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Postgraduate supervision: Comparing student perspectives from Malaysia and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Postgraduate supervision is a much explored field and a subject of close scrutiny in the West but there is scant empirical research in Asia; particularly in Malaysia. It was against this uncharted background that the current study was conducted to compare and contrast postgraduate supervision practices from the perspectives of supervisees from both Malaysia and the United Kingdom. The study involved 66 postgraduate students from Malaysia and 33 postgraduates from the UK. Data were collected via a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. Findings indicated that there was a significant difference between Malaysian and the UK supervisees’ expectations of the roles and responsibilities of their supervisors. Supervisees from Malaysia looked for a ‘people’ oriented supervisor who was a motivator and confidence booster whilst respondents from the UK stressed the need for a supervisor to be an expert in their specific field of study. Respondents from Malaysia were also more dependent and had higher expectations of their supervisors when compared to their counterparts in the UK. With regards to supervisory practices, there was no significant difference between supervisory practices of supervisors in both countries. Since there exist different world cultures of supervisors and the supervisees, it is pertinent to conduct in-depth studies involving both parties to help develop a comprehensive supervision model where students can be guided into professional research communities.

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Keywords: Postgraduate supervision; Supervisees; Supervisors; Institutional support

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1. Introduction

Under the second thrust of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP), Malaysia hopes to increase PhD holders to 60,000 by 2023. The number of PhD holders produced so far has not been substantial due to the high attrition rate. One of the main reasons cited for this high attrition is postgraduate supervision. Smallwood (2004) points out that the attrition rate for PhD programmes on a global scale is between 40 to 50 percent. Today PhD attrition and low completion rate is a grave concern as it often seen as a waste of financial resources and human energies. This is evidence enough to call for a concerted effort to place a high premium on excellence in supervisory practices; and supervisors should make instructional quality the top priority of any postgraduate programme. Most developed countries have formalised university-wide supervisory training followed by in-house sequential training over extended periods of time for new supervisors. The same however, cannot be said of Malaysian universities as they often fail to articulate supervisory practices and policies for new supervisors. Nevertheless, the contexts and means through which postgraduate supervision is being conducted in developed and developing countries reflect not only the different and diverse needs of students but also different and diverse supervisory practices which are culturally bound. Therefore, this study aims to compare postgraduate supervisory practices in Malaysia and the UK as seen from the perspectives of the client – i.e. postgraduate students.

2. Literature Review

Supervision has been defined in different ways though similarities exist. According to Loganbill & Hardy (1983), supervision is a formal process based on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, where the supervisor’s role is to help the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behaviour and competence of professional activities. The term ‘supervision’ also means discipline and oversight of work (Lee, 2009). Sze (2007) indicating that effective PhD supervision involves providing a highly favourable social learning environment during the PhD candidature to enable the research student to construct new knowledge grounded in the discipline’s community of practice. Some researchers point out that supervision and the PhD experience are each very individual and differ from one discipline to another (Cullen et. al., 1994). Nevertheless, researchers agree that one of the most important things during supervision is that the supervisor knows his or her role towards the supervisee. This, in turn will lead to effective supervision practices.

2.1. Roles and responsibilities of supervisors

According to Lessing & Schulze (2002), a supervisor’s role is to guide, advise, ensure scientific quality and provide emotional support to the supervisees. Different people have different opinions on the supervisor’s roles. Some researchers state that it is better to treat the supervisees as an independent researcher while others argue that supervisees can be dependent on the supervisors. However, it has been agreed that supervisors need to let their supervisees be in the middle where they are both independent and dependent. Supervisors need to draw a line and make things balanced. Thompson et al. (2005) stated that there is a danger in spoon feeding the supervisees and this should not be happening in the supervision process. Supervisors should be providing their intellectual expertise to boost the supervisees’ self-confidence and self-esteem. Apart from that, supervisors need to act like a guide or a facilitator as well as an intellectual critic and counsellor to their supervisees (Hockey, 1996). Most students expect to have supervisors who are competent and accessible whenever they are needed. Therefore, supervisors should always be available for the supervisees to meet and get feedback on their research writing. Thompson et al, (2005) further state that supervisors should be available to the supervisees when they need advice on academic as well as personal problems. Janssen (2005) agrees that support and availability are the top most important qualities of an ideal supervisor while Kiley (1993) claims that supervisors who are enthusiastic and full of encouragement and approachable make up an ideal supervisor.

