

POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION: A CASE STUDY AT ONE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is one of the Research Universities (RU) in Malaysia. In gaining RU status, a university must meet the criteria of a Research University. One of the criteria is that, RU must have quantity and quality of researcher including postgraduate students. Thus, the research done by postgraduate students could be used to enhance the quality of research through developing the knowledge in the field of study. Specifically, this research aims to identify the best practices relevant to effective supervision of postgraduate research students. This research was done by the basis of qualitative approach which 12 postgraduate research students have been in-depth interviewed. The data have been analysed manually and there were eight themes derived from the interviews which could answered the research questions. The results have been successfully explored the experiences and respondents' perception towards effective supervision.

Keywords: Effective, Ph.D, Practice, Postgraduate Student, Supervisor, Supervision

INTRODUCTION

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has been announced as Research University (RU) by the Ministry of Higher Education on November 16, 2006. As a Research University, it means that UPM will be an engine of growth of the nation where scholars and students exchange ideas as well as conduct research in a conducive environment that nurtures exploration and creativity in discovering knowledge and creating wealth, leading towards an improved quality of life. UPM will also be a leader in innovation, produced world class research outputs and Nobel Prize winners.

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Research also act as a core of excellence in prioritized areas of the nation which can generate high impact research publications and attract the best brains for teaching and research in producing high standard graduates.

In gaining RU status, a university must meet the criteria of a Research University. One of the criteria is the RU must have quantity and quality of researchers postgraduate students. In the vice chancellor's message on January 27, 2007, the vice chancellor of UPM Profesor Datuk Dr. Nik Mustapha Raja Abdullah said that we should realise that postgraduate student is an important asset in supporting the development and enhancement of RU. Thus, it is essential for UPM to reinforce postgraduate studies.

Numerous research have pointed out that there are high proportions of postgraduate student who fail to complete their studies within the time given. Many factors can contribute to that and one of the most important factors contributing to this is the kind of supervision they receive. Of course, all other aspects need to be taken into account in studying the postgraduate's experience of supervision. Effective supervision of research students is acknowledged as a crucial factor in the latter success completion of the Ph.D (Frischer & Larsson, 2000). How well they are supervised is likely to be linked to the way they choose to occupy their roles. Therefore supervision is concerned as the mechanics of ensuring that the students make good progress towards completion (Hockey, 1996). Therefore, on both the supervisor and individual basis, must be diligent about explicitly working with students to establish mutual expectations, responsibilities and benefits for working together and with other parties (Phillips and Pugh, 2000). Specifically, the research aims to identify the best practice relevant to effective supervision of graduate research students at UPM.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Criteria of an Effective Supervisor

Effective supervision requires supervisors to be knowledgeable and skilled in the research field (Donald *et al.*, 1995; McQueeney, 1996; Sheehan 1994). They are also expected to take the lead in establishing a quality of relations which will give their students access to the knowledge and skills they possess (Ballard and Clanchy, 1993) and to have counselling skills (Hockey, 1997; Zuber-Skerrit, 1994). Students not only expect their supervisors to have the knowledge and ability to supervise in a particular area of research but also want them to be reasonable, serious, supportive of their work in good times and bad, and approachable (Moses, 1985). Moses (1992) considers that supervisors should act as mentors and that a mentoring relationship requires mutual aspect based on high academic standards, similar interests and regular contact.

According to Moses (1994), supervisors should at least have an equivalent degree to the one the student is studying for and, if this is not the case then, they must have a solid background of research involvement and publications. Brown and Atkins (1988) suggest that, to supervise effectively, one has to be a competent researcher and to be able to reflect on research practices and analyze the knowledge, techniques and methods that make them effective. Frischer and Larsson (2000) and Phillips and Pugh (2000) take a slightly different view, in that they suggest that students are recommended to select a supervisor based on the key factor of whether the latter has an established research record and is continuing to contribute to the development of his or her discipline. This takes account of whether the person has recently published research, holds research grants and is invited to speak at conferences in their own country or abroad. Therefore, an effective supervisor should satisfy such criteria. Spear (2000) supports this statement and adds that often it will be sufficient for the supervisor to be competent in the general area of the student's research even if not expert in the detailed area of the thesis topic. Yeatman (1995) gave a similar view, stating that good supervisors must have a track record in successfully bringing through a large number of Ph.D candidates.

