Supervising Theses: Congruence between the Expectations of Supervisors and Supervisees

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ABSTRACT

Supervising theses at doctoral and master's level is never easy. Complaints are often heard from both sides. Supervisors lament the fact that their students do not have the relevant skills to carry out research; students complain that supervisors are very difficult to contact and do not seem to provide much assistance. More often than not, supervisees expect the supervisors to guide them through every detail and aspect of the research writing process. On the other hand, the supervisors expect the supervisees to have sufficient knowledge about doing research. This mismatch of expectations often leads to frustrations on both sides. This qualitative study reported here investigated the nature of the supervising process at a faculty of education at a large public university in Malaysia, in particular investigating the expectations and problems encountered during the supervising process. The findings revealed that supervisors and supervisees have different conceptions of their roles and have different expectations of each other. The findings suggest that both parties need to clarify their expectations from the outset. This may minimize conflicts between the two parties.

Keywords: *supervisors, supervisees (students in the supervising process), tutorial, expectations, mismatch, congruence.*

Introduction

The qualitative research described in this paper focuses on the experiences of supervisors and students involved in thesis writing at a faculty of

education in a large university in Malaysia. For the students, the thesis was part of their graduation requirements for the masters' programme in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). This study was triggered by laments heard at faculty meetings discussing the progress of students in carrying out their research. Supervisors often complain that students are just not meeting their supervisors for the tutorial process to take place or even if tutorials do take place, students are not meeting deadlines in completing their assignments. At the heart of this study is the fear that if students do not meet supervisors nor meet deadlines of the university, then the possibility of them not completing their programme on time or not graduating at all becomes a real prospect. The basic aim of this inquiry, therefore, is to understand the supervising process as understanding is the basis of action for improvement (McKernan, 1996). According to McCormack and Pamphilon (2004), "supervision of postgraduate students is a complex pedagogy enacted in a setting characterized by complexity and change" (p. 23).

Many times we have heard from supervisors who say that the onus of setting meetings and keeping them is the responsibility of the students. This is justification because the supervisors are very busy people. On top of supervising duties, which are often regarded as over and above normal teaching duties, supervisors have to teach, do research, sit on various university committees, as well as sit on consultancy boards of both government and private organizations. It is therefore quite reasonable for supervisors to expect students to be responsible for meetings. However, similar to Usher and Green (2003), we maintain that supervisors are accountable for initiating and maintaining contact with their students in order to ensure the quality of the supervising process as well as the product, which is the thesis.

Thesis supervision is usually not an easy task either for the supervisors or for those being supervised. Supervising a thesis is often fraught with problems, miscommunications, and unrealistic expectations on the part of the supervisors as well as the students. Many of these problems originate from the different expectations of the supervision process held by the supervisors and students. Exley and O'Malley (1999, cited in Woolhouse, 2002) have pointed out that there is no right way to supervise a thesis student. Whilst teaching in the classroom is a public occasion with students being the witnesses, supervising a thesis student is very much a private affair. What goes on between supervisor and student remain in the domain of those involved in it. Whether the supervisor is advising the students in the right manner is only known to the two involved

in it. Woolhouse (2002) asked us to deliberate on the question of whether a student's successful completion of the thesis is a result of the supervisor's contribution or the student's own capabilities.

The objective of this qualitative research was to investigate the different expectations of the supervision process held by those involved in it. It is hoped that by outlining the expectations of the supervisors and students, whether these expectations are similar or different, the supervising process can be an enriching and a rewarding experience for both parties. According to Phillips and Pugh (2000), it is so essential for students to learn to manage this "all-important student-supervisor relationship" (p.101) that they cannot leave it to chance. They consider this aspect of the relationship so crucial to the success of the students that they have devoted a whole chapter on how students can learn strategies to manage their supervisors in their highly acclaimed book "How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Supervisors and Their Students" (2000).