In supervision, supervisors are expected to not only provide support, time and encouragement, but also to provide resources and information, feedback and guidelines of thesis writing to the students. Genuineness and congruence are qualities that a supervisor should have (Zuber-Skerritt & Roche, 2004). They also pointed out that
supervisees must also have positive reputation so that students can build trust with their supervisors to guide them into completing their theses. Moreover, personal attributes and styles of supervisors are also important as well as a nurturing attitude to make the students feel comfortable. Supervision style should also be flexible (Hung & Smith, 2008). According to Hockey (1996), clear communication with the students can help the relationship move towards flexibility and sensitivity which can enhance the supervision relationship. Supervisors who can create positive feelings in their supervisees can help the supervisees to feel calm and see things sharply. Furthermore, positive feelings can lead to affective learning (Brew & Peseta, 2004). Supervisors who always create negative feelings to their supervisees may produce supervisees who are not creative. The unhelpful behaviour of the supervisors toward the supervisees may create a barrier that can stop them from proceeding. Russell & Petrie (1994) support this claim as they report that negative attitudes such as being unsupportive, unresponsive and uninterested towards the supervisees’ work may lead to ineffective supervisory relationship. Therefore, supervisors’ attitude towards their supervisees is important during supervision. Hung & Smith (2008) found that supervisors usually provide guidance when the supervisees are struggling for help. However, when the supervisees were not asking for guidance, supervisors usually give support to them. Another problem when facing supervision is the actual writing of the thesis itself. Wang & Li (2008) believe that supervisors need to come out with a systematic approach to addressing writing problems in research writing. This is especially important for the international students because these students face a lot of problems in writing their thesis in English.

2.2. Effective supervisory practices

Nakabugo & Ssebunya Masembe (2004) assert that supervisors need adequate training in supervision. Calma (2007) believes that a training programme is necessary for supervisors so that they have a full understanding of how the supervision task progresses. In addition, supervisors need to have an effective management of relationship with their supervisees. Supervisors need to be friendly, open, approachable and supportive towards their supervisees so that the supervisory relationship can be smooth. Supervisees report that they really appreciate supervisors who read their work well in advance before the meeting. Supervisors must be constructively critical of the supervisees’ work. By doing so, the supervisees know that the supervisors are serious about their work. When supervisors are serious, supervisees will be serious as well. Due to this, it is said that supervisors have to have a good knowledge of the supervisees’ research area. Calma (2007) believes that if the supervisors are not experts in the research area, it can cause problems in the later stages such as during the viva and interpreting results. When the supervisors are experts in the area of their supervisees’ research, the supervisors can point out mistakes and give constructive feedback for improvement. Apart from being experts in the area, effective supervisors must be available when students need to see them. When appointments are made, both supervisors and supervisees must be accessible and punctual for the meeting. Supervision meetings should be structured and organized and deadlines should be set so that supervisees will do work seriously. Besides that, effective supervisors should encourage their supervisees to go to conferences and publish papers in journals. Most importantly, effective supervisors are the ones who help their supervisees achieve success.

