

Full Length Research Paper

Doctorate international students' satisfaction and stress on academic supervision in a Malaysian University: a qualitative approach

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The objective of this study is to explore the doctorate foreign students' satisfaction on academic supervision in Malaysia. Nine PhD foreigner students were interviewed. Semi-structure interview guideline was developed based on the literature review in this area. The participants were selected from the National University of Malaysia (UKM). The facilitator of the interview wrote down the answer of the participants. The protocol of this study was approved by the research and ethics committee of Management and Science University (MSU). Themes were classified into categories and data analyzed manually. Most of the international students feel stressed and worried about uncertainty because of the supervisory system and the culture differences. The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisor did not give them any advice about relevant/feasible topics. The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with their supervisors in terms of monitoring their progress. However, the majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors never set realistic time frames for their research process. The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors developed their argument logically and teaches them how to use language concisely and they are satisfied with their supervisors in this matter. The majority of the participants motioned that their supervisors never discuss their circumstances and not interested in doing so. The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with their supervisors in general. The majority of the foreign PhD students were not satisfied and feel stress and worry with their supervisory system. Therefore there is a need for Malaysian institutions to look into the overall supervisory system and culture differences.

Keywords: Doctorate students, satisfaction, stress, Malaysian, qualitative.

INTRODUCTION

The way that professors supervise the thesis work of their students is of interest and concern to decision makers in universities because of supervision's link to a successful outcome for the student, which has moral, reputational, and financial implications for the institution. Enrollments in higher degree programs are increasing, and super-

visors are required to supervise more students than they have in the past. The desire to pursue higher education is constantly increasing. The government and the institutions of higher learning are striving to attract more students, especially at the graduate level by making every effort to provide quality education.

One of the major problems faced by the higher education is attrition and completion rates. To sustain high completion rates, one of the most challenges role of

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supervisor is to ensure effective facilitation and responsibility to assist the students in their research.

Since 1986, graduate enrollments have entered a growth period in the United States averaging 2% per annum (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005). Several studies have examined a number of factors to determine their relationship to completion of the degree. Such factors are attendance status, level of research funding available, age, completion of an honors degree and discipline areas. Other factors identified as significant predictors of completion are suitability of research topic, intellectual environment of the department, and access to equipment and computers and gender which have been investigated and linked to completion (Bourke et al., 2004; Gasson and Reyes, 2004; Seagram et al., 1998; Wright and Cochrane, 2002; Acker et al., 1994; Harman, 2002; Latona and Browne, 2001; Pearson and Brew, 2002). Therefore, there are multiple factors which either help research students to complete their degree or condemn them to failure (Latona and Browne, 2001).

Many authors on this subject have indicated that the quality of the student/supervisor relationship is vital to the PhD process and often pointed to as the most important factor in whether or not students make it through the process (Zainal Abiddin, 2007).

Students need information and support to cope the demands of different environments.

In most research universities in the Anglo-Saxon countries and countries like the Netherlands, PhD candidates do a research study under the supervision of one or two faculty members. These faculty members not only guide and support the PhD candidate, but also play an important role in the assessment of the quality of the final manuscript submitted.

In many institutions, it is not common to evaluate supervisory experience or discuss among staff how supervision is (or should be) provided. Nonetheless, such discussions might be profitable for the quality of the PhD students' work. Leonard et al. (2006) conclude in a review of the literature on the impact of the working context and support of postgraduate research students that several studies show a need for supervisors to be more aware of the way in which their relationship with a student is developing.

Several studies mentioned that the capability of the supervisor is a key factor in the success of candidates (Ainley, 2001; Buttery et al., 2005; Delamont et al., 1997; Harman, 2002; Heath, 2002; Johnson et al., 2000b; Latona and Browne, 2001; Pearson and Brew, 2002; Seagram et al., 1998). There are many elements that influence the performance of the supervisor and their relationship with their postgraduate students. Supervisors, for example, must have research knowledge and related skills (Beasley, 1999; Vilkinas, 2002, 2005). They also need to possess management and interpersonal

skills (Beasley, 1999). They must be able to coordinate the activities of the research program; mentor the students (Pearson and Kayrooz, 2005; Seagram et al., 1998); and, where appropriate and useful, develop supportive relationships among the research students themselves (Burnett, 1999; Dorn et al., 1995; Fraser and Mathews, 1999; Latona and Browne, 2001).