According to Burton and Brueckner (1995), the primary function of supervisions of all types is leadership, plus the encouragement and recognition of leadership in other people, either on the professional staff or among community participants. On the other hand, Phillips and Pugh (2000) and Zubir Skerrit (1994) advised supervisors to act as role models. Frischer and Larsson (2000) described three different pattern of leadership, which are called democratic, authoritarian and laissez-faire leader. The democratic leader is characterised by his encouragement of group discussions and group decisions in the choice of activities. He cares for the students by checking their achievements and commenting upon them. The authoritarian leader makes major decisions for the group all by himself/herself and shows others what to do. The laissez-faire leader provides the students complete freedom of action, hands out materials but largely avoids participating in work and checking and does not evaluate and comment upon their work, except when asked. The authoritarian leader was found to achieve a greater quality of work, the democratic a greater quality of work, while laissez-faire leadership resulted in both a low quantity and quality of work.

Cullen *et al.* (1994) in his study noted indicators of supervisor effectiveness in four major categories. These categories have been supported independently by researchers over the years. For example, the importance of academic standing was highlighted by Moses (1994) and supervisory competence by Zuber Skerritt (1994), ESRC (2001) and Zhao (2003): (1) Category 1- Supervisory style reflected in level of direction; regular meetings; making time for student; allowing students to develop original ideas; flexibility in project choice; encouraging ideas and individuality; and to

a lesser extent promoting close interaction with other academics; assistance in conference attendance and publishing before completion of Ph.D candidature; (2) Category 2- Supervisor competence with respect to student project as reflected in scientific competence; familiarity with the relevant academic literature; expertise in the area of the project; and awareness of science overseas; (3) Category 3- Supervisor characteristics and attitude as reflected in approachability and friendliness; being supportive and positive; being open minded and prepared to acknowledge error; being organized; thorough; stimulating; and conveying enthusiasm. Other areas of importance may be political compatibility and a lack of obsession in supervisor with wealth and recognition; and (4) Category 4- Supervisor academic and intellectual standing as reflected in an ability to be a creative/flexible thinker; intellectual excellence; consistent involvement in own research; good publications record; seeking/achieving external funding; and to a lesser extent being professionally interactive and influential in the department.

The Responsibilities of Research Students and their Relationship with their Supervisor

Research students have to take responsibility for managing their own learning and getting a Ph.D. They are also responsible for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out, and must always keep in touch in regular meetings with the supervisors (Moses, 1992; Powles, 1989). Moses (1985) argued that supervisors expect students to be diligent, conscientious, hardworking, energetic, keen, tenacious and conscientious and to have a sense of urgency. They also expect students to be enthusiastic and motivated towards research work, to be pleasant at work and to contribute to a good working environment. Also, student should give continual feedback, so that the supervisor can give informed instruction.

The student is the main person responsible for his/her Ph.D research. Doing a Ph.D clearly indicates that this is a student's own research and work. Phillips and Pugh (2000) emphasized that it is the student's responsibility to determine what is required as well as carrying it out, and that students have to come through with the clear aim of becoming a competent professional researcher. Students should identify the topic and preliminary reading (Brown and Krager, 1985). This can be linked with other parts of the Ph.D task, like the development of a relevant body of knowledge, placing the research in the context of the literature and originally (Haksever and Manisali, 2000; Russell, 1996; Salmon, 1992). Moses (1992) and Phillips and Pugh (2000) elaborated this statement by mentioning that the process of defining the research topic varies across disciplines. The supervisor in a science discipline has to take the lead in obtaining the physical resources and the research personnel required. The student's research topic will be clearly defined to fit in with the innovative thrust of the

supervisor's research programme. In contrast, in the humanities and social sciences, students often come with their own topics within the field in which the supervisor is expert.