According to Wisker (2005), the student–supervisor relationship is the most important feature of any type of doctoral study. However, despite the importance of supervision, Golde and Dore (2001) found, graduate students are often left unprepared in that they are not given the time to think about and plan strategies that could help them in the process of supervision. Essentially Lee (2009) points out that there are underlying issues with regards to supervision preparation, and the underlying wants and needs of doctoral students. Studies on supervisee perceptions have examined supervisee reports of effective or ideal supervisory interactions, whereas other investigations have asked supervisees to recall particularly negative or objectionable supervisor behaviours or characteristics. Nelson’s (1978) survey of 48 supervisees representing both beginning and advanced levels of counselling experience, found that the supervisor's interest in supervision, experience and theoretical knowledge are rated highly. Other criteria that the subjects consider important are supervisor’s personal traits such as flexibility, openness, permissiveness, and being outgoing. Meanwhile, Worthington and Roehlke (1979) conducted a study on beginning supervisee perceptions of effective supervision where 31 first-term practicum students were asked to rate the frequency with which their supervisors performed 42 supervisor behaviours. The subjects were also asked to evaluate the effectiveness of supervision in terms of satisfaction, supervisor competence, and the contribution of the supervisory experience to improved counsellor ability. Results indicate that supervision is considered most favourably when the supervisor
developed a supportive, personal relationship and when the supervision is structured and teaching oriented. Overall the study demonstrated that supervisor behaviours which focused on establishing rapport and providing feedback to the supervisee are the most valued. Worthington (1984) conducted a similar study using a larger sample of supervisees (N = 237) from various levels of predoctoral counselling experience. The results corroborated the earlier study and reveal that supervisee satisfaction with supervision and perceived competence of the supervisor are rated highest when the supervisor provided an environment of acceptance and support and clearly taught conceptualization and intervention skills.

Allen et al. (1986) conducted a survey on graduate students’ perceptions of their best and worst supervisory experiences. The results indicated that supervisor’s expertness, emphasis on issues related to personal growth, interest in supervision, and an environment of respect and tolerance are seen as characteristics of positive supervision. In contrast, factors such as disinterest and /or inept, authoritarian, or exploitative characteristics are perceived as poor supervision. Sexual harassment behaviours are also seen as the most extreme examples of negative supervisory interactions. Allen et al. (1986) also noted that the presence of these behaviours on the part of the supervisor are very distressing to supervisees and serve to destroy the professional relationship of trust and respect necessary for an effective supervisory interaction.

3. Methods

The main aim of the study was to investigate the perspectives of Malaysian and UK postgraduate students on a total of seven different dimensions. Nevertheless this paper will only present the findings on only two aspects – i.e. roles and responsibilities of supervisors and effective supervisory practices. This study employed a descriptive research design with a mixed-methods approach. The study involved four universities: two Malaysian public universities and two universities located in the UK. The two universities in Malaysia are referred to as “UM” in this study whilst the two British universities are referred to as “UK”. A total of 66 postgraduate students from Malaysia and 33 postgraduates from the UK volunteered to participate in the study. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 12 postgraduates (3 from each university).

Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The questionnaire referred to as the PSI (Postgraduate Supervisory Instrument) comprised of five sections and a total of 90 items with 5 open ended questions. The questionnaire was pilot tested at a public university in Malaysia and the overall alpha coefficient was .892. Both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis procedures were used to analyse the data collected. The semi structured interviews were analyzed both deductively and inductively to address the concerns of this study.

4. Findings and Discussion

Investigation into the demographic variables indicated that out of the 66 postgraduate respondents from the Malaysian universities (referred to as UM hereafter), 77.3% were females while the remaining 22.7% were males. 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. On the other hand, data from the UK universities (referred to as UK hereafter) indicated that 79.4% of the respondents were females whilst the remaining 20.6% were males. Data also indicated that only 8 respondents (23.5%) had a single supervisor whilst the remaining 26 had either two (38.2%) supervisors or a panel of supervisors (38.2%).

