Undergraduate students' perception of the final year project supervisory process: a case study at a private university in Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The purpose of this paper is to understand undergraduate students' perception of the Final Year Project's supervisory process. A survey was carried out to elicit the students' views to gain an insight into their experience during the supervision process. The sample consisted of 91 students in a private university in Malaysia. The participants' responses were analyzed according to the research questions and recurring themes. Only these factors are affected by gender of students: area of expertise of supervisors, timely feedback, duration of the research project and the number of meetings with supervisors. The implications of these findings are discussed. *A number of implications were derived for theory, practice, and further research.*

Introduction

Supervision of graduate students is a core activity in higher education. According to Ho (2003), many programmes in Hong Kong universities as well as universities in other parts of the world require students to do final year undergraduate projects, which means writing a thesis on a topic specifically related to an area studied in the programme. Educational supervision is said to be a complex and heterogeneous process, the nature and quality of which depends on many factors (Dainty, 2010).The supervision relationship requires examination of multiple issues, and the supervisory process must incorporate sensitivity to the role and responsibilities of both the supervisor and the supervisee (De Trude, 2001). This task becomes more arduous as there are stringent rules attached to it. As stipulated in the Codes of Ethics for the Association of Counselor Education and Supervision (1993), supervisors should not engage in any form of social contact or interaction, which would compromise the supervisor/supervisee relationship. It is further postulated that dual relationships with supervisees that might impair the supervisor's objectivity and professional judgment should be avoided and/or supervisory relationship terminated. Thus, according to De Trude (2001), supervisors bear a high level of responsibility to ensure that their supervisees are working within their own area of competence because their role is to increase competence. Lessing (2014) has listed a number of responsibilities that a supervisor has in carrying out his responsibility to assist his students as a supervisor and they comprise the following:

● selecting a research topic and design;
● formulating a researchable research question;
● developing an understanding of the field of study;
● arriving at a research design;
● dividing the research into different phases;
● conducting a literature review: identifying applicable literature, locating
● the literature, reading and checking its relevance, organising the selected literature, presenting results of similar studies, and relating the present study to the ongoing dialogue in literature

A recent survey of students' experiences at Aarhus University in Denmark (AU)shows that an alarming number of students feel isolated and adrift(2011 as cited in Nordentoft, Thomsen &Wichmann-Hansen, 2013). It is claimed by Remley and Herlihy (2001) that competent practitioners do not necessarily make competent supervisors. In the article, we investigate the potentials and challenges faced by supervisees in the supervisory process. The areas of satisfaction and contention as revealed in the emotional reactions of the students and/or the supervisor during the decision-making process are also portrayed (Worthington & Everett, 1985).An aspect of teaching and learning that has been seriously overlooked in higher education is the process of research supervision. Supervision of research higher degree candidates is a critically important and highly specialised form of academic teaching. High failure rates for research dissertations in the social sciences have been partly attributed to student dissatisfaction with supervision and poor student-supervisor relationships (Armstrong, 20014). Thus this research as the findings will enable supervisors and academic management to gain awareness of supervisees' perceptions on the supervisory process and with the knowledge gained, take the necessary steps to overcome the negative issues raised to ensure future supervisory relationships flow in an effective manner. The three questions underpinning this investigation were:

1. What are supervisees' perceptions of the supervisory process?
2. What are supervisees' perceptions of the role of the supervisors?
3. What are the factors that affect a supervisory process?
4. Is there a difference in the perceptions of the factors affecting supervision between the genders?

Literature Review

According to Salmon (1992), when a supervisor agrees to supervise a project means undertaking to work in close collaboration with someone who is embarking on a journey within themselves: a journey which may at times profoundly exciting, but which will also certainly be difficult, risky and painful .According to Lessing (2014), efficient supervision

requires a good relationship and interaction between supervisors and postgraduate students to ensure quality and successful research outcomes, as well as understanding of various practices, processes, potential difficulties and successful development and completion of postgraduate research projects. He based his claim on views of other researchers (Kiley and Mullins 2005, 256; Lee 2010, 45; Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts 2008, 71; Watts 2008, 371; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes and Creighton 2003, 385 cited in Lessing, 2014). Lessing (2014) claims that there is a lack of experience and knowledge among the students and they need advice and support from the supervisors when deciding about the different aspects in their research where the e supervisors provide assistance, guidance and support to the student.