The thesis is usually the most substantial piece of writing yet undertaken by students, and it provides an opportunity for them to develop their skills in writing and in marshalling arguments (Haksever and Manisali, 2000). On the other hand, they should submit written work in some form as early as possible in their studies so that writing problems can be recognized and corrected (Spear, 2000). According to Haksever and Manisali (2000), they should also decide on the research problem, designing the methodology and examination. A good student should have a broader view of academic training in the discipline in which he/she is undertaking the research, seeing as professional development (Phillips and Pugh, 2000). In this sense, professional development include attending conferences, writing papers for publication, attending seminars and workshops, making presentations, networking with other researchers, working as a research assistant and teaching (Alfonso and Firth, 1990; Brown and Krager, 1985; Holdaway *et al.*, 1995; Phillips and Pugh, 2000). Students are expected to gain expertise in the research process so that their talents can be observed in as many different settings as possible (Brown and Krager, 1985).

The responsibility for completing a Ph.D within a reasonable of time clearly lies with both the student and the supervisor (Haksever and Manisali, 2000; Hockey, 1997; McQueeney, 1996; Sayed *et al.*, 1998; SERC, 1983; Yeatman, 1995). Both of them should play their role effectively and maintain a good relationship during the period of the programmed (Cullen *et al.*, 1994; Kam, 1997; Moses, 1994; Powles, 1989). The relationship can be seen as a personal and professional relationship between the two (Ballard and Clanchy, 1993; Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Hockey, 1996; Piccinin, 2000; Yeatman, 1995). This relationship is depend upon characteristics of the persons involved, disciplinary differences in the ways knowledge is advanced and the different learning tasks facing students due to the demands of their field. The relationship between the student and supervisor involves selecting a research topic, planning the research, identifying and acquiring the necessary resources, managing the project, actively conducting the research, carrying out the literature review, analysis and interpretation of the data, writing the thesis, defending it and possibly publication (Piccinin, 2000). Consequently, the supervisory process requires constant adjustment, great sensitivity and interpersonal skill on the part of both the supervisor and student (Hockey, 1995; 1996; Piccinin, 2000).

Good communication between students and their supervisor is the most important elements of supervision (Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain 1983; Brown and Krager, 1985; Donald *et al.* 1995; Haksever and Manisali, 2000; Waitie, 1994).

Without open and honest communication it is very difficult to identify the nature of and reasons for that shortfalls perceived by student. Both parties should be open to criticism, willing to listen to each other and to talk openly (Haksever and Manisali, 2000) and trustworthy (Hockey, 1996; Salmon, 1992). According to Donald *et al.* (1995), personality factors might involve personality clashes, barriers to communication due to age, cultural, or language differences, or personal differences in the approach to work. Therefore, students bear their own degree of responsibility in dealing with these clashes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Twelve postgraduate students from various fields of study and year were interviewed. The interviews were conducted according to the principles of in-depth interview. They were conducted based on a semi-structured interview schedule and using tape recorder to ensure accuracy. The objective is to obtain information in relation to the research questions. One of the data sources for qualitative research is direct speech of the people (informants) about their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 1990). Therefore, the interviews were managed to obtain the real views of the interviewees. Since the questionnaire method unable to provide satisfactorily explanations, the interview was used as an alternative to sustain some weaknesses. A recording machine was used to record the interviews. Probing questions were asked whenever necessary to clarify and explain details related to important issues. The interview process was similar for all respondents. All interviews were held at mutually agreed appointment time. On average, each interview session lasted about an hour, depending on the response from the respondents and also 'saturation point' regarding the information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reviews the major findings of the research through a synthesis of the results from interview data. The findings relate to two main topics, namely, the responsibilities of the supervisor and the responsibilities of the student.

The Responsibilities of Supervisor

The results show that the main responsibility of a supervisor is to guide and correcting on the student's research. These results match the literature, in which many authors had highlighted the fact that the most important role of the supervisor is to guide students (Brown and Krager, 1985; Cryer, 2000; Kam, 1997; Moses, 1992;

Russell, 1996; Salmon, 1992; Sheehan, 1994; Waitie, 1994). For example, Russell (1996) mentioned that a supervisor should guide students in collecting the relevant literature. The results from the interviews also indicate that, at each stage of research, students are likely needed different forms of guidance. According to Donald *et al.* (1995), many tasks of the supervisors to research students are related broadly to guidance and advice. Generally, this guidance and advice relates to direction, completeness, clarity, methodology, topic selection and data collection and also involves giving feedback on the progress of written work (Donald *et al.*, 1995). The result indicates that students need guidance especially on how to obtain the literature and how to prepare the methodology.