From what students and other researchers claim, the heart of a successful supervision process is the quality of the relationship between student and supervisor (Acker, 1999; Dinham and Scott, 1999; Eggleston and Delamont, 1983; Grant and Graham, 1999; Knowles, 1999; Neumann, 2003; Seagram et al., 1998). Poor interpersonal relationships and lack of rapport between student and supervisor are the reasons most often cited for problems encountered in the PhD supervisory process (Hill et al., 1994; McAleese and Welsh, 1983). There is no previous study about foreign PhD students in Malaysia. Therefore, this study attempt to fill in the gap in this area. The objective of this study is to explore the satisfaction of foreign PhD students on academic supervision in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

An in-depth interview was conducted among nine PhD students. The semi-structure interview guideline was developed based on the literature review in this area. The participants were selected from the National University of Malaysia (UKM). Convenience sampling was used in this study. The inclusion criteria were: PhD foreign students, can speak and understand English language. However Malaysian PhD students were excluded from this study. Consent was obtained from the participants before the interview began. The facilitator of the interview wrote down the answer of the participants. The proposal of this study was approved by the research and ethics committee of Management and Science University. Themes were classified in categories and the data analyzed manually.

RESULTS

A total number of nine foreign PhD students were participated in this study. The majority of participants were 35 years old or above 55.6%, Male 88.8%, married 100% < 0r equal 2 children 66.6% (Table 1).

Topic selection

The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisor did not give them any advice about relevant

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (n= 9)

Variable	Categories	Number	Percent (%)
Age	<35	4	44.4
	≥35	5	55.6
Sex	Male	8	88.8
	Female	1	11.1
Marital status	Single	0	0
	Married	9	100
Number of children	≤2	6	66.6
	>2	3	33.3
Years of study	4	3	33.3
	3	3	33.3
	2	3	33.3

topics. One of them said “No, my supervisor did not give me any advice about relevant topic, unfortunately my supervisors only comment on whatever I provide to them, but they never suggest things to me.” Three of the participants mentioned that their supervisor give them advices about relevant topics.

“Yes he helps in general area but not in details” (student)

“You are PhD student you need to do everything by yourself” (supervisor)

Monitoring the progress

The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with their supervisors in terms of monitoring their progress. One of them said “I am not satisfied because they are not free to think deeply when they read my drafts”

“The monitoring is upon the student request; but if there is any progress report to submit to the postgraduate school he call and asked about the progress of the research”

Time management

The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors never set realistic time frames for their research process. Two of the participants mentioned that their supervisors guide them to set realistic time frames for their research process. One of them said “They do not care about the time”

No time management “

Scientific writing skills

The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors developed their argument logically and taught them how to use language concisely and they

are satisfied with their supervisors in this matter. Two of them mentioned that their supervisors did not guide them to develop their argument logically and teach them how to use language concisely and they are not satisfied with their supervisors in this matter.

“The supervisor check the grammatical errors rather than the scientific idea because he is always very busy in administrative work” not satisfied

He did not develop any scientific writing skills

Emotional support

Responding to the question “Dose your supervisors know your circumstances?” The majority of the participants’ mentioned that their supervisors never discuss their circumstances and not interested in doing so. One of them said “The problem is even you tell the supervisor about your problem, his answer always; this is your problem and it is not my problem.” One of them said “No, they do not. I am not satisfied with my supervisors in this matter because they are not even interested to know about me except what relates us in terms of study topics.”

Stress and supervisory system

Most of the international students feel stressed and worried about uncertainty because of the supervisory system and the culture differences.

One of them said “The best three words that could best express the emotions while meeting with supervisors are ‘depressed, worried and stressed’. You feel like that there is something big out of nothing while there are some other important things that are left unnoticed or unquestioned. Moreover, you feel of the relationship in terms of power relations. You are just a student who is not allowed to write ‘i’ even with small letter. A space for cultural misunderstanding and academic background knowledge is not given, too”.

Stress due to no free time to meet him so you need to

wait for him more than a month to meet. So this is waste of time and money.

Some stress due to change his idea from time to time so you have to start new idea and collect new literature review and take much time to read and digest the new idea

Overall satisfaction

The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with their supervisors in general.

DISCUSSION

Topic selection

The majority of the participants mentioned in this study mentioned that their supervisors did not give them any advice about relevant/feasible topics. Supervisors should provide suggestions, criticism to their students. Similar findings by Spear (2000) mentioned that supervisors should read the student's written work thoroughly and provide constructive criticism because this is essential element in the student's intellectual development. Majority of students' complaint that supervisors have been unduly slow in reading thesis drafts and other written materials. Haksever and Manisali (2000) described the supervisory requirements of the students as follows: personal help: support, motivation, socializing, and help in organizing accommodation. Indirect research help in providing contacts, equipments and initial help in locating references. Direct research help in critical analysis of research, help with methodological problems, precise direction and help with management of the project.