According to Ho (2003), the importance ofhelping students to plan the research from the very beginning is widely stated in theliterature (Allen, 1973; Mauch and Birch, 1989; Moses, 1985, 1992; Rudd, 1985; Watson, 1970; Zuber-Skerritt and Knight, 1992; Gottlieb, 1994). Thus, the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is crucial in ensuring the supervision is successful. This is supported by Dispenser (2013) who asserts that productive supervision depends on the co-creation of trust, respect, and a safe space, and the active, intelligent and responsible participation of all parties (Dispenser, 2013). She went on to add that supervision is also affected by issues of matching and difference. Elawar and Corno (1985) assert that students demonstrate higher levels of intrinsic motivation when they are provided with constructive and informative feedback. Nadar (1997) adds to this by claiming such feedback delivers insights that provide a strong stimulus for further development and change.

According to Dainty (2010), besides the relationship between trainee and trainer, other factors that contribute to effective educational supervision comprise of the following:
- Plan of Action
- Frequent meetings and liaison
- Supervisor enthusiasm and collaboration
- Tell us what you think—the role of feedback

Peterson (2007) has brought a new perspective to the process of supervision by introducing a new term, where he equates research supervision as 'category boundary work'. He went on to define how academics are continually involved in maintaining, negotiating and challenging the boundaries around the category, and supervision can be said to be as an explication and intensification of this work, and as a place where the boundaries often are discussed explicitly, or where the boundaries are being pushed by failing attempts, and hence need to be repaired or restored, or where successful appropriation of the boundaries calls for explicit reinforcement and celebration.

There is ample evidence in the literature that supervisors tend to base their supervisory approach on their own experiences as a research student (Bitzer, 2010).Although, these researchers' views are based on postgraduate students, it can also apply to supervision of undergraduate students.

According to researchers (Hockey 1994, 296; Pearson 1996, 306; Phillips and Pugh 2000, Sayed et al. 1998, 280 as cited in Lessing, 2014), students should not wait for their supervisors to tell them what to do. Students are expected to initiate discussions, ask for help when they need it, and argue about what they should be researching. According to Wothingt on and Stern (1985), the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is important in determining the type and quality of counseling supervision. The relationship is hypothesized to be influenced by three classes of variables; Structural variables (fixed elements of

supervision including aspects such as participants' gender and experience level (Miars et al., 1983), the physical facilities and equipment used in supervision, and participants' personalities or stable interactional styles, *Cognitive variables (*characteristics of participants that guide their behavior during supervision including aspects such as the supervisor's theory of supervision (Bartlett, Goodyear, &Bradley, 1983), counseling theory of the supervisee, expectations each has for supervision, and evaluative styles of participants as well as the *events of supervision (* the ephemeral occurrences between two people that change, the structures of supervision and the participants' cognitions). These events are called supervision interventions (Loganbill, Hardy, & Delworth, 1982) or supervisor behaviors(Worthington & Roehlke, 1979). Kadushin (2002) delineated three main elements of the supervision process, to be: educative, administrative and supportive. On the other hand, Proctor (1998) states that supervision encompasses formative, normative and restorative elements.