4.1. Roles and responsibility of supervisors

With regards to supervisors’ roles and responsibilities the overall findings revealed that there was a significant difference between Malaysian and UK supervisees’ expectations of the roles and responsibilities of their supervisors. The results showed that the UM supervisees (M=3.333) had more expectations of supervisors compared to their counterparts in UK (3.065).
Table 1: T-test Analysis of Roles and Responsibilities between Supervisors from UK and Malaysia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Practices</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Error</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig (tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country of Study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>.333</td>
<td>.060</td>
<td>3.711</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.325</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further investigation revealed that the UM supervisees’ perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of supervisor focussed more on the ‘person’ and ‘personality’ factors. They expected their supervisor to be a motivator and a confidence booster (M=3.62) possessing effective communication, decision making and problem solving skills (M=3.56). This is very much in line with findings highlighted by Zuber-Skerritt & Roche (2004) who reiterated that personal attributes and styles of supervisors are also important as well as nurturing attitude to make the students feel comfortable. Such a view was also articulated by Mouton (2001) who pointed out that supervisors should provide emotional and motivational support. This affective role of supervisors has also been put forward by other researchers like Hockey, (1996) who stressed that supervisors need to provide not only intellectual expertise to boost the supervisees’ self-confidence and self-esteem but they should also be a guide, facilitator and counsellor to their supervisees. Adding to this discourse, Brew & Peseta, (2004) emphasise that a supervisor who creates positive feelings can help the supervisees to feel calm and see things more clearly thereby leading students towards affective learning.

The UM respondents hold their supervisors more responsible than the UK respondents on the following significant items i.e. provide motivation and confidence to candidates (t-test=3.012) demonstrate knowledge in the candidate’s research area (t-test= 3.263) help candidates identify suitable readings (t=test 2.347) ensure that the thesis is completed within the stipulated time (t=test= 7.076) and take responsibility for the quality and the integrity of the thesis (t=test = 6.310). All these items were significant at the level of 5% (p-value < 0.05). ANOVA analysis however indicated that there was no significant differences of the roles and responsibilities played by supervisors at different stages of the postgraduate study among UM (F=.382, p=.767) and UK (F=.902, p=.418)

Data from interview sessions indicated that all the six respondents from UM (UMA1 – UMR6) were satisfied with their supervisors. In discussing the roles and responsibilities, these respondents highlighted that their supervisor must be an expert and should have a good knowledge in research methodology. Respondent UMR2 stressed that it was not important if her supervisor was not an expert but it was important for a supervisor to be understanding and willing to help. Respondents also highlighted that they appreciated supervisors who took upon their role seriously and helped them in their ‘academic journey’ (UMR2). According to Respondent UMR3, a supervisor should be ‘sincere in helping her student and not take for granted that her student knows what he/she should do. Three respondents from UM stated that their supervisors were not well informed on the logistics issues in postgraduate studies. For instance, Respondent UMR5 felt that her supervisor was of little help with regards to rules and regulations of submitting a proposal. Furthermore, Respondent UMR4 felt supervisors must be well versed with the rules and regulations of postgraduate studies and where possible update them on the latest processes and procedures.

On the other hand, interview sessions with UK respondents revealed that their supervisors need to be experts in their respective field so that they can be good role models for research (M=3.47, SD=.615). They should also demonstrate a good knowledge in research methodology (M=3.41, SD=.609), provide sound and expert advice (M=3.44, SD=.504), possess good communication skills (M=3.42, SD=.502), and provide quality feedback (M=3.53, SD=.563). These students highlighted that the onus lay in the hands of the students to ensure that their work was original and up to the required standards. Respondent UKR4 highlighted that the supervisor is more ‘a guide’ and ‘an academic with the expertise’ but the students must be held responsible for the work they do. Respondent UKR3 stressed that availability is very important and it is the responsibility of the supervisor to be around when needed.

The different emphasis given to the roles and responsibilities of supervisors also indicate that Malaysian supervisees have more expectations and a higher level of dependence on supervisors, when compared to postgraduate candidates in the UK. This is perhaps also indicative of the fact that UK respondents in the UK were more autonomous and independent learners as compared to the UM learners.
4.2. Supervisory Practices

Respondents were asked to what extent their supervisors demonstrated a list of supervisory practices. The overall results revealed that the respondents were moderately satisfied (M=3.770). Further analysis indicated that both UM supervisees’ (M=3.787, SD=.654) were moderately more satisfied than their UK counterparts (M=3.753, SD=.741).