Monitoring the progress

The majority of the participants mentioned that they are not satisfied with their supervisors in terms of monitoring their progress. Supervisors should have listening skills, encourage argument and debate, provide continuous feedback and support, be enthusiastic, and show warmth and understanding. Seagram et al. (1998) showed that important positive characteristics of supervisors according to their doctoral students were professional, pleasant, and supportive behavior. Heath (2002) argues that the success of the PhD system heavily depends on the supervisors, who must provide the time, expertise and support to foster the candidate's research skills and attitudes, and to ensure the production of a thesis of acceptable standard. Heath (2002) reported that the fre-

quency of meetings between supervisor and candidate is essential, the quality of these meetings is even more (cf. Li and Seale, 2007). Gurr (2001) has recommended that students need such direction early in the process of working on their theses; and Heath (2002) has pointed out that students are more satisfied if supervisors guide their thesis work. Acker et al. (1994) have also argued for such a practical and commonsense approach. Similarly, Burnett (1999) has urged that students should be mentored, and Styles and Radloff (2001) support developing a "congenial and synergistic relationship"; moreover, a collaborative approach is generally supported in the research (Tyler, 1998).

Time management

The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors never set realistic time frames for their research process. Moses (1992) mentioned that students need different forms of guidance for each stage of the research progress. They need particular guidance on when to stop data collection and analysis, when to start drafting the thesis and how to structure it (Moses, 1992). Guidance with overall planning of the research and planning the study in terms of time frames is very necessary.

Scientific writing skills

The majority of the participants mentioned that their supervisors developed their argument logically and taught them how to use language concisely and they are satisfied with their supervisors in this matter. This may be due to the fact that these students do not have difficulties in scientific writing skills because they learnt about it in their master program. Similar findings reported by (Affero and Norhasni, 2009) that supervisors should help students more instead of let them on their own.

Emotional support

Students sometimes experience personal difficulties including family difficulties, financial problem, problem in personal relationships and culture adjustment. In the current study, the majority of the participant's mentioned that their supervisors never discuss their circumstances and not interested in doing so. Similar findings reported by Salmon (1992) that the supervisors need to be flexible in meeting the needs of individual students. Similar findings reported by (Ismail and Abiddin, 2009). Supervisors are not trained and cannot be expected to help in a professional sense, nor should they intrude into

the personal lives of their students. Supervisors who have this flexibility can be more helpful to their research students (Haksever and Manisali, 2000). From what students and other researchers claim, the heart of a successful supervision process is the quality of the relationship between student and supervisor (Eggleston and Delamont, 1983; Seagram et al., 1998; Knowles, 1999; Grant and Graham, 1999; Dinham and Scott, 1999). Poor interpersonal relationships and lack of rapport between student and supervisor are the reasons most often given for problems encountered in the PhD supervisory process (Hill et al., 1994; McAleese and Welsh, 1983). Armstrong (2004) suggested that trust, warmth, and honest collaboration are key elements in successful supervision. One study even indicated that satisfaction with supervision highly correlated with the students' perceptions of the supervisory relationships than with perceived expertise (Heppner and Handley, 1981). While the idea of students being grouped was not popular, the need for supervisors to be collaborative, offer advice, and work in tandem with students was considered important in the supervisory process. These behaviors all involve an intellectual, structural, and emotional commitment, which are important in the supervision process (Beasley, 1999) and can contribute to faster completion of the thesis and degree program (Acker et al., 1994; Harman, 2002; Latona and Browne, 2001; Pearson and Brew, 2002; Pearson and Kayrooz, 2005; Seagram et al., 1998).

This study reported that most of the PhD international students mentioned that the supervisory system make them worried and stressed. This finding reported by other studies which described learning culture, supervision as well as personal problems are all factors affecting postgraduate students studies and life. This is because most of postgraduate students are in the mature age category as well as experts in their chosen disciplines back home (Guilfoyle, 2006; Symons, 2001; Ingelton and Cadman, 2000).

RECOMMENDATION

More research is needed with a quantitative approach to investigate this problem among foreign students. More research in qualitative and quantitative approach is needed to explore the view of supervisors opinion about foreign PhD students. Guidelines for supervisory system is necessary to guide both supervisors and students during the study period.

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