



Fostering Trust in the Postgraduate Student-Supervisor Relationship: A Crucial Foundation for Academic Success

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Abstract

The relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors is a cornerstone of academic success and personal development. Trust is pivotal in establishing a positive and productive collaboration between these two parties. This conceptual paper explores the significance of trust in the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship, delving into its impact on academic progress, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of the individuals involved. This is a qualitative design paper where systemic desktop research was used. The systematic reviews follow structured and predefined methods to identify, appraise, and synthesise the relevant literature. Desktop research is a research method that involves the use of existing data. These are secondary collected and summarised data to increase the overall effectiveness of the investigation. The secondary literature was collected based on the definition of trust, trust relations, building trust, the impact of trust on academic progress, challenges to trust in the postgraduate journey, trust as a catalyst for research excellence, strategies for repairing and rebuilding trust, the psychological well-being of postgraduate students and future directions in enhancing trust in postgraduate education. The paper concludes that trust is fundamental to the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship. It influences academic success, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of individuals involved. Recognising the importance of trust and actively working towards its cultivation can lead to a more positive and productive academic journey for postgraduate students.

Keywords

Trust, Trust relations, Postgraduate Student, Academic Progress, Research Outcomes

INTRODUCTION

University postgraduate students are allocated supervisors. Supervisors provide professional guidance to students, enabling them to complete and produce the highest quality research output. The question primarily concerns their relationship based on trust with their supervisors. This paper explores the significance of trust in the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship, delving into its impact on academic progress, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of the individuals involved.

Postgraduate students' success depends on their relationship with their supervisors. In any relationship, trust forms an integral part. Trust is the glue that holds the supervisor and supervisee together and a lubricant that smoothens communication. Effective communication, an important aspect of trust in relationships, enhances student academic achievement (Makhamrch & Kitsyuruba, 2021).

There has been a massification of postgraduate students in recent times. This massification of students puts pressure on universities, especially supervisors and prospective supervisors. The world is now aligning with the knowledge economy; postgraduate graduates create new knowledge and develop new skills for economic growth. Postgraduate education programmes are there to train graduates with problem-solving skills, analytical skills, research skills, academic writing skills, interdisciplinary skills, and they learn to thrive in a competitive job market (Adedokun & Oyetunde-Joshuab, 2024). As part of the global village, South Africa also wants to expand its globalised knowledge economy. To recognise globalised knowledge, South Africa has a National Development Plan 2030, which forces universities to graduate 5000 doctoral graduates per 1 million per population (National Development Plan 2030, 2013). Trust is one of the fundamental values in the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. This conceptual paper explores the significance of trust in the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship, delving into its impact on academic progress, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of the individuals involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature discussion, the researcher would begin with the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

Theoretical Framework

The study's theoretical framework is the **trust relations** developed by Lau and Rowlson in their survey of 2005. The theoretical framework is relevant to the project management community. While it may likely be of specific interest to those involved in construction projects, the trust issue may apply to a broader range of project types, including postgraduate supervision (Lau & Rowlison, 2010). Trust helps to smoothen the supervision process, allows flexibility when facing uncertainty, increases efficiency, and sustains long-term relationships. Trust directly affects work group process and performance, and Dirks' findings (1999) show that better coordination and greater efficiency, and hence better performance, are found in a high-trust group. Barney and Hansen (1994) believe that a university characterised by a culture of trustworthy values and beliefs will often display an intense form of "trust in exchange" in its behaviour.

The theoretical framework (**trust relations**) adopts a value-based perspective of trust that recognises its moral, social and work dimensions (Lau & Rowlinson, 2005). Trust relations are based on shared values and have a long-term impact on relationships. Trusting behaviour can be observed in situational factors related to the contract, communication, relations with others and conflict. Trust relations are based on four types of trust: contractual trust, knowledge-based trust, goodwill, and generalised trust. The trust relations can be built at the inter-personal and inter-university levels, as demonstrated in (Figure 1) below.

Trust in this research paper is examined from the perspective of inter-personal and inter-university relationships, where it exists in generalised trust, contractual trust, knowledge-based trust and goodwill (Sako, 1998). Generalised trust (Holden, 1990) represents mainly the affective component, which is not considered in the other types of trust.