Table 2: Overall Mean Score on Supervisory Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supervisory Practices (5-point scale)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UM S'pore-M'sia</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td>3.787</td>
<td>.654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK UH - UK</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.753</td>
<td>.741</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Means</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.770</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results obtained from UM indicated that post graduates felt that their supervisors displayed effective supervisory practices to a great extent on the following practices: supervisors were knowledgeable, (M=4.09, SD= .729), motivating, provided prompt and quality feedback, and showed interest in their work. Findings also revealed that the UM respondents were moderately satisfied with their supervisors’ communicative, negotiation, problem-solving and decision making skills.

Similar responses were also revealed by the UK respondents. They highlighted that their supervisors demonstrated the following skills to a great extent: supervisors were professional and kept to their consultations times (M=4.38, SD=.853), possessed good communication skills (M=4.27, SD=.876) sound knowledge of research (M=4.26, SD=.710) and provided prompt and high quality constructive feedback (M=4.21, SD=.740). They expressed moderate satisfaction with regards to the following items: supervisors were accessible through various media (M=4.06, SD=.956), provided motivation (M=3.97, SD= 1.058) and ample opportunities to exchange ideas and were sensitive to personal and professional needs.

Based on findings obtained from the survey and semi-structured interviews, respondents from both countries expressed rather similar best supervisory practices. They felt that supervisors must be experts in their area of study and should be able to provide expert knowledge and guidance in terms of research methodology and data analysis. More importantly, supervisors should provide a positive working relationship and guidance at all stages of their study. Besides that, supervisors should help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and where possible show how they can improve and work on their limitations. Respondents stressed that supervisors must respect human diversity and individual differences and give students the space to make mistakes and grow as researchers. This would help and encourage students to become confident, independent learners and researchers. Supervisors should also show interest in students’ work and be able to provide prompt and constructive feedback to help students progress (time-on-task). Respondents from both countries also highlighted the importance of availability. They added that a supervisor should be easily contactable via email, SMS and phone. A few respondents from Malaysia emphasized that supervisors must be punctual and keep to scheduled meetings. Last minute cancellations were a frustration articulated by respondents from both countries. Respondents also felt that supervisors should provide reasonable time lines and monitor students’ progress to ensure completion of research project according to mutually agreed time frame.

Finally, respondents highlighted some qualities that supervisors need to possess during the supervisory meetings. They pointed out that supervisors must be friendly, supportive, encouraging and motivating. They should respect students as learning individuals so that students do not fear supervisors. Respondents also stressed that a supervisor should maintain clear professional boundaries, be flexible and encourage creativity all times. Finally, a supervisor must possess good communication skills.

With regards to supervisory practices, the t-test analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between supervisory practices of supervisors in both countries. Nevertheless, there were certain items that showed significant differences. For instance data from supervisees indicated that UK supervisors (M=4.38) were better at
keeping to scheduled consultation times compared to Malaysian supervisors (M = 3.84) (t-test = 2.498). On the other hand, Malaysian supervisors (M=4.02) were perceived to provide more guidance than their UK counterparts (M=3.38) in helping their students to becoming independent learners (t-test= 2.654). UM supervisors (M=3.74) were also seen as providing more advise on possible publications from students’ work in comparisons to UK (M=3.18) supervisors (t-test=2.234).

ANOVA analysis of findings among both UM (F=.003, p=.997) and UK (F=.249, p=.782) also indicated that there was no significant differences of the supervisory practices of supervisors both universities at different stages of the postgraduate study. Interestingly, results again indicated that UM respondents placed more emphasis and priority on the affective domain stressing the importance of the ‘personality factors’ such as providing motivation (M=4.03) and treating supervisees as adult learners and fellow researchers (M=3.95). They also reiterated the importance of soft skills such as effective communication (M=3.98), decision making (M=3.94) and negotiation skills (M=3.90).