This aspect of a graduate student's career is so important to a university that in graduate schools in most universities, both locally and abroad, graduate faculties have devised their own "code of practice" for supervising doctoral and masters' students, and even hold colloquia to help supervisors learn and manage this very important supervisor-supervisee relationship. At the university where this study took place, the graduate school, even in its infancy, has conducted several workshops where experts from both local and foreign universities were invited to give tips and guidance to novice, as well as veteran supervisors, on how to supervise their research students. The first PhD from this university, a major historical event for the newly-conferred university, was awarded in 2002.

In a 1996 paper, Nelson, a history professor at the Australian National University, pointed out that the PhD is a new degree in Australia. There were no regulations for the award of the PhD at any Australian university until after 1945 and that the number of doctoral students during the post-war years was very small indeed. If the PhD was considered a new degree in the middle of the last century in Australia, it is more so here in Malaysia where the first university, University Malaya, was established in Singapore in 1949 (MOE, 2001). A check with EPRD (Economic, Planning and Research Department) revealed that it has no information on the first locally produced PhD.

In Malaysia, public universities have traditionally sent their scholars overseas, especially to the US, UK, Germany, France, Australia, and

New Zealand, to carry out their research studies both at the doctoral and masters' level. Very few research scholars stayed home to do their graduate work. It was largely because of the economic downturn in the late nineties that more university-funded scholars were encouraged to do their master's and PhDs locally. To meet this demand, more public universities have developed or expanded their graduate school or faculty and opened up places for potential masters' and doctoral students. Having a graduate faculty also lends prestige to a university as it indicates that research (a highly prized academic achievement) and development is being carried out at the university. Because of increased demand for research work, many supervisors have had to grow up in a hurry, developing and honing their skills as supervisors, and learning to meet the expectations of their supervisees without much assistance from the institution.

Typically these professors will fall back on their own experiences being supervised in order to supervise. They may often rely on their "gut" reaction that what they are doing is the right thing and that they will get along with their students (Woolhouse, 2002). This apprenticeship of supervising may have been learned at the feet of their supervisors. The usual anecdotal observation made of foreign supervisors amongst local PhD graduates is usually how helpful their foreign supervisors had been during the supervision process and how well the students got along with their supervisors. In the foreign context, one often hears of students and supervisors having drinks together at their meetings. The usual and often unsubstantiated claim regarding local supervisors is how unhelpful local supervisors usually are and how difficult it is to set appointments with them.

The first author's skills in supervising masters' students began in 1996 and similar to the assertion made by Woolhouse, she fell back on her own experiences with her own doctoral supervisor in order to guide her students in carrying out their research and in subsequently writing their theses. There was never any guided training session to become supervisors which was similar to a student being trained to become a teacher or a doctor. One becomes a supervisor through the act of being supervised. This type of incidental training could either be detrimental or beneficial, and depends subjectively on the experiences of the ones being supervised. The vicarious nature of the learning one has had with one's supervisor may also be largely incomplete and may not include best practices in the conduct of supervision as outlined by Dr. Lynn Taylor in

the 2002 Best Practices in Graduate Supervision Conference at the University of Sasketchewan, Canada.

In order to investigate the nature of the supervising process, we asked the following questions:

1. What do supervisors expect of the students they are supervising?
2. What do students expect of their supervisors?
3. What are the problems they encounter during the supervising process?

The Method

In order to investigate the nature of the supervising process, we chose the qualitative research method so that we can get at the heart of the supervising process, letting the voices of the supervisors and the largely "silent" voice (Woolard, 2002) of the students to emerge. We are of the opinion that qualitative research method allows us to get insights into "…people's lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings…" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.11). To obtain the data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant. Although we had a set of questions we wanted to ask, most of the time, we allowed the participants to respond in their own words to our probing questions, and more importantly, to also offer other details which we may not have thought of, but which added to the richness of the information we were getting.

The Study Participants

To get at the core of the supervising process, we selected participants who were themselves deeply involved in the process, namely the supervisors and the students (henceforth known as supervisees) of the Faculty of Education at a large public university in Malaysia. Four supervisors and nine supervisees participated in our study.