The antecedent-behaviour-consequence (ABC) framework helps explain the behavioural consequence of trust (Kahn, 1999; Wong et al., 2000), which appears in coordination, cooperation and collaboration. These behaviours are motivated by different types of value-based trust. The value dimensions are moral trust (an intrinsic need), social trust (a need for interaction), economic trust (a need for appropriate reward), and management trust (a need for control). These dimensions form the foundation for developing a trust model incorporated into an analytical hierarchy process (AHP) framework. The case study method is considered the most suitable investigation tool for the human factor, such as trust, which may have positive or negative consequences (AL-Meshekeh & Langford, 1999).

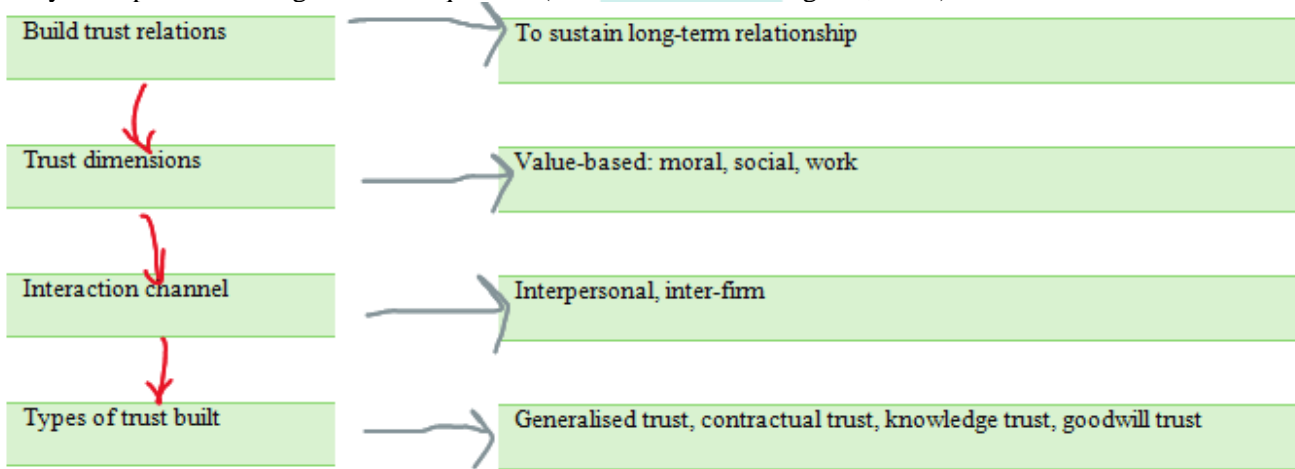


Fig. 1 The theoretical framework of trust relations (Rowlinson, 2010)

Building Trust

Researchers have no consensus on how and based on which mechanisms trust is formed (Lewicka, 2022). Some researchers state that trust happens instantly and evolves gradually through distinct stages or phases. These stages typically involve building blocks such as initial interaction, reliability, honesty, and vulnerability. Individuals tend to navigate through these stages as relationships progress. Trust is a dynamic process influenced by various factors, including communication, shared experiences, and perceived reliability (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996; Shapiro et al., 1992).

On the other hand, Sundaramurthy (2008), Rong and Wilkinson (2011) and de Groote and Bertschi-Michel (2020) believe that while some models may conceptualise trust development as a linear progression, it is often much more complex and dynamic. Trust is continually tested and reevaluated through various interactions and experiences within a relationship. These tests provide feedback that can either strengthen or weaken trust. Positive experiences may accelerate and deepen trust, while negative experiences can slow down or erode it. Furthermore, trust is not solely built on positive experiences; how individuals and relationships handle conflicts, misunderstandings, and breaches of trust also play significant roles. Effective communication, conflict resolution skills, and the ability to repair trust after it has been damaged are essential components of this dynamic process. In essence, trust development is a multifaceted journey influenced by a wide range of factors, and this ongoing interplay makes it such a fascinating and intricate aspect of human relationships.

The complexity and multidimensionality of the relationships between actors in the organisation are shaped by ongoing experiences and interactions (Huang & Wilkinson, 2013; Czernek & Czakon, 2016). Building trust mechanisms are activated under specific circumstances and conditions (Bunge, 1997); they are linked events over time (Poole et al., 2000) and constitute repeatable patterns of actions and responses that produce a specific type of outcome (Hedstrom, 2005). Through them, it is possible to explain the trust variability that results from intentional action and unexpected mistakes or crises.

