# Supervision Practices for Foreign Graduate Research Students

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**Abstract:** Past research had shown that only highly unusual graduate research students had successfully completed their research degree programmes while the relationship with their supervisors was poor. There were many factors that had contributed to poor achievement of foreign students and one of the most important critical factors found which contributed to this problem was the weaknesses in supervision they received. This research was to identify the type and level of support given to foreign graduate research students by their supervisors as well as schools/universities. This research was using the quantitative method where the data was collected using on-line questionnaires. As many as 110 foreign Ph.D. students from 45 well-established universities in the United Kingdom were involved in this study. This research managed to expose what the students had expected and what they have received from the supervisor and school. As a result, the research had developed better practices and guidelines for student, supervisor and school.

**Key words:** Effective Practices, Foreign, Graduate, Supervision, Supervisor, Student, Responsibility

## INTRODUCTION

One factor driving the decision to do a Ph.D is the consideration that this qualification is needed in order to become an academic. As the doctorate is the highest grade, completing a Ph.D is seen as a substantial investment in human capital[1]. Often, starting a research degree marks a transition in the lives of students. For some, it is a transition from recent undergraduate work where learning was structured and directed to a situation where the learning is more self-directed. For others, starting a research degree may be a return to study after a lengthy break. Some students may already be employed in a university and be switching back from the role of teacher to that of a student. Whatever the situation, the student will need time and help to adjust to the new role.

All overseas students have a lot of challenges to overcome, such as cultural differences, language, families, money etc. which may lead to lower achievements by them[2]. These challenges are much greater if the student is doing postgraduate education, which really consumes time, effort, patience and enthusiasm. Furthermore, those mature students coming from overseas together with their families and with

limited sources of income, may face many more challenges than those who are younger and single.

Most Malaysian students, who have been sent to the UK for postgraduate studies, are civil servants in the Malaysian Government, and they are contracted to serve the government again after they have completed their programme. It is their duty to ensure that they fulfil the government's aspirations to contribute their acquired knowledge for the benefits of the country. While the amount of allowance that they have received to live on overseas is very minimal, the Government of Malaysia spends a lot of money in order to develop the knowledge of its people. This is seen as a crucial factor in the development of a better-educated work force, particularly in science, technology and related professions. Therefore, the students are expected to complete their programme as soon as possible, and certainly within the contracted time frame.

Many factors can contribute to overseas students being unable to successfully complete their programme within the given time frame. 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 overseas student's experience of supervision. These include the support of

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the department or school, as well as the fact that the students should properly know their own responsibilities.

This research project studies Malaysian Ph.D students' experience in relation to effective supervision. In addition, in order to understand more about supervision practices, every involved individual in supervision such as student, supervisor and school must have their respective responsibilities. The implication from this research would be to identify what do they have and what they need in terms of supervision. Therefore, the information gathered will be used by the supervisor, school and the sponsor as well as the policy maker while enhancing their services and roles respectively.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study describes the survey of Malaysian Ph.D students in British universities throughout the United Kingdom. These respondents have been grouped into three major disciplines namely science, social science and arts. Information technology in general and e-mail in particular has played an important part in speeding up communication. Therefore, the researcher designed a questionnaire, put it on a website designed for the purpose and distributed it by giving the respondents the website address. The data has been analysed using SPSS to examine descriptive statistics by looking at frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulation.

Some questions offer multiple choices, which require the respondent to pick the answer most relevant to the question under consideration. Some use a Likert Scale, where the respondent indicates the extent to which they agree or disagree with particular statements, using a five points scale (1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree). However, the results revealed that most of respondents tend to choose 'agree' and 'disagree' rather than 'strongly agree' and strongly disagree'. Therefore, the researcher has decided to combine the ratings 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) to indicate agreement with a statement. Also, ratings 1 (strongly disagree) and 2 (disagree) have been combined to indicate disagreement with a statement. This also simplifies the analysis. The researcher managed to obtain a total of 353 e-mail addresses of Malaysian Ph.D students studying in the United Kingdom. From these, only 296 e-mails proved valid and in these cases questionnaires were successfully sent to the particular respondents' e-mail addresses. Out of the 296 questionnaires distributed, only 110 were returned and useable, but this is a quite good response rate for such a survey. There is a good distribution in the survey

according to location, year of study, gender, age and field of study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are four main issues that are highlighted and discussed in this article. These are: supervisory patterns and practices, the responsibilities of the supervisor, the responsibilities of the student and the responsibilities of the department/school.