The four supervisors, two male and two female lecturers, were all senior members of the faculty. All obtained their PhDs from overseas, one from an American university and the other three from British universities. Most have had supervisory experience either at the masters' level or the undergraduate degree level. Only one has had experience supervising students at the doctoral level. Two are professors and have had experience being external examiners for other universities. All four

have had extensive experience in teaching and in administration. They had been deans, heads of departments, or coordinators.

The nine adult students, all female, were in the fourth and final semester of the MEd. TESL program at the Faculty of Education. The thesis was part of their coursework requirements for graduation. The students were assigned their supervisors at the beginning of their second semester with the program. During the first semester, they had taken the Research Methodology class; the major assignment coming out of this class was the research proposal. The supervisors were assigned to the students based on their interest in the topics of investigation. When the supervisors chose the topics, they had no idea of the identity of the supervisees. This was done to ensure the objectivity of the selection.

After the assignment was made, the coordinator of the program gave the students and supervisors a document entitled *Plan of Studies for the Writing of the Thesis* which outlined the schedule and activities students were encouraged to follow in the writing of the thesis. This was a guide designed to help students plan and manage their time. The other objective was also to help students complete their thesis on time.

The Interview Process

Four supervisors and nine supervisees were interviewed. Most of the interviews were carried out on campus: the supervisors were interviewed at their offices; the students were interviewed in the classrooms or the student rest areas. Whenever possible, both researchers were present at the interviews so that one could ask the questions whilst the other took notes. When this was not possible only one researcher carried out the interviews, and took brief field notes. However, it was a rule that detailed notes be transcribed as soon as the interviews were over. This was done so that memory failure would not colour our data collection.

Each participant was interviewed at least three times: the first was to set the scene, explain our objectives, and ask initial probing questions; the second was to ask further clarification questions; and the third was to confirm our findings. The interview focussed on our central question of investigating the expectations of the supervisors and supervisees.

Method of Analysis

As mentioned earlier, we took copious field notes of the interviews. As soon as each interview was over, we both looked over our notes to confirm what was said, and to fill in the missing sections. It was inevitable that we would not be able to write verbatim what was mentioned during the interviews. Therefore it was imperative that both researchers sat together to discuss initial data immediately after each interview. The handwritten notes were then typed onto the computer and as we were inputting data into the computer, recurring themes related to our objectives began to appear. This was immediately categorized as we did not want to lose the immediacy and freshness of the data and our initial impressions.

We thus subjected the data to "open coding" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in which "…the data was broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences." (p. 102). Similar views or opinions were then grouped together under concepts termed as categories. This fractured data was then subjected to "axial coding" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) in which the data was reassembled "…to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (p. 124). We categorized recurring themes together and present these categories in the form of tables.

Findings

Holdaway, Deblois, and Winchester (1995, cited in Woolard, 2002) has suggested that students' expectations of their supervisors fall into two broad categories: interpersonal and procedural. The interpersonal deal with matters such as creativity, mentoring, and support; whilst procedural matters deal with notions surrounding tasks like scheduling, meeting, and reporting progress. We have decided to use the categories above loosely, as well as add another category which we termed "academic". Since we interviewed both supervisors and supervisees, we have also included the supervisors' expectations based on these categories.

For the interpersonal category, we refer to notions centring on rapport, communication, support, and empathy supervisors show towards supervisees. In procedural matters, we refer to tasks such as helping students register, scheduling meetings, reporting progress, and keeping students on track. Academic matters specifically refer to the research and writing process, such as helping students with finding topics for

research, providing materials related to topics, and/or designing a research methodology.

The expectations of students and supervisors are presented in separate tables according to the categories yielded by data coding. The discussion of the concepts "congruence" and "mismatch" between students and supervisors are treated in the discussion section.

Expectations of Students

The three tables below outlined the expectations students hold of their supervisors. The expectations are categorized into three separate headings.

