

# MITIGATING SUPERVISORY INTIMIDATION IN POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES OF NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract**

Supervisory intimidation in Nigerian postgraduate programmes significantly impairs student well-being, academic progress, and institutional integrity. This paper examines the dynamics of supervisory intimidation, contextualizing its causes, manifestations, and impacts through recent studies. Key factors such as power imbalances, cultural norms, and inadequate communication are explored alongside their consequences, including high dropout rates, compromised research quality, and psychological distress. This study underscores the need for Nigerian tertiary institutions to implement institutional policies, conduct supervisor training, and introduce transparent feedback mechanisms. Insights from recent research on ethical leadership reveal its potential to reduce academic procrastination and improve student outcomes, providing a blueprint for fostering positive academic environments.

**Keyword:** Supervisory intimidation, postgraduate education, academic well-being, Nigeria, ethical leadership.

## Introduction

Postgraduate education is a cornerstone of academic advancement and societal progress, which enables students to engage in specialized research and innovation. Supervisors act as both mentors and gatekeepers, saddled with the responsibility of shaping students' intellectual development and professional futures. In Nigeria, however, some supervisory relationships often devolve into toxic dynamics characterized by intimidation, coercion, and exploitation. This undermines the objectives of

postgraduate education and negatively impacts students' academic experiences and outcomes.

The prevalence of supervisory intimidation is not unique to Nigeria but reflects broader systemic issues in academia globally. Studies by Wang and Gao (2021) reveal that supervisors' leadership styles directly influence students' academic engagement and psychological well-being.

Supervisory intimidation encompasses behaviours that create an atmosphere of fear and subjugation in academic relationships, especially between a student and his or her assigned supervisor. It often emerges

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from a misuse of power dynamics and takes multiple forms, including:

1. **Bullying:** This includes verbal abuse, public humiliation, and exclusion from academic opportunities. According to English, Flaherty, and English (2015), bullying impacts not just individuals but also the academic systems in which they operate.
2. **Exploitation:** Supervisors appropriating students' intellectual property without acknowledgment (Martins, 2013).
3. **Coercion:** Imposing unreasonable demands under the threat of delayed graduation or unfavorable assessments.

Studies have shown that such behaviours are not isolated incidents but part of a systemic pattern. According to Moss and Mahmoud (2021) 65% of postgraduate students in STEM fields reported experiencing some form of supervisory abuse, with profound implications for their academic performance and mental health. By focusing on the Nigerian context, this paper explores the root causes, manifestations, and far-reaching impacts of supervisory intimidation, while proffering realistic solutions tailored to the nation's tertiary institutions.

### Causes of Supervisory Intimidation

Several factors contribute to the persistence of supervisory intimidation in Nigerian postgraduate programmes:

1. **Power Imbalances:** Supervisors wield significant influence over students' academic trajectories, including thesis approval and publication opportunities. This dependency promotes an environment where intimidation can thrive unchecked.
2. **Cultural Norms:** In many Nigerian institutions, hierarchical structures and authoritarian leadership styles are normalized, perpetuating harsh supervisory practices. Baligidde (2019) notes that supervisors who experienced hardship during their doctoral journeys

may intentionally make their students face similar challenges.

3. **Poor Communication:** Lack of clarity in expectations and feedback exacerbates conflicts, leading to frustration and hostility (Mncina & Letsie, 2024).
4. **Inadequate Training:** Many supervisors lack formal training in mentorship, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of student supervision.

### Effects of Supervisory Intimidation

The consequences of supervisory intimidation extend beyond the immediate academic environment. It equally affects students, institutions, and society at large in the following ways:

1. **Student Well-being:** Intimidation leads to psychological distress, burnout, and reduced academic engagement. Allen et al. (2022) report that 40% of postgraduate students experiencing poor supervisory relationships suffer moderate to severe mental health challenges.
2. **Research Quality:** Stress and fear stifle creativity and innovation, resulting in poor research outcomes (Wang & Gao, 2021).
3. **Dropout Rates:** Many students opt to abandon their programmes rather than endure toxic supervision.
4. **Institutional Reputation:** Tertiary institutions known for failing to address supervisory misconduct risk losing credibility, both nationally and internationally.

### Mitigation Strategies

Addressing supervisory intimidation requires a multi-pronged approach involving institutional reforms, supervisor development, and enhanced accountability mechanisms. This can be achieved by:

- Policy Implementation:** enforcing clear anti-intimidation policies with explicit consequences for violations;
- establishing independent review boards to handle student complaints impartially.

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### Supervisor Training:

Conducting regular workshops on ethical leadership, effective communication, and conflict resolution for supervisors;

developing mentorship certification programmes to ensure supervisors possess the requisite skills.

### Feedback Mechanisms:

Introducing anonymous feedback systems to allow students to report supervisory misconduct without fear of retaliation;

implementing regular evaluations of supervisors based on student outcomes and feedback.

### Promoting Ethical Leadership:

Recent research underscores the value of ethical leadership in academia. Wang and Gao (2021) found that supervisors who demonstrate integrity, empathy, and fairness significantly reduce student procrastination and foster trust. Moss and Mahmoud (2021) similarly highlight that ethical leadership correlates with improved research productivity and reduced psychological distress among students.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed:

1. Adopt Comprehensive Policies: Institutions must institutionalize zero-tolerance policies for intimidation and harassment to ensure accountability at all levels.
2. Foster a Supportive Culture: Encourage open dialogue and collaboration between students and supervisors to build mutual respect and understanding.
3. Invest in Training: Prioritize supervisor development through continuous professional education and mentorship training.
4. Empower Students: Equip students with resources to navigate and report intimidation, including access to counseling and legal support.

### Conclusion

Supervisory intimidation is a pervasive issue that undermines the goals of postgraduate education in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Addressing this

challenge requires concerted efforts to reform institutional policies, enhance supervisor training, and promote ethical leadership. By providing a supportive academic culture, Nigerian institutions can improve student outcomes, elevate research quality, and enhance their global reputation.

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