This study has also revealed that an effective supervisor should supervise students according to their ability and individual requirements. This result is supported by the literature, in which Welch (1980) identifies three styles of supervision. The first is a highly directive approach, which is very structured with the student being given a lot of advice in the early stages. When the student gains confidence and ability, this level of control is diminished. The second approach is highly directive at the beginning and at the end of the project, with a highly non-directive period in between. The third approach is described as highly directive with close monitoring of the student throughout the whole project. The reason why there are three approaches is that students are not homogenous in terms of academic ability, personality attributes, motivation or attitude.

This study also found that a good supervisor should give personal support to students which indicate that most students need their supervisor to advice and consultation, and highlights the fact that emotional awareness is also a necessary attribute of a supervisor. This was mentioned in the literature, Haksever and Manisali (2000) who suggested that the student's requirements from a supervisory relationship are as follows: (1) personal help: support, motivation, socialising, help in organising accommodation and other things that may be required but are unrelated to the research; (2) indirect research related help: providing contacts, both industrial and academic, providing equipment and initial help in locating references; and (3) direct research-related help, namely: critical analysis of work, help with methodological problems, precise direction and help with the management of the project. A combination of these three approaches can be used in the supervision of research students depending upon the situation and requirements. This is also supported by Donald *et al.* (1995) and Salmon (1992) who stated that the supervisor should support students by placing appropriate emphasis on pastoral care and providing advice, sympathy and encouragement.

It has also been found that an effective supervisor must have significant knowledge and experience in the field of study. This is emphasised by many authors, including Donald *et al.* (1995), McQueeney (1996), Moses (1985), Parsloe (1999) and Sheehan (1994). This study has also found that student will be have more advantages if the supervisor is an active researcher who has written books or journal articles that can be drawn on in the research. This is supported by Brown and Adkins (1988), who suggest that, to supervise effectively, one has to be a competent researcher and to be able to analyse knowledge, techniques and methods.

The findings from this study also suggest that another main responsibility of supervisors is to provide critical feedback on students' written work. The idea that it is the supervisor's responsibility to give feedback in the form of constructive criticism is an essential element in the student's intellectual development (Spear, 2000). This is also supported by Donald *et al.* (1995) and Russell (1996) who suggest that the responsibilities of a supervisor include giving feedback on the progress of the student's written work.

The Responsibilities of Student

As the student is the 'owner' of the research, he/she has the ultimate responsibility for the decisions taken. The findings in this study suggest that students should develop independence throughout their study. In the interviews, the supervisors mentioned that students have to be independent as they can be considered as mature students who have had a lot of experience, having taken undergraduate, and most of them are married and have their own families. Therefore, supervisors believe that students should manage their work independently, without being told step by step what to do. In order to make progress, they have a responsibility to manage their own work. In research student policies, it is similarly reported that students need to take initiative in raising problems or difficulties. These results are supported by the literature findings. In the literature on research student supervision, Phillips and Pugh (2000) suggest that research students have to take responsibility for managing own learning. They are responsible for determining what is required, as well as what is need to be carried out and keeping in touch with supervisors through regular meetings (Moses, 1992; Powles, 1989). Moses (1985) also argued that they should be diligent, conscientious and hardworking and have a sense of urgency.

In this research, it has also been found that students placed great importance on the regular submission of written work. They indicated that they are responsible for submitting written work in order to make progress. The results show that most respondents stated that they normally submit written work either on the day they meet