Interpersonal Expectations

In terms of interpersonal relationships between supervisors and supervisees, the supervisees expect the supervisors to be, among others, approachable, to be a good listener, and to have patience with them during the research and writing process. This is important and supports what Phillips and Pugh (2000) declared in their seminal work on supervision. They said, "… 'rapport' and good communication between students and their supervisors are the most important elements of supervision. Once the personal relationship has been well-established, all else falls into place. If interpersonal compatibility is missing everything else to do with being a postgraduate student is perceived negatively" (p. 12). They further suggest that this important aspect of the supervisory relationship be discussed right at the beginning of the process. Phillips and Pugh (2000) also alluded to the fact that even marriage partners do not spend long hours in close contact with each other, as the supervising process usually demands.

Ashari (2002), in writing about the challenges of adult students, said that such students have to assume multiple roles and complete multiple tasks when they come back to the university to continue their postgraduate study. Among the many roles they assume are student, mother, father, daughter, son, wife, husband, friend, teacher, lecturer, etc. And the tasks are multiple as well. Aside from their duties as mother or father, they also have to complete tasks at work, as well as finish assignments given to them by their professors. This is why one of the students' expectations is that their supervisors would understand their personal commitments

such as with family and work. Table 1 briefly outlines the interpersonal expectations of the students.

Table 1: Interpersonal Expectations of Supervisees

Supervisors should:
• be approachable
• be good listeners
• have patience
• have a "give and take" attitude
• not pose any pressure or threat
• understand supervisees' personal constraints like work, family and other commitments
• be specific in giving support and guidance

Procedural Expectations

Students also expect supervisors to help them in procedural matters such as arranging meetings for tutorial sessions, providing guidance in adhering to the graduate school's regulations and requirements, and registering topics with the program. It can be seen from the table that students do not seem to have much trouble with this aspect of the supervision. This could be due to the fact that most assistance on these matters can also be sought from the program coordinator whose main job is to help students in matters procedural.

Table 2: Procedural Expectations of Supervisees

Supervisors should:
• understand and be flexible with supervisees' problems meeting deadlines
• understand supervisees' problems in meeting supervisors
• arrange meetings convenient to supervisees
• provide guidance
• assist supervisees
• arrange for longer meetings

Academic Expectations

It seemed that more assistance is sought in this area. Some of these expectations are similar to these Phillips and Pugh (2000) presented in their book. These are that students expect supervisors to have read and made comments on their work before a meeting and that supervisors have sufficient knowledge of the topic to help students develop their research study.

Table 3: Academic Expectations of Supervisees

Supervisors should:
• be helpful to the extent of providing materials
• provide clear and precise comments and feedback
• ask the supervisees what problems they are facing in doing the research
• allow the supervisees to have the freedom to decide on research topics
• not ask supervisees to do what the supervisors think is right
• give ample time to complete any work given to them
• be knowledgeable and informative on research topics

Expectations of Supervisors

The following section outlines the expectations expressed by the supervisors who participated in the study. Similar to the students' expectations, the supervisors' expectations are also categorized into three aspects, interpersonal, procedural, and academic.

Interpersonal Expectations

This section outlined what the supervisors expect themselves to be when supervising students. Supervisors agree with students that they have to listen well and not pose threat or cause tension with their students. They also expect to "straighten out" any mismatches of expectations from the beginning.

Table 4: Supervisors' Interpersonal Expectations of Themselves as Supervisors

Supervisors should:
• be good listeners
• treat students as adult learners
• avoid posing any threat, pressure, tension or stress
• never label the supervisees
• straighten out the mismatch from the beginning by telling the students what they ought to do

Procedural Expectations

Supervisors did not express much opinion regarding this matter. The only thing they mentioned was that they should not set up a structured schedule for the supervisees because this would reduce the independence of the individual student. Phillips and Pugh (2000) support the notion that supervisors expect students to be independent. Independence, however, is a very tricky notion. Despite declarations of independence, students must still adhere to faculty policies, graduate school requirements, presentational style of thesis, and ethics of the discipline. That supervisors did not have much opinion on this is expected as most procedural matters are handled by the program coordinator's office or the Centre for Graduate Studies.

