceive it as a very complicated and impossible task. In this way, both types of students have a different attitude toward pursuing their research projects. These students require supervisory support accordingly. It was inferred from the supervisors’ experiences that when students get admission to the M.Phil class, at that time they are in an uncertain condition and are anxious about the research process. Do they think about what they have to do now? What will be their next step? At the same time, a person appears up and utters: *“don’t worry, I am with you”*. That person is the supervisor and he attempts to guide all the students whether they are thesis or non-thesis students.

This study describes supervisors’ experiences of supervising thesis and non-thesis students. The questions were asked about their role in improving the research skills of the non-thesis students. In other words, how can they improve the research skills of non-thesis students? Different supervisors gave diverse comments on this question.

A supervisor “K” who was performing his job in a public university and had seven years’ experience in supervision remarked that:

Students must be acquainted with theory understanding, literature review techniques, and skills of utilizing statistical techniques which largely require a mammoth leadership from the supervisor. Secondly, they must be assigned problems and encouraged to find scientific and unbiased solutions to these problems.

Another supervisor “I” who was a lecturer in a public university, gave suggestions for the improvement of non-thesis students and described that *“non-thesis students should be encouraged to read a lot, search on the internet and visit as many libraries as possible. These students should be given small research assignments to make them understand the process first”*. It would help them to

have basic knowledge and tactics to pursue their thesis while conducting the research.

Similarly, another participant named “R” remarked that:

The supervisors should arrange workshops, seminars, and direct meetings with the students for improving the research skills of not only non-thesis students but also of the thesis students. The students should be asked to review the various articles in their fields, ask to write paragraphs again and again by mock exercises, and by seeing the previous research studies.

When asked by the participants that “what are the commonalities between thesis students and non-thesis students?” The majority of the supervisors gave the same comments as a supervisor “A” stated that *“both types of students work for getting the degrees, not for learning the research process and to become independent researchers.* Nevertheless, it was remarked by the supervisors that there are a few students in each session who sincerely and devotedly attempt to learn the research skills and seek help from the supervisors for further understanding of the research process.

#### **4.5 Communication Skills**

Communication skills is one of the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Different questions were asked from the supervisors about the communication skills of thesis and non-thesis students. Most of the supervisors stressed it and considered it as one of the most important skills the student requires because attaining and mastering communication skills is a core element for the postgraduate students of every institution of higher education. Students’ communication skills determine the thoughts, ideas and feelings they share with their supervisor, peer, and other scholarly communities through a common language.

When questions were asked from the study participants regarding the communication skills of thesis and non-thesis students, most of them remarked that thesis students have good communication skills as compared to non-thesis students. Nevertheless, some of the participants had a different experience. A supervisor “S” described that *“even the thesis students could not communicate well what they had done in their research. Their written communication skills were not up to the mark and grammatical and structural mistakes made the thesis difficult to understand”.* When the thesis drafts were sent to the supervisors, it became difficult for them to understand and they have to suggest any corrections. After many attempts, the students were able to present the thesis in an acceptable form.

Similarly, non-thesis students did not have the experience of thesis writing. One of the participants “M” added that *“almost all of the non-thesis students were unable to write scholarly”*. Another supervisor “W” described thesis and non-thesis students that the students had to conduct interviews and collect data from the teachers, students, school heads, and different people related to their field of research. While collecting data, non-thesis students faced serious problems in communicating with the respondents and participants as compared to thesis students who already had experience and skills in interacting with the research participants. He stated that *“thesis students have the skills to comprehend the spoken word and the written text due to better communication skills”*.

Similarly, a supervisor “B” who got a PhD degree in education from a public university described thesis and non-thesis students that in the process of thesis writing, *“thesis students had improved ability to summarize the whole thesis in a few paragraphs and had specific skills to write for a specific reader due to better communication skills”*. On the other hand, one of the supervisors “S” did not feel any big difference between the written and oral communications skills of both types of students. He experienced that *“thesis and non-thesis students have almost the same level of communication skills*. When the question was asked how can communication skills of thesis and non-thesis students be improved? The majority of supervisors suggested that *“an appropriate communication skill course should be initiated in the university for promoting the written and verbal domains of communication skills among students”*.

The supervisors remarked that the students spent most of their time in and outside of the lecture hall during the study period where they exercised their communication skills, for example in group work, class presentations, and assignment writing. Communication skills; written or verbal are essential, particularly during the process of research or thesis writing. Postgraduate thesis students were observed by the supervisors through their communication skills i.e., writing and speaking skills during their interviews at the time of admission and the research. The participants of the study i.e., supervisors suggested that universities and faculties have to make it clear that students have the required ability to communicate and can complete the process of research before giving them admission to the research-related course or class.

## **5. Findings**

It was found that most of the M.Phil students who had done a thesis in their last degree had knowledge and understanding of the research problem, research methodology, research design, research questions and data analysis techniques as they had gone through the research process during their master’s

thesis but non-thesis students were less familiar with the basics of the research process as experienced and perceived by the supervisors. Thesis students had comprehensive and better practical knowledge of research as compared to non-thesis students. This facilitated supervisors in supervising such students' research thesis.