In a research conducted in a public university in Malaysia to identify postgraduate students and their supervisors' perception on effective supervisor, the researcher (NorhasniZainalAbiddin, n.d.) identified five crucial points with regards to supervisors, namely; (1)to provide comment and guidance; (2) to meet, discuss and negotiate with student with ease; (3) have good knowledge and experience in his/her respective field of study; (4) give personal support to student; and (5) should supervise students according to their ability. According to Worthington and Stem (1985), the relationship between supervisor and supervisee is important in determining the type and quality of counseling supervision and it is hypothesized to be influenced by three classes of variables; structural variables, cognitive variables and the events of supervision. Miars et.al (1983) assrts that structural variables are those relatively fixed elements of supervision which include aspects such as participants' gender and experience level, thephysical facilities and equipment used in supervision and participants' personalities or stable interactional styles. Bartlett, Goodyear and Bradley (1983) went on to explain the cognitive variables as the characteristics of participants that guide their behavior during supervision which include aspects such as the supervisor's theory of supervision, counseling theory of the supervisee, expectations each has for supervision, and evaluative styles of participants. The events of supervision are the ephemeral occurrences between two people that change the structures of supervision and the participants' cognitions. These events are called supervision interventions (Loganbill, Hardy, &Delworth, 1982) or supervisor behaviors (Worthington &Roehlke, 1979).

Methodology

Universities in all parts of the world require students to do final year undergraduate projects, which means writing a thesis on a topic specifically related to an area studied in the programme (Ho, 2002). In order to understand how students perceived the supervisory process, a survey was carried out. The survey questionnaire was designed using a Likert scale and was administered to were distributed to 100 final year students in the School of Business in a selected university. The adapted questionnaires entailed three sections: section A aimed at collecting biographical data, section B to identify the factors affecting the supervision process and Section C investigated students' views on their experience in the supervision process. Five independent variables were investigated. These were (a) supervisee degree level (master's versus doctoral student), (b) supervisor status (faculty or post-PhD versus graduate student), (c) supervisee gender, (d) supervisor gender, and (e) gender

match (matched versus unmatched pairs). The questionnaire was distributed to Final Year Project Coordinators who dispersed them to supervisees within the practicum class. At the end of class, the questionnaires were collected. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Findings And Discussion

Introduction (Background of Samples)

There are 91 respondents of which 42.6% are male and 53.4% are female. These students are from different majors such as Business Administration (28.6%), International Business (22%), International Business and Marketing (48.4%), and Banking and Finance (1.1%).
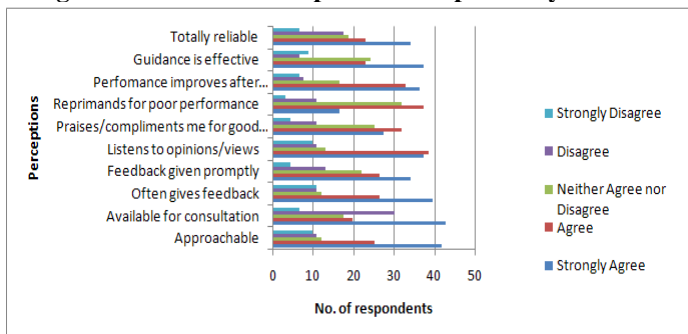
Table 1

	Frequency	Percent
Male	42	46.2
Female	49	53.8
Total	91	100.0

Table 2: Field of Study

	Frequency	Percent
Business Administration	26	28.6
International Business	20	22.0
International Business & Marketing	44	48.4
Banking & Finance	1	1.1
TOTAL	91	100.0

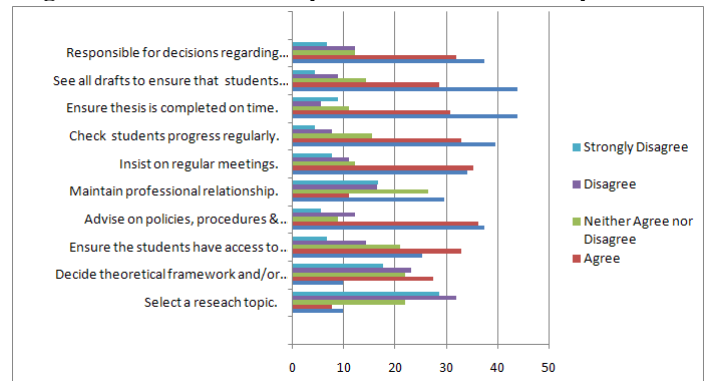### Students'' Perceptions of the Supervisory Process

