Postgraduate Supervision: Exploring Malaysian students’ experiences

Gurnam Kaur Sidhu¹*, Sarjit Kaur⁵, Chan Yuen Fook⁶, Farhana Wan Yunus⁷

¹–⁴Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, 40200 Selangor, Malaysia
⁵Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Abstract

Postgraduate supervision has been a subject of close scrutiny all around the globe demanding transparency, parity and rigour as students cross international boundaries, prompting reflection and critical analysis of the student-centered paradigm shift in higher education. Therefore, this study investigated supervisees’ experiences of postgraduate supervision in Malaysia. The study involved 66 postgraduate students from two public universities in Malaysia. Data were collected via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Initial findings revealed supervisees were only moderately satisfied with postgraduate supervision. Respondents indicated that an effective supervisor is a ‘people’ oriented person who is a motivator, a confidence booster and one who respects the student as a fellow researcher. Besides being an expert in his/her area of interest, the supervisor must be willing to transfer his/her knowledge and skills to the student in a flexible and non-threatening learning environment. Findings further revealed that supervisors displayed highest levels of competency and supervision providing most help and guidance at the initial stage of writing the research proposal. Supervision lessens after the acceptance of the proposal and less guidance is given at later stages. Supervisees highlighted they encounter most problems and challenges during the final stage of their research – i.e. the thesis writing, viva and correction stages. Respondents also felt that institutional support was below average and suggested the need for better run postgraduate centres and more flexible financial packages to create learning communities for postgraduates. The implications of the study suggest that it is imperative for supervisors to understand a range of postgraduate supervisory approaches to cater to the varying needs and expectations of students.

Keywords: postgraduate supervision, supervisees, supervisors, supervisory practices

1. Introduction

The twin forces of globalization and internationalization brought about a transformation of higher education all across the globe. Likewise, Malaysia too witnessed a change in higher education with the launch of
the National Higher Education Strategic Plan in 2007. Aimed at producing a critical mass of high quality human capital through holistic education and to make Malaysia a regional hub for higher education excellence, Malaysian universities were pushed to increase their intake of postgraduates. Nevertheless, the number of doctoral graduates produced by each institution has been substantially low as the attrition rate is rather high. One of the main reasons cited for the high attrition rate has been the nature of postgraduate supervision. In another study, Burgess, Hogan, Pole & Sanders (1995) also highlighted that the nature of postgraduate supervision has also been cited as a major reason for low submission and completion rates in the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding such concerns, postgraduate supervision plays an important role in ensuring quality research work leading to ‘knowledge creation’. Besides, postgraduate supervision has become an increasingly demanding role for supervisors because they are critical players in candidates’ successful completion of their theses. Calma (2007) stresses that supervision is a ‘professional practice’ and it is fast becoming an evolving field of research interest not only among ‘supervisors and candidates but also for other stakeholders who wish to examine it’ (p.91). A review of literature in this area also indicates that postgraduate supervision is a much explored field in the west (Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003) but there is scant empirical research on postgraduate supervision in Asia, particularly in Malaysia. It is against this background that the current study was conducted to look into postgraduate supervisees’ perspectives, expectations and experiences of supervision in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

Lee (2009) points out that the word ‘supervision’ has connotations of hierarchy, discipline and oversight of work. Researchers (Loganbill & Hardy 1983; Douce, 1989; Bernard & Goodyear, 1992) highlight that though supervision has been defined in numerous ways, similarities do exist in the fact that supervision is a formal process based on the relationship between a supervisor and the supervisee, whereby the supervisor’s role is to help the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behaviour and competence which is usually gained through and examination of the latter’s professional activities. These researchers also argue that effective PhD supervision involves providing a highly favourable social learning environment to the candidate so that the research student can be helped to construct new knowledge grounded in the discipline’s community of practice. Adding to this discourse, Kandlbinder & Peseta (2001) stress that the three key elements of research supervision in helping postgraduates build a co-learning relationship with supervisors are through establishing clear goals (via a good researchable research question), developing partnerships and managing the supervisory process through regular meetings and seminars. Sze (2008) and Delamont et al. (2000) further add that enculturation of the postgraduate students into the professional community include helping them form cohesive collaborative groups within the same discipline, setting multi-disciplinary research centers and providing opportunities for students to attend and present at both local and international seminars and conferences. Such opportunities encourage students to become reflective researchers as it provides them with a platform to make enquiries, put across arguments and exchange ideas and opinions with other students and senior academics. This is also an opportunity for them to write and publish and grow as academics within their learning communities.