Academic Expectations

Most of the supervisors' expectations of students centred on academic matters and much less on interpersonal and procedural matters. Supervisors feel that at the graduate stage, students should have the skills of research design and writing especially since they had taken a Research Methodology class in the first semester. The table below succinctly outlined what the supervisors expect the students to know in terms of academic matters in particular, conducting research and subsequently writing research report.

Table 5: Academic Expectations of Supervisors

Supervisees should:

- understand the overall concept of research design
- have an adequate knowledge of research methodology
- know the topic well
- have done sufficient reading on the topic area
- have read and looked through samples of other related theses
- have established a theory(s) to support the research
- have looked into all theoretical aspects in TESL, and try to relate these to what they have learnt before
- have built a foundation through literature review
- not expect supervisors to help identify or provide the research topic
- not expect supervisors to correct language
- be prepared to defend the proposal
- be prepared to answer questions on any aspect of uncertainties
- be prepared to accept changes and amendments to the work done
- understand that supervisees lack the knowledge and experience in doing research

Positive and Negative Perceptions of Supervisees Towards Their Supervisors

Another set of data that we found serendipitously during analysis is outlined in the tables below. We decided to include this data so that we can be more informed about the supervision process. We found that, based on their experiences of the supervision process, students held both positive and negative perceptions of their supervisors. Tables 6 and 7 detailed this more succinctly.

Positive and Negative Perceptions of Supervisors Towards Their Supervisees

It is inevitable that supervisees, too, have their own perceptions of the students they are supervising. On the positive side, supervisors could actually see the development of the students as researchers as they progress further in the research process. If initially, they were very

Table 6: Supervisees' Positive Perceptions of Supervisors

Students find that their supervisors are:
• very understanding
• very friendly and approachable, although supervisees know their limit and always observe and understand their position as supervisees
• knowledgeable and informative
• flexible in making appointments
• able to keep appointments
• flexible in meeting the deadlines
• flexible in letting supervisees to set up meetings
• easily contactable through e-mail and SMS
• happier with face to face meetings
• responsible in calling the supervisees when supervisees have been keeping quiet

Table 7: Supervisees' Negative Perceptions of Supervisors

• students felt fearful of supervisor's reputation, usually negative, about being a poor listener, being "snobbish", being fussy etc.
• students are confused by poor comments and feedback from the supervisors
• students are unsure of what to do next
• supervisors do not like to have meetings for too long. Usually gestures to students to leave
• students prefer to meet supervisor in person, not too often through SMS or e-mail
• supervisors conduct the meeting in a formal and professional manner
• supervisors create a serious mood at the meeting
• supervisors are not good listeners
• supervisors never ask supervisees about their problems

dependent on the supervisor, they develop maturity and confidence as they begin to gain more knowledge about their own research. They are now able to debate issues with their supervisors and offer their own opinions during discussions.

The supervisors' negative perceptions of their supervisors are listed in Table 8. The supervisors' complaints about their students usually centred

Table 8: Supervisors' Negative Perceptions of Supervisees

• supervisees lack reading
• supervisees portray minimal knowledge on research writing
• supervisees are dependent on supervisors
• supervisees are not confident, always need supervisors' approval and confirmation of what they do
• supervisees are unable to justify, argue and look at ideas from different perspectives
• supervisees will take a longer "distance" before they can meet the supervisors' expectations
• supervisees lack understanding of the whole concept of what research is all about
• though exposed to Research Methodology, the supervisee's knowledge about research is still insufficient
• supervisees do not meeting supervisors as frequently as supervisors wanted them to

on matters surrounding the whole research process: the ability to find a topic, the ability to do literature review, to design a method of inquiry, and the ability to write without much editing from the supervisor.

The supervisors also complained about the lack of meeting with their supervisees. One of the supervisees interviewed had not had any meetings with her supervisor outside the first introductory meeting. This general situation, amongst other supervisees as well, got to the point where the supervisors and program coordinator held a meeting to discuss this lack of meeting and issued a memo requiring students to meet with their supervisors at least once a fortnight. This was done in the first month but the practice petered out eventually. Students often cited their commitment to assignments and projects for their coursework as preventing them from scheduling more meetings with the supervisors.