Understanding the mechanisms of trust building in universities is crucial for fostering positive stakeholder relationships. As Xu et al. (2007) highlight, importing role-based trust from other contexts can provide valuable insights into how trust dynamics operate within universities. Role-based trust refers to trust that is based on the roles and positions individuals occupy within the institution. For example, students may trust professors or supervisors based on their roles as educators, while professors may trust administrators based on their roles in managing the institution.

As Huang and Wilkinson (2013) suggest, the university's reputation plays a significant role in building initial trust, especially when individuals do not have direct past experiences to draw upon. Forming optimistic assumptions about a university based on its reputation allows individuals to infer the value of its educational offerings, supervisor expertise, research opportunities, and overall environment. Making optimistic assumptions can significantly influence students' trust in their university. Studies such as the one by Aghaz et al. (2015) shed light on the impact of reputation on students' trust in their university. These studies help to empirically demonstrate the relationship between reputation and trust, providing valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying students' perceptions and behaviours.

Polat (2011) has shown that students attending universities with solid reputations tend to have higher academic success rates. This can be attributed to several factors, including access to high-quality supervisors, resources, research opportunities, and a supportive learning environment often associated with reputable institutions. Similarly, research by Drydakis (2015) highlights the positive impact of a university's reputation on alumni prospects in the labour market. Employers often view degrees from prestigious institutions favourably as signals of competence, skills, and knowledge. As a result, graduates from reputable universities may enjoy enhanced career opportunities, higher earning potential, and greater professional recognition.

As Pavlou et al. (2003) describe, trust transfer is another critical sub-mechanism in this context. When individuals trust a university due to its reputation, this trust can extend to related entities or situations. For example, if students trust that their university provides quality education and support, they will be interested in furthering their studies there.

Bromiley and Harris (2006) and Lewicka and Krot (2015), in agreement with Polat (2011) above, highlight the role of rational judgment in assessing opportunities, threats, profitability, benefits, and losses associated with trust. When individuals are considering which university to attend, they engage in a process of calculation where they weigh the potential benefits and risks associated with their decision. This involves assessing factors such as the university's reputation, the quality of its programmes, supervisor expertise, campus facilities, tuition costs, and potential career outcomes. The competent fulfilment of obligations by the university, consistency in actions, predictability of behaviour, and precise communication all contribute to building calculative trust. When universities demonstrate reliability, transparency, and consistency in their actions, it instils confidence in prospective students that their expectations will be met and that their investment in education will be worthwhile.

Besides calculation, it is cognitive and relies on accumulated knowledge, enabling predictions about the university's and its representatives' competence to emerge. However, this mechanism is grounded in personal experiences from direct contact with the university. The trusting individual evaluates the other party's ability to fulfil promises, primarily focusing on competence and skills but also considering benevolence (Blomqvist, 2008). Trust arises when assumptions are transformed into positive expectations regarding the trustee's competence, resources, and capabilities (Dietz & Hartog, 2006). Although cognitive trust is based on knowledge, it is presumed to develop in incomplete knowledge, which can be supplemented and verified through ongoing interactions with the university.

Universities and Trust

Trust means different things to many people. McKnight et al. (2001) define trust as contextually dependent and can be an attitude, intention, belief, expectancy, or behaviour. Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) define trust as a 'willingness to be vulnerable based on the confidence that the other party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open'. Luhman (1979) and McKnight and Chervany (2001) distinguish two main types of trust: interpersonal trust, which can be further distinguished between personalised and general or social trust, and trust in institutions.

Cerna (2014) believes that trust is indispensable for social and economic relations; it is the glue that holds organisations together and appears to work somehow mysteriously. Trust is ubiquitous in policymaking and implementation across many governance systems, including education, whether it concerns accountability mechanisms, capacity building, or strategic thinking.