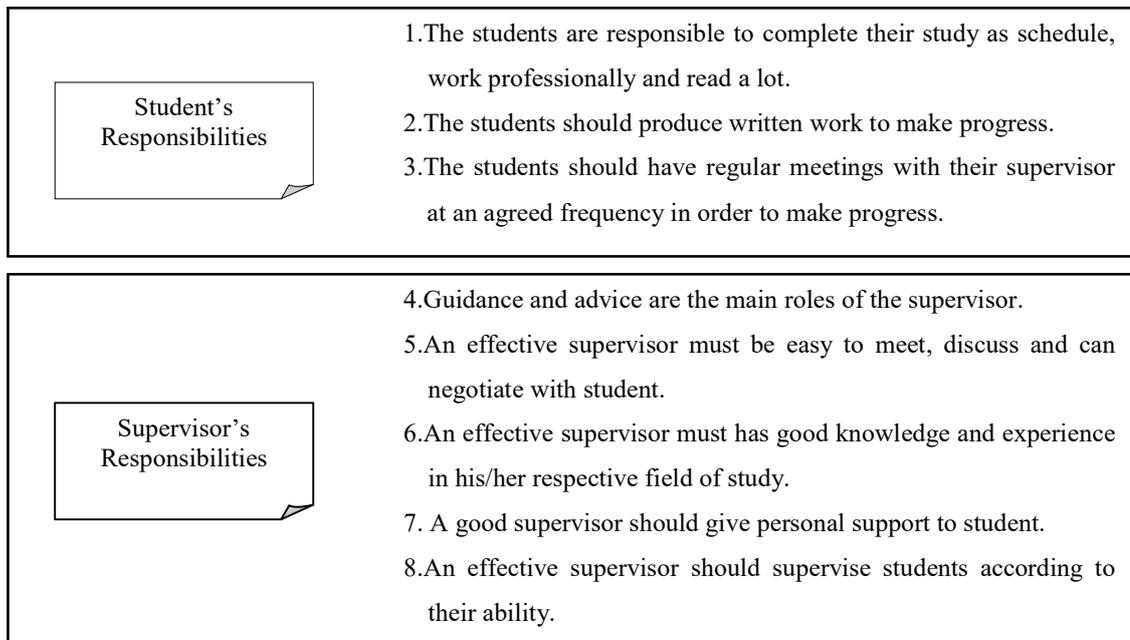
or they send it to their supervisor a few days in advance. This is supported in the literature, where Spear (2000), among others, mentioned that the regular submission of work is essential so that writing problems can be recognised and addressed as soon as possible. It is also stated in the research student policies that supervisor must request appropriate written work and returning the work with constructive criticism in a reasonable time.

The findings suggest that a good student should grasp the opportunity to develop professionally. This is matched in the literature, where Alfonso and Firth (1990), Brown and Krager (1985) and Holdaway *et al.* (1995) mentioned that students should develop professionally and that this professional development should include attending conferences, perhaps writing papers for publication, attending seminars and workshops, making presentations, networking with other researchers and working as research assistant. Most of the students in the interviews indicated that they had experience of presenting papers in seminars or conferences. This result also closely reflects statements in the literature, Ballard and Clanchy (1993) described research students' supervision as a blend of academic expertise and the skilful management of personal and professional relations.

Summary of the Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the themes derived from this research. The main responsibility of a supervisor is to guide and advice a student's research. This guidance and advice relates to the direction, completeness, clarity, methodology, topic selection and data collection and also involves giving feedback on the progress of written work. At different stages of the research, students are likely to need different forms of guidance. A Ph.D involves cooperation between the student and supervisor in order to achieve objectives. Without good supervision from a good supervisor, problematic situations will arise which can affect progress. An effective supervisor should supervise students based on their ability and individual requirements, since postgraduate students are not homogenous, but highly diverse in their academic ability, personality attributes, motivation and attitude. A good supervisor should give personal support to students if they have problems because, if these are not attended to, they may affect the student's progress. If the supervisor is not in a position to help students to solve them, he should be able to refer them to an individual who can do so. He/she should also be seen by students as close to them and always there when needed. Also it has been found that an effective supervisor must have good knowledge and experience in their respective field of study.

Figure 1 : Summary of the Themes that Emerged from the Research



need to produce written work in order to make progress. The results also show that a good student should grasp opportunities to develop their professional skills like attending conferences, writing papers for publication, attending seminars and workshops, making presentations and networking with other researchers.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the experience, practices and problems of postgraduate students in UPM. In doing a Master/Ph.D, students face problems with their research, their supervision, and their personal problems. It is not easy to overcome all these problems without enthusiasm, strength, support and commitment. It has, in particular, been found that postgraduate students in UPM are very dependent on their supervisor which they need more support and motivation from their supervisor, department or school and the other people surrounding them, like their families and friends. Furthermore, the person who is closest to them in a professional relationship is their supervisor. A good relationship with their supervisor is very important element as this will lead to them getting many benefits in their study.

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