**Supervisory patterns and practices:** Respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they see their supervisor in their current year of study. Table 1 below shows that the frequency of meetings with a supervisor depends on the student's year. It is clear that the stage of a student's research and, specifically, whether the student is in the first or final year determines the number of meetings with supervisors. The result shows that forty-three respondents (39.1%) see their supervisor once a week. Of these, 50.0 percent are from the first year and 40.6 percent from the second year, compared with only 33.3 percent from the third year and 14.3 percent from the fourth year. This is probably because first year students need more guidance at the beginning of their study in order to have a clear idea about their research. When they know their direction, they decrease the number of meetings with their supervisors. This statement is supported by the findings of Holdaway *et al.*, Hockey and Moses[3-5]. In general, meetings with a supervisor become less frequent as a student's studies progress.

Table 1 indicates that 46.9 per cent of respondents (15 in number) see their supervisor every two weeks, followed by 30.0 percent from the first year, 25.0 percent from the third year and 21.4 percent from the fourth year. It can be seen that twenty-eight respondents (25.5% of total) meet their supervisor only once a month. Of these twenty-eight, eight are from each of the fourth and first years, three from the second year and nine from the third year. The results also show that only one student from the second year meets his supervisor every two months and two students, one from the third year and one from the fourth year, meet their supervisor every three months.

Table 2 shows that 49.3 percent of science students tend to see their supervisor at least once a week, 29.1 percent of them see their supervisor every two weeks and 18.8 percent of them see their supervisor once a month. Only one science student sees a supervisor every two months, while one science student said that he meets their supervisor every three months. 23.1 percent of social science students see their supervisor

Table 1: Frequency of meetings in relation to year of study

| Frequency of Meetings | Year of Study | | | | | | | | | |
| | First | | Second | | Third | | Fourth | | TOTAL | |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Once a week | 20 | 50 | 13 | 40.6 | 8 | 33.3 | 2 | 14.3 | 43 | 39.1 |
| Once every 2 weeks | 12 | 30 | 15 | 46.9 | 6 | 25.0 | 3 | 21.4 | 36 | 32.7 |
| Once a month | 8 | 20 | 3 | 9.4 | 9 | 37.5 | 8 | 57.1 | 28 | 25.5 |
| Every 2 months | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3.1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 |
| Every 3 months | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4.2 | 1 | 7.2 | 2 | 1.8 |
| Total | 40 | 36.4 | 32 | 29.1 | 24 | 21.8 | 14 | 12.7 | 110 | 100.0 |

Table 2: Frequency of meetings for difference disciplines

| Frequency of Meetings | Disciplines of Study | | | | | | | | | |
| | Science | | Social Science | | Arts | | TOTAL | | | |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Once a week | 34 | 49.3 | 6 | 23.1 | 3 | 20.0 | 43 | 39.1 | | |
| Once every 2 weeks | 20 | 29.1 | 8 | 30.8 | 8 | 53.3 | 36 | 32.7 | | |
| Once a month | 13 | 18.8 | 12 | 46.1 | 3 | 20.0 | 28 | 25.5 | | |
| Every 2 months | 1 | 1.4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 | | |
| Every 3 months | 1 | 1.4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6.7 | 2 | 1.8 | | |
| Total | 69 | 62.7 | 26 | 23.6 | 15 | 13.6 | 110 | 100.0 | | |

Table 3: Respondents' satisfaction with progress

| Satisfaction about Progress | Frequency | Percentage |
| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Very Dissatisfied | 22 | 20.0 |
| Satisfied | 73 | 66.4 |
| Very Satisfied | 15 | 13.6 |
| TOTAL | 110 | 100.0 |
| Why 'Very Dissatisfied' (N=22) | | |
| Loss of motivation and interest | 3 | 13.6 |
| Poor supervision | 4 | 18.2 |
| Dealing with uncertainty in research | 12 | 54.6 |
| Financial difficulties | 3 | 13.6 |
| Total | 22 | 100.0 |

