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Development and Initial Testing of an Instrument for Evaluating 9 Needs and Inferring Readiness of Research Supervisors: A Mixed Methods Approach

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21 Abstract

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Purpose: Skilled supervisors are crucial to the development of new researchers. A variety of institutional perspectives exist regarding prerequisites for effective research supervision, yet little is known about this subject from perspectives of research supervisors themselves. 25 Mixed methods designs offer the potential to integrate various data collection and analyses procedures to rigorously investigate complex social constructs such research supervision and to design tools to evaluate needs and readiness. The present study aimed to develop and 27 initially test an instrument that explores needs and readiness of research supervisors using an integrative mixed methods design.

- Methods: Drawing on a blend of socio-cognitive theories an integrative exploratory mixed methods approach was adopted. 29 Interviews, focus groups, Delphi technique and survey were utilized. Self-rated needs for effective research supervision were completed by a convenience sample of research supervisors. Qualitative data were analyzed using inductive content analysis.
- 31 Results: Findings from all data sets indicate that research supervisor needs are multifaceted and indicative of readiness. By widening the range of research methods used to explore the issues, needs and readiness were subsumed under general thematic 33 headings of cognitive, interpersonal, administrative and scientific domains.

Discussion: Research supervision can be conceptualized as being embedded in a comprehensive theoretical framework in which components of perceived cognitive skills, personal beliefs, behaviors, administrative and environmental factors work together to 35 determine needs and readiness. Utilizing rigorous data collection and analyses methods that integrate quantitative and qualitative

data is recommended to develop an instrument to determine needs and readiness. To achieve optimal practice in research 37 supervision, development should be based on well-specified basic requirements and needs of supervisors built on a methodology

rooted within the mixed methods paradigm. Further data and analyses are needed to ascertain whether the identified thematic 39 variables can be replicated in a second sample drawn from other populations and subcultural groups. © 2016 King Saud bin AbdulAziz University for Health Sciences. Production and Hosting by Elsevier B.V. This is an open access

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- 43 Keywords: Research supervisors; Needs; Readiness; Mixed methods

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1 1. Background

Supervising students undertaking research projects at levels from undergraduate projects to doctorates is a significant part of the work of academics. Supervision at any level is widely recognized as complex and multidimensional. Fostering research capability in students requires high quality supervision.^{1,2} However, although there have been notable developments in research training, supervision and funding in recent
years, high attrition and less than ideal completion rates

Q2 have been attributed to poor quality supervision.^{3,4} To
 13 improve completion times, reduce attrition and generally improve levels of satisfaction, many higher educa 15 tion institutions have published lists of supervisory

responsibilities, tasks and activities which are typically disseminated in related policies and procedures.

According to Pearson and Brew⁵ however, the 19 difficulty with such lists is that "...they range from the general to the particular and mix technical research 21 skills with those supposed to enhance employability more generally" (p.137), making it difficult to identify priorities and appropriate professional development 23 strategies. Furthermore, although there are many opinions regarding roles and responsibilities of research 25 supervisors, there is little published literature in the 27 area of needs or readiness assessment of research supervisors from their own perspectives.

29 As revealed in the different dimensions of the topic adopted by researchers, supervision generally has various definitions, functions and forms of delivery.^{5,6} 31 Most definitions are related to practice-based super-33 vision in teaching, social work, psychology, counseling and clinical healthcare contexts. In health-care contexts, the emphasis is on the promotion of professional 35 development and maintenance of patient/client safety. 37 Nevertheless, a definition that is reflective across professions and which has most relevance to research 39 supervision is that of Proctor (cited in Kilminster and Jolly⁶ who outlined three basic functions of supervision - normative (administrative), formative (educational) 41

and restorative (supportive). Research supervision cantherefore be defined as a pedagogical, administrative and facilitative process.

Indeed, some authors see supervision as in part or wholly, a form of teaching and consider that important
roles of a good educator is to be a research supervisor, role model, mentor and facilitator in meeting students

49 needs to fulfill their research projects effectively.⁷ Pearson and Kayrooz⁸ also conceptualize research

51 supervision as a facilitative process requiring challenge and support. In contrast, others maintain that the emphasis in research supervision is less on teaching53or mentoring and more on overseeing, evaluating53performance and directing.9 Undoubtedly, there are55often overlaps and as Ford and Jones9 point out, this57fulfill the role of a mentor when promoting the57professional development of their research students or59switch into an instructional mode where necessary.59

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In practice, application of the three above mentioned components will be dependent on a number of variables including personal style, socio-cultural environment, intellectual level and characteristics of supervisor and supervisees, etc. Furthermore, tasks and activities at undergraduate and postgraduate supervision levels will include varying degrees of teaching, mentoring and coaching the research process, supporting and progressing students.

A definition focusing more on the evaluative/monitoring aspects of supervision provided by Bernard and Goodyear¹⁰ states that supervision is: "An intervention provided by a more senior member of a profession to more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s)..."(p.8).

Both research supervisors and students may have 79 different preconceptions of what the supervisor role should entail and the ideal characteristics of each side of the equation. Similar to the old teaching adage'see one, do one, 81 teach one' being active in research is no longer seen as a sufficient pre-requisite for effective supervision of research. 83 According to Remes et al.¹¹ the most appreciated qualities of the supervisor from students' perspectives were scientific 85 competence, sufficient amount of time for supervision, encouragement, social skills and good interpersonal rela-87 tionships. Supervisors therefore not only need professional 89 expertise generally and in specific discipline areas of the students' research, but also personal qualities which enable them to communicate effectively and establish rapport with 91 their students.¹²

Most universities are now quite explicit in their 93 descriptions about quality research supervision and the roles and responsibilities of both students and supervisors.¹³ Most organizations also now recognize that the development of skills and understanding in this area is potentially a long-term investment in the institutional culture and provide induction and training for this 99 important role.¹⁴ These include a range of programs ranging from half a day to a longitudinal series of 101 educational activities lasting up to a year.

Against a backdrop of varying definitions and 103 understandings about the functions and purpose of

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