Discussion

It is fairly apparent that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is marked by different expectations on the part of both supervisor and supervisee. In summary, the supervisor's expectations of the supervisees centred on academic matters, such as the ability to identify a research topic, to relate the research topic to the theoretical framework of the problem, to

design the method to investigate the problem, and subsequently, to write the research report correctly and succinctly. This aspect of the research process, however, was not mentioned by the students during the interviews. They did not highlight the fact that they should have certain research skills before they can carry out any research work. It is apparent that there is a mismatch in expectations here; whilst one party mentioned this aspect extensively (see Table 5), the other party in the same endeavour was silent on the matter.

It is our opinion that, at this stage, students should have the relevant skills to do research even though they can still be considered novice researchers. They have also had one semester of the Research Methodology class in which the basic principles of doing research was taught to them. Therefore, this expectation was a realistic one on the part of the supervisors. In addition, it is fairly unreasonable to expect supervisors to teach their supervisees the various elements of doing research given the heavy teaching workload of the supervisors.

Supervisees and supervisors agree on the interpersonal requirements of the relationship. They recognize the fact that both parties must establish a rapport right at the beginning of the relationship, they must clarify expectations right from the outset, they must have good listening skills, and they must be able to communicate with each other. To reiterate Phillips and Pugh's (2000) recommendation, once rapport is established everything else will fall into place.

Despite this realization of the importance of the interpersonal element of the relationship, there exists a power imbalance between supervisor and supervisee. The supervisor remains the "knower" – the person who has the inside knowledge of the research process, and the person who inducts the supervisee into the mysteries of the research world, and the person who will eventually evaluate the students' work. Knowing this, supervisees realize that there will always be a gap in their knowledge and that they will always have to be alert to the boundaries of the relationship. Although one is advised to establish rapport with one's supervisor, one can never get too close. This aspect could also be culturally explained as in this culture, the teacher is always looked upon with awe and respect. One must never go against the teacher. This cultural expectation could also be carried over into the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

Supervisors should realize this culturally ingrained aspect of the relationship and should make attempts to reduce the gap. Some researchers (Woolard, 2002, and Phillips and Pugh, 2000) have even

advised supervisors to schedule some discussions over an informal lunch instead of at the supervisor's office, which is the norm. Some supervisors are reluctant to do this, however, especially if they have a female supervisee. This is fairly understandable, but parameters can also be set for such meetings where the outcomes are clear to both parties.

It is apparent that expectations centred more on the interpersonal and academic matters, rather than the procedural. Both sides have things to learn about the supervision process, and both need to re-adjust their expectations in order to accommodate one another.

Conclusion

Differences in expectations are apparent and indeed, expected, in the supervisor-supervisee relationship. As in any relationship, student-teacher, doctor-patient, supervisor-supervisee, the clarifications of expectations from both sides at the outset of the relationship must be achieved in order for the relationship to be a mutually-beneficial one.

Supervisors cannot just rely on "gut" reaction that they are doing the right thing. The practical and emotional aspects of supervision must be consciously learned so that quality supervision can be given to the students, especially in this time of changing practices and changing supervisory roles (Usher and Green, 2003). Supervisors need also to be trained in the art of supervising as part of their professional development. This is especially so for supervisors in a formerly teaching intensive university making initial forays into becoming a research intensive university.

Another crucial aspect that has to be considered by the supervisors is the timely completion of the research in order for the students to graduate in specified time. A university's prestige often hinges on the timely completion of these graduates. A high percentage of late completion does not reflect well on the faculty and the university is finally accountable for this state of affairs.

It is hoped that once supervisors have the "inside information" about the supervising process, "they will be in a better to position to develop the skills necessary to teach the craft of research, maintain a helpful 'contract' and encourage students' academic role development" (Phillips and Pugh, 2000, p. 161). The research revealed that whilst there are some aspects of expectations that are congruent, there are aspects that are not and that need to be clarified, especially if quality supervision is to be provided to the students in our charge.

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