Yeatman (1995) argues that the traditional model of supervision where candidates selected their own supervisors based on ‘charismatic authority’ is no longer relevant in today’s changing times and what is needed is a more systemic and managed approach to postgraduate supervision. A study conducted by Cullen et al. (1994) examining the roles, responsibilities and expectations of supervisors and postgraduates suggested that co-supervision was more effective than working with one supervisor. In fact, findings revealed that 71% of students with a single supervisor felt satisfied by their supervision whereas 92% of students supervised by multiple supervisors and advisors were satisfied. Sze (2008) felt that co-supervision can “contribute to the proximal zone of development of the postgraduate students in those particular aspects of the research projects where the chief or principal supervisor may lack the required expertise” (p.4).
3. Methodology

With scant empirical research on postgraduate supervision in Malaysia, this study sought to investigate supervisees’ learning experiences of postgraduate supervision in two public universities in Malaysia (hereafter referred to as University A and University B). University A is located in the state of Selangor while University B is located in one of the northern states of Malaysia. The study explored aspects such as the roles and responsibilities of supervisors, their leadership characteristics, their competency and their supervisory practices. The study also investigated the challenges faced by supervisees and their suggestions on how postgraduate supervision could be further enhanced. This descriptive study involved a total of 66 postgraduate supervisees from two Malaysian public universities (University A & B).

The research instruments used in the data collection process comprised a questionnaire (referred to as Postgraduate Supervisory Instrument) and semi structured interviews with 10 randomly selected postgraduate supervisees (5 from each university). The items in the questionnaire were drawn from several research articles on postgraduate supervision. Section A of the questionnaire investigated respondents’ demographic profile exploring variables such as gender, mode of study, academic qualifications, area of study and number of supervisors. Section B examined the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor, while Section C investigated supervisory practices. Section D investigated challenges supervisees faced and Section E explored institutional support provided to supervisees. The final section comprised five open ended questions seeking respondents overall comments on postgraduate supervision.

A pilot study was conducted at a public university in Malaysia comprising 20 postgraduate students to test the internal consistency reliability of the supervision instrument in the Malaysian university context. The reliability test was conducted using SPSS version 17 and the alpha coefficients for each component is indicated in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>No of Items</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles and responsibility of the Supervisor</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory Practices</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>.972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor’s Competency</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.917</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges faced in Post Graduate Study</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Support</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis procedures were used to analyze the data collected. Percentages, means and standard deviations were used to analyze the data relating to roles, competency and institutional support. Besides that, ANOVA was used to examine significant differences among the stages of study for all the eight components identified in the study. The semi structured interviews were analyzed both deductively and inductively to address the concerns of this study.

4. Findings

Investigation into the demographic variables indicated that out of the 66 postgraduate respondents, 77.3% were females while the remaining 22.7% were males. The results also showed that 63.6% of the respondents possessed a Masters degree while 34% of the respondents possessed Bachelor degrees and 1.5% of the respondents had attained other academic qualifications. Regarding the stage of the study, the results demonstrated that almost half of the respondents (49.2%) were at the stage of writing their research proposal, 18.5% were working on their literature review, 7.7% were collecting data, 4.6% were analyzing data and 9.2 % were reporting their findings. Only 1.5% of the respondents were waiting for their viva voce examination. In terms of
the number of supervisors, more than half of the respondents (56.1%) had only one supervisor while another 18.2% had two supervisors.

4.1. Roles and Responsibilities of Supervisors

Respondents in this study felt that their supervisors demonstrated their roles and responsibilities at a moderate level. A large majority strongly felt that supervisors should provide them motivation and confidence (M=3.62, SD=.548), be good research role models (M=3.59, SD=.581), demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of research methodology (M=3.58, SD=.609), possess good communication skills (M=3.56, SD=.530) and provide timely and constructive feedback (M=3.50, SD=.562). These respondents also agreed that an effective supervisor is one that ensures their candidates complete their research on time ((M=3.44, SD=.583), advise candidates on research ethics and help candidates identify suitable readings in the area of interest and encourage postgraduates to attend seminars and present papers (M=3.39, SD=.699). Nevertheless, they did not expect their supervisors to select a potential topic for research. Further ANOVA analysis indicated that there were no significant differences of the roles and responsibilities played by supervisors at different stages of the postgraduate study (F=.382, p=.767).