Table 4: Changing supervisor

| Changed supervisor during Ph.D study | Frequency | Percentage |
| | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| During your Ph.D study, have you changed your supervisor or stopped seeing him/her? (Answer= 'Yes') | 12 | 10.9 |
| Cause of changing (N=12) | | |
| Inadequate supervision | 2 | 16.7 |
| Personality clashes | 2 | 16.7 |
| Supervisor's lack of knowledge in my field | 1 | 8.3 |
| Supervisor left the institution/retired/died | 6 | 50.0 |
| Changed field of study | 1 | 8.3 |
| Total | 12 | 100.0 |

once a month, while 30.8 percent of such students meet their supervisor every two weeks. Also, 46.1 percent of social science students meet their supervisor once a month. On the other hand, eight arts student (53.3%) meet their supervisor every two weeks, while three such students (20.0%) meet their supervisor once a month and another three meet once a week and another one said he meets his supervisor in every three months in his current year of study. It is accepted in the research student policies that the frequency of such meetings may alter throughout the student's research programme depending on the stage he/she has reached, and that this varies from discipline to discipline.

Table 3 shows that most respondents are satisfied (66.4%) with their recent progress, although only 13.6 percent of total respondents said they are very satisfied with the progress of their studies. However, 20 percent of total respondents said they were very dissatisfied with their progress. Of those who were very dissatisfied, 54.6 percent chose the reason 'dealing with

Table 5: Respondents' perception of their supervisor

| No | My supervisor: | Strongly Disagree | | Disagree | | Undecided | | Agree | | Strongly Agree | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1 | Has research interests that are similar to my topic | 1 | 0.9 | 6 | 5.5 | 19 | 17.3 | 44 | 40.0 | 40 | 36.4 |
| 2 | Is interested and committed to my research | 0 | 0 | 4 | 3.6 | 10 | 9.1 | 57 | 51.8 | 39 | 35.5 |
| 3 | Guides me to the relevant literature | 1 | 0.9 | 15 | 13.6 | 18 | 16.4 | 51 | 46.4 | 25 | 22.7 |
| 4 | Assists me with writing skills | 1 | 0.9 | 14 | 12.7 | 27 | 24.5 | 45 | 40.9 | 23 | 20.9 |
| 5 | Provides critical feedback on my written reports | 1 | 0.9 | 11 | 10.0 | 11 | 10.0 | 39 | 35.5 | 48 | 43.6 |
| 6 | Is available when needed for project discussion | 0 | 0 | 7 | 6.4 | 12 | 10.9 | 54 | 49.1 | 37 | 33.6 |
| 7 | Is knowledgeable and resourceful | 1 | 0.9 | 6 | 5.5 | 14 | 12.7 | 36 | 32.7 | 53 | 48.2 |
| 8 | Is friendly, approachable and flexible | 2 | 1.8 | 4 | 3.6 | 5 | 4.5 | 46 | 41.8 | 53 | 48.2 |
| 9 | Has leadership skills | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2.7 | 24 | 21.8 | 41 | 37.3 | 42 | 38.2 |
| 10 | Encourages me to plan and work independently | 1 | 0.9 | 4 | 3.6 | 16 | 14.5 | 50 | 45.5 | 39 | 35.5 |
| 11 | Ensures that I meet the deadlines | 1 | 0.9 | 9 | 8.2 | 35 | 31.8 | 45 | 40.9 | 20 | 18.2 |
| 12 | Is an active researcher | 1 | 0.9 | 2 | 1.8 | 12 | 10.9 | 42 | 38.2 | 53 | 48.2 |
| 13 | Leads and investigates in choosing the research topic | 5 | 4.5 | 16 | 14.5 | 17 | 15.5 | 34 | 30.9 | 38 | 34.5 |
| 14 | Is an effective communicator | 0 | 0 | 5 | 4.5 | 11 | 10.0 | 48 | 43.6 | 46 | 41.8 |
| 15 | Is a good role model | 1 | 0.9 | 5 | 4.5 | 16 | 14.5 | 55 | 50.0 | 33 | 30.0 |

uncertainty in research' and 18.2 percent stated 'poor supervision' as the main reasons for their dissatisfaction with their progress. Also, three students mentioned that their dissatisfaction was due to 'loss of motivation and interest' and another three said they were having financial difficulties.