Figure 2: Students Perceptions on Supervisory Process

The students were asked to rate the supervision process that they had undergone. The responses to the ten statements given on the whole were above average with the lowest response being 53.9 % agreeing that their supervisors have reprimanded them for poor performance. This findings when read with the response of 59.4% agreeing that their supervisors praise and compliment them for good work needs to be addressed as it is very crucial for students' good work to be acknowledged and poor performance to be admonished in appositive manner to ensure students enhance the good and eliminate the negativity in their performance. However, the significant percentage of students agreeing to the statements that the supervisor is reliable (62.7%), the supervisor is approachable (67.1%), the supervisor listens to the student's opinions/views (60.5), supervisor gives feedback promptly (66%), the guidance given by the supervisor is effective (60.5%) and lastly, the student's performance improves after the supervisor's feedback, taken together gives a strong indication that the students are satisfied with the overall supervisory process.These findings are similar to the findings of past researches (Grant, Schofield & Crawford, 2012).

Students' Perceptions of the Role of the Supervisors

Figure 3: Students' Perceptions on the Role of Supervisors

The survey questionnaire also elicited responses on students' perceptions as to the role of supervisors in the supervision process. The findings revealed that the students actually have a very high expectations with regards to the supervisors' roles. The ten statements posted to the students in the survey requested them to identify the key roles played by supervisors in the process. The percentage of responses from the students who agreed to the statements was high in the following statements:
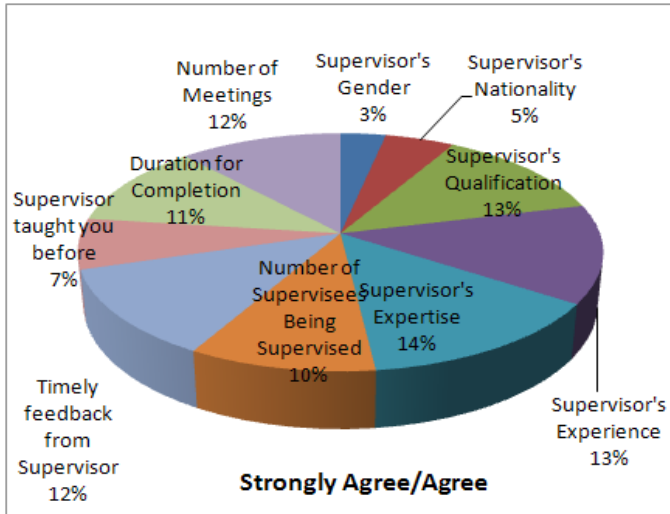
- Ensure thesis is completed on time—74.8%
- Advice on policies, procedures & requirements—73.7%
- Check students' progress regularly—72.6%
- See all drafts to ensure that the students are on the right track—72.6%
- Insist on regular meetings—69.3%
- Responsible for the decisions regarding the standard of the thesis---69.3%

These findings clearly assign a significant role on the part of the supervisors as the key elements for a successful thesis is that students should adhere to policies, procedures and requirements, complete thesis on time as well as ensure that they are on the right track which can be achieved through regular meetings and regular checks on progress and drafts (   ). An interesting finding that the researchers noted was that the students felt that selecting the topic and theoretical framework/methodology should not be within the ambit of the supervisors. This was indicated by the small percentage of the students agreeing to the statements. There was only 17.6% agreeing that supervisors should select research topics and 37.4% agreeing that supervisors should decide theoretical framework/methodology. This can be seen as a positive findings as it shows that these students are quite independent and have the ability to think for themselves which proves that the objectives the Malaysian Education to cultivate students' who are able to think critically has been somewhat successful. The responses to the statement that supervisors should have a purely professional relationship had a low response 40.7%. The supervisors feel that future research should go on to study why students have this stand to identify whether students are expecting supervisors to go beyond a professional relationship, i.e. become more friendlier and more approachable compared to the times when they were students in their respective subjects or they probably feel it is not an important element as Malaysian education from primary to college/university has in place this divide between students and lecturers and they take it for granted. This is an area which can be further researched to identify if there is a difference between students from Western countries and Asian countries in their expectations to the kind of relationship that is needed between supervisors and supervisees.