According to Law and Le (2023), universities have long been perceived as trustworthy institutions with credentials and merits since their inception. The perception of trust is linked mainly to the universities' core missions and functions that fall primarily in education, knowledge production, and dissemination, as well as sciences in most societies. Bearing in mind the purpose of universities, the sector has been exposed to numerous disruptions in recent decades. These include, and are not limited to, technology disruptions and questioned status quo. Furthermore, Law and Le in Niedlich,

Kallfaß Pohle, and Bormann (2021) realise that persistent societal issues, such as inequalities and perceived low performance or lack of responsiveness from public institutions weakened that trust.

According to Brehm and Rahn (1997), Putnam (2000), Alesina and La Ferrara (2002), Paxton (2007) and Merolla et al. (2013), the social and economic importance of trust is widely acknowledged. Significant differences exist across and within countries in self-reported institutional and interpersonal trust levels. Age, racial background, socio-economic status, gender, and educational attainment are all factors significantly correlated with trust levels.

Contextual factors such as levels of inequality and diversity can create an obstacle to or, inversely, promote the formation of trust (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Hero, 2003; Borgonovi, 2012). Many approaches have been developed to examine the processes governing trust formation. One is the cultural approach, which views trust as primarily determined by socialisation processes such that children learn from their parents and their parents' parents and the general notion that anonymous others will, in general, be positively predisposed (Uslaner, 2008; Stolle & Hooghe, 2004; Putnam, 1993).

Following this line of thought, trust is an attitude, a mental schema through which people learn to perceive the world, and, as such, is mainly stable over an individual's life irrespective of particular experiences. Another is the experientialist approach, which conceptualises trust as the result of positive social interactions and experiences. Trust is built and destroyed over time as individual experiences change, as communities host more or less trustworthy individuals who do or do not foster the well-being of the communities they serve, lack transparency, or are not open to relationships (Hardin, 2002; Bok, 1978). Other research points to the role of biological factors in determining levels of trust in a given context (Kosfeld et al., 2005; Merolla, 2013) as well as the role of genetics in determining predisposition to trust more generally (Sturgis et al., 2010). Borgonovi and Burns (2015) argue that interpersonal trust formation results from all these elements and arises from socialisation processes, the interactions individuals develop, and the incentives they face. Education thus plays a fundamental role in these processes.

Trust relations

Bitzer (2011), as cited by Cekiso et al. (2019), ascribes to numerous factors that may affect relations, such as inexperienced or overburdened supervisors, inadequate preparedness of candidates, poor planning and management, methodological difficulties, personal problems outside research, insufficient financial support for students, and overall ineffective infrastructural support for postgraduate studies. A strong relationship is built on trust among all factors contributing to student and supervisor relations.

The Impact of Trust on Postgraduate Student Academic Progress

In their study, Liang et al. (2021) state that sound interpersonal relationships are helpful for individual subjective well-being and essential resources to promote individual development. The reciprocity level of the student-supervisor relations is positively related to students' well-being. When students perceive a fair exchange of effort and support with their supervisors, their well-being improves. In this way, trust also matters as higher trust levels in the student-supervisor relationships positively correlate with students' subjective well-being. Strengthening trust can mitigate adverse effects caused by low reciprocity.

Trust and reciprocity in the student-supervisor relationship can enhance postgraduate students' well-being and contribute to their academic success. Educational practices should focus on improving student-supervisor relations to support students effectively (Liang et al., 2021).

Challenges of Trust in the Postgraduate Journey

Different researchers have outlined challenges to trust faced by postgraduate students as follows:

Quality of Guidance: When supervisors provide precise, timely, and expert guidance, students feel supported. However, trust can erode if supervisors are perceived as distant or lacking expertise (Sun et al., 2023).

Conflict of Interest: Supervisors must balance their research interests with their students' roles. Trust may suffer when conflicts arise (e.g., prioritizing personal research over the student's project) (Luz, 2011).

Feedback and Communication: Regular, constructive feedback is essential. Inconsistent or unhelpful feedback can lead to frustration and mistrust. Adequate communication bridges gap and fosters trust (Pfeiffer, 1998).

Transparency in Evaluation: Lack of transparency in grading and evaluation processes can lead to suspicions of bias or unfairness. Transparency fosters trust and accountability in evaluation practices (Oakden, 2013).