Table 4 shows that twelve respondents (10.9%) out of 110 have changed their supervisor for some reason. The twelve respondents who have changed their supervisor, had to give reasons. Six of them (50.0%) chose 'supervisor left the institution, retired or died' as the main reason for their change of supervisor, whereas two percent have changed supervisor due to 'inadequate supervision'. Another two respondents said that it was due to 'personality clashes' that they had had to find a new supervisor in order to make progress. Only one student mentioned that the change of supervisor was due to the 'supervisor's lack of knowledge in my field' and another one said that a 'changed field of study' had led him to change his supervisor. This means that most respondents in this study have changed their supervisor due to unexpected circumstances like the fact that he/she had left the institution, retired or died, and only a few have done so because the relationship has gone wrong or was not working in the first place.

**The responsibilities of supervisors:** The analysis of the data for this section relates to two major issues. The first one is how the respondents evaluate their supervisors' characteristics in their role as supervisor. The second issue addressed is what constitutes an effective supervisor from the student's point of view. The responses in relation to respondents' perception of their supervisor show that most respondents tended to choose 'agree' rather than 'strongly agree' and they chose 'disagree' rather than 'strongly disagree'. Consequently, ratings 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) have been combined to indicate agreement with a statement. Also, ratings 1 (strongly disagree) and 2 (disagree) have been combined to indicate disagreement with a statement. Table 5 relates to the respondents' perception of their supervisor.

The results show that, the highest percentage of respondents who stated that they strongly agreed or agreed with a statement did so in relation to statement no. 8: "My supervisor is friendly, approachable and flexible" (90%). The second most favourable response was in respect of statement no. 12: "My supervisor is an active researcher" (86.6%), followed by that in respect of statement no. 14: "My supervisor is an effective communicator" (85.4%). On the other hand, statement no. 3: "My supervisor guides me to the relevant literature" (14.5%), statement no. 4: "My supervisor assists me with writing skills" and statement no. 5: "My supervisor provides critical feedback on my written report" attracted the highest proportions for strongly disagree or disagree. The statements which the highest percentage of respondents said they were undecided about, were statement no. 11: "My supervisor ensures that I meet the deadlines" (31.8%); and statement no. 4: "My supervisor assists me with writing skills" (24.5%). The

Table 6: Respondents' perception of an effective supervisor

| No | An effective supervisor should: | Strongly Disagree | | Disagree | | Undecided | | Agree | | Strongly Agree | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1 | Give support and guidance about the nature of research, the literature, theories, methodologies and the standards expected | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 | 3 | 2.7 | 37 | 33.6 | 69 | 62.7 |
| 2 | Provide balance between his direction and the student's independence | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.8 | 8 | 7.3 | 33 | 30.0 | 67 | 60.9 |
| 3 | Motivate students continually | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2.7 | 10 | 9.1 | 42 | 38.2 | 55 | 50.0 |
| 4 | Provide personal counselling | 1 | 0.9 | 11 | 10.0 | 36 | 32.7 | 33 | 30.0 | 29 | 26.4 |
| 5 | Ensure that the research does not grow excessively | 1 | 0.9 | 8 | 7.3 | 15 | 13.6 | 45 | 40.9 | 41 | 37.3 |
| 6 | Request written work as appropriate and provide prompt feedback with constructive criticism within a reasonable time | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 | 6 | 5.5 | 45 | 40.9 | 58 | 52.7 |
| 7 | Be able to establish good and professional relationships with student | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1.8 | 4 | 3.6 | 39 | 35.5 | 65 | 59.1 |
| 8 | Be accessible outside appointment times when the student needs advice | 1 | 0.9 | 7 | 6.4 | 21 | 19.1 | 36 | 32.7 | 45 | 40.9 |
| 9 | Maintain contact. The frequency of meetings may vary according to the student's ability and stage of studies | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.9 | 7 | 6.4 | 42 | 38.2 | 60 | 54.5 |
| 10 | Keep a written record of the content of meetings | 1 | 0.9 | 7 | 6.4 | 30 | 27.3 | 38 | 34.5 | 34 | 30.9 |
| 11 | Act as a guide on specialist research and generic skills which the student should acquire and on how this might be done | 0 | 0 | 6 | 5.5 | 13 | 11.8 | 51 | 46.4 | 40 | 36.4 |
| 12 | Provide appropriate opportunity for the student to talk about his or her work in graduate seminars | 0 | 0 | 5 | 4.5 | 16 | 14.5 | 49 | 44.5 | 40 | 36.4 |
| 13 | Identify meetings, courses, conferences and training opportunities | 2 | 1.8 | 7 | 6.4 | 16 | 14.5 | 40 | 36.4 | 45 | 40.9 |
| 14 | Ensure that the student is made aware of the inadequacy of his/her progress or if his/her standard of work is below what is generally expected | 2 | 1.8 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 6.4 | 39 | 35.5 | 62 | 56.4 |
| 15 | Give detailed advice and set deadlines for submission of particular parts of the thesis within the scheduled time | 3 | 2.7 | 1 | 0.9 | 14 | 12.7 | 40 | 36.4 | 52 | 47.3 |
| 16 | Provide assistance in orientating students towards appropriate behaviour in oral the examination | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2.7 | 14 | 12.7 | 43 | 39.1 | 50 | 45.5 |
| 17 | Provide a good example as a leader | 1 | 0.9 | 3 | 2.7 | 13 | 11.8 | 44 | 40.0 | 49 | 44.5 |