Factors that Affect a Supervisory Process

From the literature review (Goodyear, 1982; Abadie, 1985; Friedlander & Ward, 1984; Goodyear et al., 1984), the researchers identified ten factors which affect a supervision process. The students were asked to verify whether these factors do affect the supervision process. Figure 4 shows the responses of the 91 students surveyed in this study.

Figure 4. Factors that Affect a Supervisory Process

The most significant findings is that the student generally feel that the gender and the nationality of the supervisors do not have much impact on the supervision process. This is seen in the low percentage of students agreeing to their importance; gender (18.7%) and nationality (28.6%). The factors that a large percentage of the students agreed to have significant impact on the supervision process are the qualifications of the supervisor (73.7%), experience of the supervisor (76.9%) and supervisors' area of expertise (79.1%)(Holloway et.al., 1989).The students did not mind having assigned supervisors whom they have had not had any prior contact with as a problem. This is proven by the low percentage of response who agreed that supervisors having taught them before is important for a successful supervision (39.65). The factors of timely feedback (69.3%), duration for completion of project and number of meetings were considered to be important by an average percentage of students.

Differences in the Perceptions of the Factors Affecting Supervision between genders

Cross tab analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between the variables. Cross tabulations provide a way of analyzing and comparing the results for one or more variables with the results of another (or others).

In this section, cross tab is done to determine whether the gender of the students affect the success of supervision process. Below is the result of the Chi-Square Tests. Only these factors are affected by gender of students (all p-values less than 5%): Number of meeting with the supervisors, Area of supervisor's expertise (sig at 10%); timely feedback (5% sig level) and duration given for completion of the project (5% sig level).

The findings indicated a difference in the perceptions between the male and female students with regards to the number of meetings with supervisors and success of supervision. 50% of the male students agreed that it is an important factor while 81.6% of female students felt that it was important. With regards to the factor of supervisors area of expertise and importance to the success of supervision the findings between the perceptions of the male and female students showed a small difference of 4.38% only where 54.8 of males agreed it was

important while 59.18 of female of students agreed that it is important. In response to the question of whether timely feedback and duration of project affects supervisory process, the responses between the genders indicated a significant difference. Only 66.7% of male students said it was important but 71.4% of female students found it important. Similarly, there was a significant difference in the perceptions on the importance of duration to successful supervisory process. Compared to an average of 52.3% male students claiming it important, a larger percentage of 75.5 % female students found it important.

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Chi-Square Tests

	Pearson Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
No. of meetings with supervisor	15.603	.004
Area of supervisor's expertise	8.173	.085
Timely feedback	10.170	.030
Duration of the project	11.265	.004

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	6.023[a]	4	.197
Likelihood Ratio	6.130	4	.190
Linear-by-Linear Association	.030	1	.862
N of Valid Cases	91		

a. 4 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.69.

The Pearson chi-square statistics is 15.603 and the p-value is less than 0.05. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis. There is evidence to support that no of times a student meets the supervisor is dependent on the gender of student at 5% significant level.

50% of the male students agree that the number of times affect their supervision process. However for female students, it was higher with more than 82% agreeing that the number of meetings is important.

The respondents' supervision process were measure by 9 items which remained after factor analysis was conducted. Based on Cohen's criteria (1989), two variables are said to be associated if the correlation coefficient value is at least 0.35. In this study, all the variables in a construct are adequately correlated since the highest absolute correlation falls between 0.35 and 0.85. Therefore, every item in the construct correlates adequately with at least one item in the construct.

The reliability analysis gave Cronbach Alpha value of 0.842 for supervision process, which is well above the minimum requirement of 0.7. The KMO value form the factor analysis was 0.785 indicating a good level of data reduction adequacy.