Data from interview sessions, however, indicated that the ten interviewed respondents were satisfied with their supervisors. In discussing the roles and responsibilities of supervisors, these respondents highlighted that their supervisor must be an expert and should have a good knowledge in research methodology. Respondent B2 from University B said that it was ‘not important if my supervisor is not an expert in my area but the supervisor must make it a point to understand and perhaps direct me where I can go for help when needed.’ Respondents also highlighted that they appreciated supervisors who took their supervisory role seriously and helped them in their ‘academic journey’ (B2). According to Respondent A3 from University A, a supervisor should be:

sincere in helping her student and not take for granted that her student knows what he/she should do. She should bring her students to see her presentations at conferences and seminars, offer students to work on her research, instil the culture of research in her students from the very beginning of the class.

On the other hand, three respondents in this study emphasized that their supervisors were not well informed of the logistics issues in postgraduate studies. For instance, Respondent A2 from University A felt that her supervisor was ‘of no help’ with regards to rules and regulations of submitting a proposal. She stressed that her supervisor ‘did not know the process of thesis submission’ and even the final date she had to submit. Respondent A4 from felt supervisors must be well versed with the rules and regulations of postgraduate studies and should “make it a point to get information for their students”.

4.2. Supervisory Practices

Results also indicated that postgraduates were only moderately satisfied with the supervisory practices of their supervisors. Nevertheless, they were satisfied to a great extent with regards to their supervisors being knowledgeable (mean=4.09, SD= .729), motivating them to produce quality work (mean=4.09, SD= .729) and encouraging them to become independent learners (mean=4.09, SD= .729). Supervisors were seen as good communicators (mean=3.98, SD= .975), showing interest in student’s work (mean=3.98, SD= .975), and treating them as adult learners and fellow researchers (mean=3.98, SD= .975). However, supervisees felt that supervisors were not empathetic as they provided little advice and help in their financial (mean=2.09, SD= 1.179) and personal (mean=2.33, SD= 1.237) crises that affected their study. Respondents also highlighted that supervisors did not take an active interest in their future career (mean=2.38, SD= 1.224) or provide assistance in networking with other experts (mean=2.46, SD= 1.224) in their areas.
Findings from the interview session with Respondent A5 from University A also revealed that supervisors need to be more encouraging with regards to helping students publish their work. Respondent B2 further added that supervisors should “ensure that every student has at least published an article in a journal before they graduate”. Further ANOVA analysis also indicated that there were no significant differences of the supervisory practices of supervisors at different stages of the postgraduate study ($F=0.003$, $p=0.997$).

Based on the survey and interview results, the respondents listed the following as some of the best supervisory practices. According to them a supervisor should:

1. be an expert in their area and provide expert knowledge and guidance in terms of research methodology and data analysis
2. be available and easily contactable via email, SMS and phone
3. provide prompt and constructive feedback to help students progress (time-on-task)
4. be interested in students’ work and place importance on students’ work beyond personal interest
5. be punctual and have regular scheduled meetings and intellectual discussions
6. provide reasonable time lines and monior students’ progress to ensure completion of research project according to mutually agreed time frame
7. give students the space to make mistakes and grow as researchers and encourage students to become confident, independent learners
8. be friendly, supportive, encouraging, motivating and respect students as learning individuals so that they do not fear supervisors
9. be a professional and possess good communication skills
10. be flexible and encourage creativity

4.3. Supervisor’s Competency

With regards to supervisors’ competency, the respondents perceived their supervisors as moderately competent in terms of being knowledgeable ($m=3.38$) and being able to provide quality supervision ($m=3.30$). They also indicated that supervisors were not very prompt in providing feedback ($m=2.33$) and having regular meetings and discussions ($M=3.11$). However, ANOVA analysis revealed that there was a significant difference of the supervisor’s competency at different stages of the postgraduate study ($F=3.422$, $p=0.023$). Supervisors displayed a higher level of competency at the proposal supervision stage ($M=3.34$, $SD=0.49$) compared to data collection and analysis ($M=3.23$, $SD=0.52$) and report writing level ($M=2.94$, $SD=0.64$) stages. This is so perhaps because supervisors probably feel supervisees need to get a good conceptual understanding of their research to get through the first hurdle, i.e. defence of research proposal. Nevertheless this finding indicates that a good supervisor should provide guidance not only at the proposal stage but also at later stages of data collection, data analysis and final report writing stages.