results may reflect the fact that the majority of respondents are from the first year or second year (36.4 percent of respondents are first year and 29.1 percent are second year students). Most first and second year Ph.D students are not keen on writing up their thesis as they are normally collecting data. Therefore, they are not sure whether their supervisor will assist them with their writing later on. The same goes for statement no. 11. Since the first and second year respondents who represent about 65.5 percent of the population are far away from writing up their work, they will be unsure whether or not their supervisor will ensure that they meet the deadlines.

The second issue addressed in the survey is what constitutes an effective supervisor from the student's point of view. There are seventeen questions in this part. Some of the questions on the first issue (Table 5) overlap or are quite similar to questions on the second issue (Table 6). The researcher presented the questions in this way in order to understand whether the answer to the similar questions matched, since they related respectively to the respondent's attitude to their own supervisor and their view of an ideal supervisor. The result shows that most respondents tended to agree and strongly agree with all the seventeen statements in relation to what constitutes an effective supervisor. However, most of them also tended to choose 'strongly agree' rather than 'agree' for most of the statements given unlike what they did in relation to the first issue of respondents' perception of their supervisor. However, most of the respondents who expressed disagreement in relation to statements regarding both

Table 7: Responsibilities of the Ph.D students

| No | A Ph.D student should: | Strongly Disagree | | Disagree | | Undecided | | Agree | | Strongly Agree | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1 | Discuss with the supervisor the type of guidance and comment that he/she finds most helpful | 16 | 14.5 | 14 | 12.7 | 15 | 13.6 | 50 | 45.5 | 15 | 13.6 |
| 2 | Have a timetable of research for the Ph.D | 3 | 2.7 | 4 | 3.6 | 23 | 20.9 | 45 | 40.9 | 35 | 31.8 |
| 3 | Initiate supervisory sessions where necessary and set the agenda for them | 11 | 10.0 | 20 | 18.2 | 28 | 25.5 | 36 | 32.7 | 15 | 13.6 |
| 4 | Take the initiative in raising problems or difficulties | 14 | 12.7 | 4 | 3.6 | 17 | 15.5 | 47 | 42.7 | 28 | 25.5 |
| 5 | Ensure that the progress of work is in accordance with the stages agreed with the supervisor | 10 | 9.1 | 10 | 9.1 | 28 | 25.5 | 44 | 40.0 | 18 | 16.4 |
| 6 | Provide a brief formal annual report on progress | 2 | 1.8 | 12 | 10.9 | 29 | 26.4 | 46 | 41.8 | 21 | 19.1 |
| 7 | Decide when to submit the thesis within the time limits specified in the regulations | 1 | 0.9 | 11 | 10.0 | 36 | 32.7 | 40 | 36.4 | 22 | 20.0 |
| 8 | Provide written work to the supervisor | 2 | 1.8 | 2 | 1.8 | 25 | 22.7 | 52 | 47.3 | 29 | 26.4 |