According to both supervisors and students, the majority of supervisors need better training to ensure effectiveness in supervision processes.

				Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
No of Meetings with Supervisor	Gender	Male	Count	8	13	13	5	3	42
			% within Gender	19.00%	31.00%	31.00%	11.90%	7.10%	100%
		Female	Count	22	18	2	3	4	49
			% within Gender	44.90%	36.70%	4.10%	6.10%	8.20%	100%
	Total		Count	30	31	15	8	7	91
			% within Gender	33.00%	34.10%	16.50%	8.80%	7.70%	100%
Area of Supervisor's Expertise	Gender	Male	Count	5	18	6	8	5	42
			% within Gender	11.95%	42.85%	14.29%	19.05%	11.90%	100%
		Female	Count	14	15	9	6	5	49
			% within Gender	28.57%	30.61%	18.37%	12.24%	10.20%	100%
	Total		Count	19	33	15	14	14	91
			% within Gender	51.6%	27.5%	4.4%	4.4%	12.1%	100%
Timely feedback	Gender	Male	Count	12	16	7	7	0	42
			% within Gender	28.6%	38.1%	16.7%	16.7%	0%	100%
		Female	Count	22	13	5	3	6	49
			% within Gender	44.9%	26.5%	10.2%	6.1%	12.2%	100%
	Total		Count	34	29	12	10	6	91
	Gender	Male	% within Gender	37.4%	31.9%	13.2%	11.0%	6.6%	100%
Duration of the project	Gender	Male	Count	8	14	10	6	4	42
			% within Gender	19%	33.3%	23.8%	14.3%	9.5%	100%
		Female	Count	22	15	3	3	6	49
			% within Gender	44.9%	30.6%	6.1%	6.1%	12.2%	100%
	Total		Count	30	29	13	9	10	91
	Gender	Male	% within Gender	33%	31.9%	14.3%	9.9%	11%	100%

	Gender of Supervisor	Nationality of Supervisor	Qualification Supervisor	Experience of Supervisor	Area of Supervisor's Expertise	No of Supervisees	Timely Feedback	Taught You Before	Duration for Completion	No of Meetings with Supervisor
Gender of Supervisor	1	0.724	0.144	-0.018	-0.062	0.160	0.010	0.221	-0.035	-0.035**
Nationality of Supervisor		1	0.218	0.047	-0.013	0.173	0.028	0.135	-0.006	-0.067
Qualification Supervisor			1	0.790	0.739	0.592	0.620	0.220	0.468	0.473
Experience of Supervisor				1	0.926	0.498	0.723	0.211	0.593	0.559
Area of Supervisor's Expertise					1	0.537	0.692	0.211	0.609	0.599
No of Supervisees						1	0.495	0.050	0.455	0.368
Timely Feedback							1	0.222	0.594	0.523
Taught You Before								1	0.306	0.428
Duration for Completion									1	0.640
No of Meetings with Supervisor										1

p>0.001*
p>0.005**

Conclusion

This research explored the experience, practices and problems of the supervision process of undergraduate students who completed a final year project. Most of the responses revealed that the role played by their supervisors is not very satisfactory. The results show that a large proportion of the students respondents were not very happy with the support and guidance given in terms of time given for the supervision Their felt that the supervisors did not guide them sufficiently in terms of the research requirement; literature review, designing research questions, methodology and analysis of data especially with regards to the analysis of quantitative data.

Since academic research is a complex and highly specialized form of teaching, it is crucial for highest standards of practice is adopted in conducting the supervision. Future research should be carried out to understand the social processes that occur in multicultural supervision. According to Proctor and Rogers (2013), such supervision may include the development of cultural awareness, exploration of the cultural dynamics that take place within the supervision relationship, and discussion of cultural assumptions that are embedded within school psychological services premised on western cultural values (e.g., traditional counseling theories).

According to DeTrude (2001), the supervision process is a delicate one and is composed of multiple roles and responsibilities for both the supervisor and supervisee which leads to the critical need to monitor this relationship for the identified sensitive issues in this study.

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