Administrative Support: Bureaucratic hurdles and inadequate administrative support can make students feel neglected or undervalued. Administrative support is crucial in the overall student experience within educational institutions. When administrative support is lacking, students face numerous challenges impacting their academic and personal well-being. To address administrative support, universities need to streamline administrative processes, provide adequate training for administrative staff, enhance communication channels, and ensure that support services are accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of the student body. By doing so, institutions can create a more supportive and welcoming environment where all postgraduate students feel valued and supported (Hurni-Cranston & Stys, 2024).

Funding and Resources: Inconsistent funding and limited access to necessary resources can undermine trust in the institution's commitment to student success. When students perceive that the institution does not prioritise or adequately support essential services and programmes, it can create a sense of instability and lack of dedication to educational

outcomes. This erosion of trust can impact morale, reduce engagement, and ultimately hinder the institution's effectiveness in fulfilling its mission to support and develop its students. Consistent funding is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring effective programme delivery. When funding becomes inconsistent, it can hinder progress and impact students (Lewicka, 2022).

Impostor syndrome: a psychological pattern where individuals doubt their accomplishments and fear being exposed as a "fraud," is a common issue among postgraduate students. This phenomenon is characterised by persistent self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, despite evident success and competence. These feelings can significantly impact mental health and academic performance, eroding trust in one's abilities. By fostering a supportive academic environment and encouraging open discussions about self-doubt, institutions and supervisors can help students build confidence and trust in their abilities (Lau, 2024).

Supervisor-Students' Trust

According to Dube (2021), trust is a yardstick to measure quality supervision. Students who trust their supervisors can adhere to all their instructions and guidance. Supervisor student relations is very important. Saunders and Fortin (2023) state that for postgraduate students, working towards completing their degree is a personal journey, which may be long and lonely, but ultimately, it is ideal. The supervisors are there to mentor, develop skills, and offer any support along the way. The relationship between postgraduate student and supervisor is not simply that of student and supervisor but often involves joint projects and shared co-authorships and may even go beyond the completion of the degree. The relationship is, therefore, a critical component of the study journey, contributing significantly to the student's academic and professional growth.

Trustworthiness is perceived based on ability, benevolence, and integrity (Saunders & Fortin, 2023). Leck and Orser (2013) describe trust between student and supervisor as a critical component of effective mentoring relationships. In dyadic supervisory relationships, supervisors and supervisees trust each other; their willingness to become vulnerable is influenced by perceptions of the other's trustworthiness. As they trust each other, they already know about the other's ability, integrity, and benevolence, and can evolve as they work together. Trustors, through their behaviours, need to demonstrate their trust in the other, while trustees need to demonstrate through their actions that they are worthy of trust. Congruence of actions demonstrating trust and trustworthiness is crucial for supervisees and supervisors (Saunders & Fortin, 2023).

Congruence of actions during the supervision process: Supervisees signal their trustworthiness through the integrity of their actions. These include being open and honest about their work with the supervisors, respecting deadlines and presenting their best work, respecting their supervisors' time, taking responsibility for their studies and being accountable (Saunders & Fortin, 2023).

Trust that students anticipate from their supervisors includes support, encouragement, guidance and advice, constructive criticism, accessibility and availability at appropriate times. Students also anticipate that supervisors should read and comment on their written work at acceptable times, ensure that they have adequate facilities and resources, receive appropriate research training and advice on progress, and have enthusiastic, committed, knowledgeable and approachable supervisor who helps them with academic and personal problems which may interfere with the smooth running of the research (Dube, 2021).

The psychological well-being of postgraduate students

In the study by Roslan, Ahmad, Nabilla and Ghiami (2017), researchers associate psychological well-being with the fulfillment of life potential and happiness, while others associate well-being with the personal experience of individuals or with the result of accomplishing goals, as well as the feeling of pleasure from participating in fascinating activities. However, Ryff (1989) associates psychological well-being with the extent to which people feel they have meaningful control over their lives and activities.

According to van Vuuren, Bodestein, and Obelholzer (2021), the challenges associated with postgraduate studies can significantly impact students' psychological well-being. They can influence their academic success, even leading to anxiety, stress, and depression, and as a result, students depend on supervisors for more emotional support (Mashau & Ravhuhali (2023).