4.4. Challenges faced by Supervisees

Data from the questionnaire revealed that supervisees did not have any critical problems during their postgraduate study. They were however rather concerned as to their own limited knowledge in research methodology ($M=2.70$), academic writing ($M=2.61$) and limited access to resources ($M=2.55$). Data from the questionnaire also revealed that respondents were also concerned about the quality and timeliness of feedback ($M=2.18$) and meetings with supervisors as they are busy academics ($M=2.01$).

Interview sessions further indicated that the main challenge faced by the supervisees was the lack of time. A majority of the respondents highlighted that as full time working adults and part time students, they were always ‘fighting for time’. Respondents also emphasized that they were also challenged as their supervisors were also very busy people and often had to wait for some time to get feedback on their work. Feedback obtained from open ended responses in the questionnaire indicated that Respondent 52 felt it took her supervisor ‘ages to
provide feedback’. Meanwhile Respondent 38 who is a part time student and full time lecturer felt that postgraduate supervisors ‘had too much on their plate’. She pointed out that her supervisor ‘had to teach 18 hours a week, mark assignments on a weekly basis, supervise 5 undergraduate students and 9 postgraduate students’. Thus, this respondent felt her supervisor had ‘limited quality time’ and was ‘not engaged and involved’ in her discussions about her PhD work.

A few students also admitted they did not possess sufficient knowledge in research methodology and needed skills in data collection and data analysis while some felt they needed help in writing due to their limited language proficiency whole others admitted they found it difficult to express their ideas in writing. Interestingly, close to 15% of the respondents pointed out that they lacked confidence and were afraid they might not be able to complete their thesis. Some respondents highlighted that they feared their supervisors and when probed further stated that this fear stemmed from either possessing limited knowledge in research or not being ‘able to live up to the expectations’ of their supervisors. Respondent 16 admitted she feared her supervisor’s comments as she sometimes ‘demoralized’ her while respondent 57 felt her supervisor was not cooperative and often blamed her for everything that went wrong. Respondent 49 highlighted that he feared his supervisor because he ‘treated students like children’ and he did not ‘trust his students and on top of that did not like anyone challenging his ideas’.

Both Respondent B1 and A5 were not very satisfied with their current supervisor as they felt they were not in their areas of specialization. As a result, Respondent B1 felt her supervisor was ‘not interested’ in her PhD work and this left her with a ‘sense of loneliness and abandonment’. Respondent A5 however felt her current supervisor though not in her area of interest ‘refused her suggestion of getting a co-supervisor’. As a result of her suggestion, she had now developed a ‘very strained cut-and-dry relationship’ and feared all appointments with her supervisor. Both respondents emphasized that students should be allowed to choose their own supervisors to match their fields of interest. They also called for greater flexibility to allow students to bring in a co-supervisor if their current supervisor was uncooperative or not in their area of specialization.

ANOVA analysis indicated that there was a significant difference of the challenges faced by postgraduates at different stages of their postgraduate study (F=3.129, p=.033). The results showed that postgraduates encountered more problems during report writing, viva and correction stages in contrast to the other earlier stages (data collection & analysis stage, writing the proposal and literature review stage).

4.5. Overall Findings

Overall, the supervisees in this study were only moderately satisfied with their postgraduate supervision. The supervisees felt that the supervisors demonstrated their roles and responsibilities (m=3.33) and competency level (m=3.23) at the moderate level. Besides that, respondents also indicated institutional support was below average; however, most of the students admitted that they did not have any critical issues or challenges during their postgraduate study. Table 2 below provides a summary of the supervisory variables examined in this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles &amp; Responsibilities of the Supervisor</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor's Competency</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Support</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges Faced in Postgraduate Study</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that supervisees were only moderately satisfied with the postgraduate supervisory practices. Data obtained from all sources indicate that supervisors play multiple and diverse roles. As
counsellors they are supportive friends, motivators and confidence builders. Furthermore, as experts they are
guides and advisors to students on their research projects. Respondents highlighted that an effective supervisor
must be a ‘people-oriented person’ and should possess certain leadership attributes that can put supervisees at
ease so that they can gain confidence and work collaboratively to complete their research. Henceforth,
supervisors should be empathetic counsellors who can motivate and build their confidence. Besides that, they
should be good communicators and be warm, friendly and supportive individuals who respect their students as
fellow human beings. They were not pleased with supervisors who were uncooperative, ignorant, disrespectful
and did not admit their mistakes.

