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

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Postgraduate supervision; Supervisees; Supervisors; Institutional support

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1. Introduction

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

2. Literature Review

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

2.1. Roles and responsibilities of supervisors

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

In supervision, supervisors are expected to not only provide support, time and encouragement, but also to provide resources and information, feedback and guidelines of thesis writing to the students. Genuineness and congruence are qualities that a supervisor should have (Zuber-Skerritt & Roche, 2004). They also pointed out that