In contrast UK respondents focussed their highest ratings on the cognitive domain and highlighted that effective supervisory practices required supervisors to be academic experts who demonstrate knowledge and understanding of research methodology (M=4.26) and provide high quality constructive feedback (M=4.21). They also emphasised the importance of work ethics and felt that supervisors need to keep to scheduled consultation hours (M=4.38) and read students’ drafts before consultation sessions (M=4.18). Furthermore, they drew attention to the fact that effective supervisory practices required supervisors to show interest (M=4.06), pay attention to what students have to say (M=4.21) and provide ample opportunities for intellectual discourse (M=4.00).

All the above supervisory practices are also very much in line with a study conducted by Janssen (2005) who highlighted that the top ten qualities of effective supervision requires supervisors to be approachable, supportive, and work towards building rapport with students. They should demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in which to provide constructive feedback and give direction and structure to student’s work. They should be easily available for consultation and possess good communication skills. Finally, they should display interest and enthusiasm in their student’s work and career, and have the experience and interest in supervision. All these ten supervisory practices also highlight not only the affective and cognitive domains but also good workplace professional ethics.

4.3. Issues regarding postgraduate supervision

The main concern highlighted by the UK respondents is having supervisors who are busy (M=1.56) and are a poor academic fit (M=1.65). The UM respondents also gave slightly higher ratings to items such busy supervisors (M=2.06), receiving poor unconstructive feedback (M=1.86) and supervisor’s lack of commitment (M=1.83).

On the other hand, a large majority of the UM respondents highlighted the issue of writing. They felt that they possessed limited ‘analytical writing skills’ whilst others felt they lacked “academic writing skills’ A few admitted they did not possess sufficient knowledge in research methodology and needed skills in data collection and data analysis. Another 15% of the respondents pointed out that they lacked confidence in completing their thesis due to ‘slight conflicts’ with their supervisors. Respondent UM16 feared her supervisor’s comments as she sometimes ‘demoralized’ her, whilst Respondent UM57 felt her supervisor often ‘snapped’ at her when she failed to ‘grasp what she was saying’. Respondent UM49 highlighted that he feared his supervisor because his supervisor ‘did not like to be challenged.’ Respondent UM5 however felt her current supervisor was a poor academic fit and ‘refused her suggestion of getting a co-supervisor’ leading to them having a strained relationship. A few respondents also highlighted the issue of personality clash and hence called for greater flexibility to allow students to choose or change supervisors mid-way during their postgraduate study.

5. Conclusion

The main limitation of this study lies in the small sample size. The study involving perspectives of postgraduates from only four institutions does not give the study the statistical support for any conclusive findings that may be
directly generalizable to the issues of supervision. Nevertheless, the results obtained from the study have provided some useful insights into postgraduate supervision. This study has helped to shed some light on postgraduate supervision in the selected Malaysian and UK universities. Postgraduates in the selected Malaysian universities focused on the social affective domain where the ‘person’ and the ‘personality’ factors take precedence over the professional ethical and the cognitive domain which were stressed by respondents in the UK. Furthermore, the expectations of Malaysian supervisees are much higher and more demanding when compared to the demands of the UK supervisees. What is perhaps needed is a clarification of postgraduate supervision rules and regulations encompassing the diverse roles both parties have to take on in postgraduate study and supervision.

To conclude it must be stressed that there exist two different world cultures of postgraduate supervision - i.e. the supervisors and the supervisees. Henceforth more in-depth studies need to be conducted to help bridge the gap between students and academics. Such a move would perhaps enable more effective mechanisms to be put in place and help develop a more comprehensive model where postgraduate students can be led into professional research communities. This was put aptly by Respondent UMA3 of this study:

“An effective supervisor is not one who is the best in his field but one who is committed to give the best to the student and willingly shares and transfers that acquired knowledge to the student. To me, a good supervisor is a ‘people person’ and views the student’s success as his own success and victory.”

References