It was experienced by the supervisors that thesis students were acquainted with the knowledge and application of some of the research software and this helped them to carry out their research work independently and timely in a more presentable way. It saved the time of supervisors as compared to non-thesis students who had to seek the services of professional persons and help from their friends or relatives for the organization of the content, managing references, and performing the statistical analysis for the collected data. The supervisors remarked that they had to work hard and spend a significant amount of time helping the students learn these skills as they had not learned and practiced them during their masters and in some cases during M.Phil studies at the university.

The role of a supervisor is very vital and guiding for such students. They shared their knowledge, skills, and their experiences with these students and transferred the basic skills to the students for developing their research understanding and practices. Supervisors also conducted meetings, workshops and seminars for the assistance of the students so that their research skills and abilities can be improved particularly for the non-thesis students.

The supervisors' experiences and their perspectives on supervision of thesis and non-thesis students demonstrated that thesis students exercised communication skills during the time of consulting with the supervisors, writing a thesis, group discussion, presentation of a research proposal, and dealing with the participants and respondents during the process of research. On the other hand, it was perceived by the supervisors that most of the non-thesis students had demonstrated comparatively fewer communication skills due to less opportunity of practicing these skills. One of the aspects was that non-thesis students had not written a thesis, and were not engaged in dealing with the research participants, supervisors, and communicating with others for the consultation of the thesis. The study showed that thesis students were more confident than non-thesis students due to their previous experience in research and knowledge of research-related activities.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

It was explored from the findings that supervisors' experiences with these two types of students were predominantly positive but they had to struggle with non-thesis students to help them out and spend more time training them in

practical aspects of conducting research. The supervisors reflected on their experiences during the interviews. These experiences centered around the themes such as conceptual understanding, using software, confidence in researching, supervisory support, and communication skills.

The findings suggest that the students were supported by the supervisors during the thesis process. They performed different tasks and worked on the transfer of skills required to accomplish the thesis. The supervisors guided, arranged meetings and conducted workshops for the improvement of the research and writing skills required for thesis and non-thesis students. Several studies have supported the finding of this research regarding the guidance of research students (Chireshe, 2012; Grant, 2010; Hendrick & Cartwright, 2017; Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Tasti et al., 2021; Turner, 2015). They argued that the role of supervisors should be supportive and caring for the improvement of research knowledge and expertise of the research degree students. The students requiring research knowledge were also supported by other studies (Manathunga, 2015; Yıldızhan, & Güçlü, 2019; UNESCO, 2016). They remarked that thesis writing skills, solid interest in the subject, and knowledge about methodology are pre-requisite skills for the research students.

The findings focusing on the students' communication skills are also witnessed in the literature. For example, Haksever and Manisali (2000) pointed out that effective communication is the foremost element for the research degree students as a thesis is not only a scholarly contribution in writing but it requires to be presented appropriately for a better understanding of what the researchers have done. These skills are improved during the research process. It is also reported by Nkosi and Nkosi (2011) that thesis students are probably more successful in their postgraduate studies. It was noted that communication skills were improved at the time of feedback and communication with peers and supervisors. Abiddin (2007) argued that a good relationship between students and supervisors depends on how they convey their research ideas to the scholarly communities in the university and outside.

It was explored during the interview with the supervisors that the thesis students used different research softwares for the presentation and organization of the content and analysis of the data which improved their performance in executing and writing the thesis. It saved time and helped them perform well during the research work and timely completion of the thesis as compared to non-thesis students. It is also found in the literature that research softwares and technology had improved the research process for supervisors and the research students (Velte, Velte & Elsenpeter, 2010). There are user-friendly and eye-catching softwares for research students and supervisors that require less time for

performing a task and help researchers develop their expertise in presenting the content and results efficiently. Ali, Watson and Dhingra (2016) argued that softwares help thesis students to manage their time effectively and perform the research work more precisely. It was found that thesis students were confident due to the use of research softwares and possessed the knowledge of research work comparatively more than their non-thesis counterparts. Some of the studies argued that a successful thesis experience increased students' confidence (Manathunga, 2014, Tasti et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2016).

The study concluded that M.Phil students with a thesis in their last degree had relatively more practical and conceptual knowledge and a better understanding of the research process at the time of undertaking MPhil thesis. The supervisors perceived that these students can execute the research work more skillfully as compared to non-thesis students who had to spend a great deal of time while undertaking their M.Phil theses and required much support to conceptualize and conduct the research. The thesis students manifested more confidence and demonstrated better communication skills as compared to non-thesis students who hesitated to take initiative while proceeding with their research work. The writing and communication skills played an important role in carrying out the research work that enabled the thesis students to comprehend scholarly papers and present them in a meaningful way.

### **7. Recommendations**

1. It may be compulsory for the students seeking admission in M.Phil degree programs that they must have undertaken a thesis in their last 4-year bachelor's or 2-year master's degree.
2. There should be workshops and seminars on academic writing, research skills, reference management, knowledge organization and research methodologies, particularly for the non-thesis students for the compensation for what they had not learned in their last degree program.
3. The M.Phil courses on designing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research should be practice-oriented and the students should be assigned small research projects or term papers during the semester.
4. The supervisors should also be given orientation on how to guide non-thesis students who had serious deficiencies and need remedies to come up to the minimum level of M.Phil studies.
5. For improving the research work and motivating to read and write, the M.Phil students should visit other libraries and universities and they should be encouraged to constitute the research groups for helping each other. Such networks of the students can also be formed among different departments within the same university and across the universities.



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