METHODS

This is a qualitative design paper where systemic desktop research was used. The systematic reviews follow structured and predefined methods to identify, appraise, and synthesise the relevant literature. Desktop research is a research method that involves the use of existing data. These are secondary collected and summarised data to increase the overall effectiveness of the investigation. Secondary research is much more cost-effective than primary research, as it uses existing data, unlike primary empirical research. The secondary literature was collected based on the definition of trust, trust relations, building trust, the impact of trust on academic progress, challenges to trust in the postgraduate journey, trust as a catalyst for research excellence, strategies for repairing and rebuilding trust and the psychological well-being of postgraduate students.

DISCUSSION

Students choose universities where they want to pursue their studies based on their trust in such institutions. The choice is also based on the trust relations theory. When individuals are considering which university to attend, they engage in a process of calculation where they weigh the potential benefits and risks associated with their decision. This involves assessing factors such as the university's reputation, the quality of its programmes, supervisor expertise, campus facilities, tuition costs, and potential career outcomes. If students have chosen any university as a choice of study, it is assumed that they trust its programmes, supervisors, and facilities. Huang and Wilkinson (2013) suggest that the university's reputation also plays a significant role in building initial trust, especially when individuals do not have direct past experiences to draw upon. In this study, one zoom in on what trust between students and supervisors is all about.

Many scholars have expressed great interest in trust, but its study in different organisations has remained tricky because of the definition of trust itself, as alluded to by (Mayer et al., 1995). Mayer et al. (1995) went on to state that besides the definition of trust, there is a lack of clarity in the relationship between risk and trust, confusion between trust and its antecedents and outcomes, lack of specificity of trust referents leading to confusion in levels of analysis, and a failure to consider both the trusting party and the party to be trusted. However, scholars such as Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) and McKnight et al. (2001) define trust as contextually dependent and can be an attitude, intention, belief, expectancy, behaviour and willingness to be vulnerable based on the confidence that the other party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open.

Saunders and Fortis (2023) believe that trust is the willingness of an individual (the trustor), in this case, postgraduate students, to be vulnerable to another on whom they rely (the trustee), the supervisor, based on positive expectations. This is where the postgraduate students find themselves when they are allocated supervisors in institutions where supervisors are allocated. They become vulnerable based on whether the supervisors are benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open. Therefore, trust helps to smoothen the supervision process, allows flexibility when facing uncertainty, increases efficiency, and sustains long-term relationships.

Benevolent, reliable, competent, honest and open should be on both sides (supervisors and students). A strong relationship is built on trust among all factors contributing to student and supervisor relations. Trust helps to smoothen the supervision process, allows flexibility when facing uncertainty, increases efficiency, and sustains long-term relationships. Trust directly affects work group process and performance, and Dirks' findings (1999) show that better coordination and greater efficiency, and hence better performance, are found in a high-trust group. Barney and Hansen (1994) believe that a university characterised by a culture of trustworthy values and beliefs will often display an intense form of "trust in exchange" in its behaviour.

On the other hand, trust builds into the well-being of the student. Liang et al. (2021) state that sound interpersonal relationships are helpful for individual subjective well-being and essential resources to promote individual development. The reciprocity level of the student-supervisor relations is positively related to students' well-being. When students perceive a fair exchange of effort and support with their supervisors, their well-being improves. The trust is affected once there is a decline in power relations between the supervisor and student. When supervisors break trust with a student, they break trust with society. Universities cannot expect students to act with integrity (trust) if the institutions they learn from are corrupt and untrustworthy.

The emphasis is that trust is a crucial foundation for academic success. Recognising the importance of trust and actively working towards its cultivation can lead to a more positive and productive academic journey for postgraduate students.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between postgraduate students and their supervisors is a cornerstone of academic success and personal development. Trust is pivotal in establishing a positive and productive collaboration between these two parties. Building and maintaining trust contribute to a positive and productive learning experience for the student and a fulfilling mentoring experience for the supervisor. The paper was based on the definition of trust, trust relations, building trust, the impact of trust on academic progress, challenges to trust in the postgraduate journey, strategies for repairing and rebuilding trust, the psychological well-being of postgraduate students and future directions in enhancing trust in postgraduate education. The paper concludes that trust is fundamental to the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship. It influences academic success, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of individuals involved. Recognising the importance of trust and actively working towards its cultivation can lead to a more positive and productive academic journey for postgraduate students. The study concludes that trust is fundamental to the postgraduate student-supervisor relationship. It influences academic success, research outcomes, and the overall well-being of individuals involved.

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