Effective supervisors must possess the required knowledge and expertise in their fields of interest and research
methodology that can lend to personal and academic match. Respondent 40 felt that supervisees should be given
the opportunity to choose their own supervisors to suit their area of interest and expertise. Besides, both parties
must be committed to agreed roles, responsibilities and expectations and work collaboratively to draw up flexible
yet workable schedules to ensure the completion of the research project within the stipulated time frame. More
importantly, supervisors must be willing and committed to share and transfer their knowledge in a flexible non-
threatening learning environment so that supervisees do not ‘fear’ their supervisors. Ideally, the supervisor should
be a person who is engaged, involved and interested in their work. With regards to effective supervisory
practices, respondents felt that supervisors should be easily contactable, provide prompt and constructive
feedback at all times, place importance on students’ work beyond personal interest, keep to scheduled meetings,
hold intellectual discussions, monitor students’ progress and allow them to make mistakes so that they can grow
as fellow researchers. Supervisees appreciate supervisors who understand the multiple roles that they take on as
adult learners and hence prefer to work within a flexible time frame that allows them to take risks and encourage
creativity.

The results also revealed that supervisors were often very busy academics resulting in some supervisors not
being able to provide timely and constructive feedback. Insufficient time devoted to supervision has also been
highlighted in studies conducted by Zuber-Skerritt (1987), Brown & Atkins (1988); cited in Lee, (1998) and
recently by Attwood (2009). In Attwood’s study, respondents indicated that only 57% of supervisors are
available when needed and only 57% are genuinely interested in understanding the difficulties faced by their
students. Atwood (2009) cited that in the National Student Survey (NSS) taught postgraduates also gave rather
low ratings (57-58%) to the quality and timeliness of the feedback received from their supervisors.

Similar findings have also been recorded by Sigrell (1999), Chiang (2003), McCormack (2004) and
Woolhouse (2002) who highlighted that supervisees felt that supervisors should spend time with them and listen
to what they have to say. They also appreciated supervisors who were sympathetic, understanding and possessed
a high level of patience. In another study conducted by Whitelock et al. (2008), postgraduate students stressed
that they needed their supervisors to instil in them confidence by providing positive and constructive feedback as
well as giving them encouragement and advice. Supervisees also like supervisors to be empathic and have a
great sense of humour so that they are at ease and comfortable during the supervision process (Woolhouse, 2002).
They felt that once they were confident, they would be more willing to take risks as risk taking improves
creativity.

ANOVA analysis in this study indicated that there were no significant differences of the supervisor’s roles and
responsibilities (F=.382, p=.767) at the different stages of the postgraduate study. This was also evidenced in
studies by Worthington and Stern (1985) and later by Zucker and Worthington (1986) that exhibited that neither
supervisor licensure status nor supervisor experience level had any influence on supervisees’ ratings of the
effectiveness of supervision.

This study also revealed that respondents were not satisfied with institutional support and they highlighted the
need for postgraduate centres, better and well equipped resource centres and financial packages. Brabazon (2009)
points out that providing institutional support can help improve doctoral completion rates. In her paper entitled
“Doctoring the system”, she highlighted that all universities should have a graduate centre headed by a dean and
the centre should comprise administrative staff that specialize in all stages of candidature from admission to
graduation. She also felt that an economical and successful method to increase the number of completions is for
graduation centres to hold an orientation day for postgraduate students as they ‘supply positivity and excitement to students’.

All things considered, there is no denying that there exists two different world cultures of postgraduate supervision – the supervisions and the supervisees. Scott (2009) notes that there is a gulf between students and academics in relation to age and the manner in which both groups function. The young of today operate in a cyber world of social connectivity (e.g. mobile phones and networks such as Twitter and Facebook) where communication is more visual and aural as contrasted to the supervisors who function in a predominant world of written language. In order to bring these two worlds together, it is perhaps pertinent to look into more structured training programmes to develop effective supervisors not only in terms of academic leadership but training in developing supervisors as mentors and counsellors.

Finally, it cannot be denied that the main limitation of this paper lies in the fact that it has only explored students’ perspectives. The findings and implications would have been more valuable if supervisors’ views were also sought. The researchers are currently looked into supervisors’ perspectives and it would be interesting to see if any match or mismatch is apparent.

References