Table 8: Responsibilities of the school

| No | The school should: | Strongly Disagree | | Disagree | | Undecided | | Agree | | Strongly Agree | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| 1 | Ensure that the supervisor and student are issued with safety instructions | 1 | 0.9 | 7 | 6.4 | 32 | 29.1 | 45 | 40.9 | 25 | 22.7 |
| 2 | Provide care for overseas students who may need frequent contact and advice, and have language problems | 4 | 3.6 | 6 | 5.5 | 13 | 11.8 | 26 | 23.6 | 61 | 55.5 |
| 3 | Provide substitute supervisor in the absence of your supervisor from the university for six weeks or more | 1 | 0.9 | 6 | 5.5 | 30 | 27.3 | 55 | 50.0 | 18 | 16.4 |
| 4 | Provide an Induction Training Programme for all new students covering topics such as supervision arrangements | 2 | 1.8 | 7 | 6.4 | 35 | 31.8 | 45 | 40.9 | 21 | 19.1 |
| 5 | Make the student aware of the possibility of changing supervisor of the need arises | 2 | 1.8 | 5 | 4.5 | 32 | 29.1 | 52 | 47.3 | 19 | 17.3 |
| 6 | Provide good facilities to all students enabling them to work in a conducive environment | 1 | 0.9 | 2 | 1.8 | 19 | 17.3 | 24 | 21.8 | 64 | 58.2 |

these issues mostly stated that they 'disagreed' rather than 'strongly disagreed'.

As mentioned above, there are a few questions in the 'My supervisor' section (Table 5) that are quite similar to questions in the 'An effective supervisor' section (Table 6). A comparison of these two tables makes it very clear that some similar statements that received a low percentage for strongly agree and agree in Table 5 received a high percentage for strongly agree and agree in Table 6.

Thus, respondents who chose undecided, disagree and strongly disagree in relation to a statement in the 'My supervisor' section, were not that happy with the role played by their current supervisor, chose strongly agree and agree in response to a similar statement about their perception of an effective supervisor. In other words, the reality of the role played by their supervisors is different from the role of their ideal supervisor. As mentioned before, some of these statements in Table 5 and Table 6 were purposely designed to check the balance between the reality and expected role of the supervisor from the respondent's point of view.

As an example, the results show that a statement that received quite a high percentage for strongly disagree or disagree (14.5%) in the 'My supervisor' section was statement no. 3: "My supervisor guides me to the relevant literature". The similar statement in the 'An effective supervisor' section, namely statement no.

1: "An effective supervisor should give support and guidance about the nature of research, the literature, theories, methodologies and the standards expected", was purposely design to check differences in the attitudes to 'My supervisor' and to 'An effective supervisor'. The results show that quite a high percentage of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with statement no. 3 compared to other statements in the 'My supervisor' section, whereas quite a high percentage of respondents strongly agreed and agreed with statement no. 1 in the 'An effective supervisor' section.

There follow examples of other similar statements from the 'My supervisor' and 'An effective supervisor' sections purposely designed to check similarities between a real and an ideal supervisor. A quite low proportion of respondents either agreed or disagreed with statement no. 5: "My supervisor provides critical feedback on my written reports", received quite low proportion for strongly agree or agree. This statement matches statement no. 6 in the 'An effective supervisor' section: "An effective supervisor should request written work as appropriate and provide prompt feedback with constructive criticism within a reasonable time", with which 93.6 percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed. This means that respondents tended to say that they were not very happy with the role played by their supervisor in this respect and they thought that supervisors should assign particular importance to this function in order to be effective in their role.

Other examples of similar statements purposely designed to check similarities between a real and an ideal supervisor are statement no. 9: "My supervisor has leadership skills" in the 'My supervisor' section and statement no. 17: "An effective supervisor should provide a good example as a leader", in the 'An effective supervisor' section. In relation to statement no. 9, 21.8 percent of respondents stated that they were unsure whether their current supervisors have leadership skills or not (75.7 percent said that their current supervisors have leadership skills). 11.8 percent of respondents were unsure about statement no. 17 in the 'An effective supervisor' section (84.9 percent stated that they perceived an ideal supervisor is the one who could provide an example as a good leader).

So, it is apparent that a smaller percentage of respondents were undecided about statement no. 17 than were undecided about statement no. 9 (11.8 to 21.8 percent, a 10.0 percent difference). Also a higher percentage strongly agreed and agreed with statement no. 17 than did so in relation to statement no. 9 (84.9 to 75.7 percent, a 9.2 percent difference). It therefore appears that some of those who were undecided about statement no. 9 in the 'My supervisor' section, tended to strongly agree or agree with statement no. 17 in the 'An effective supervisor' section. In other words, some of those (about 10.0 percent) who are not sure whether their current supervisor has leadership skills stated that they perceived an effective supervisor as one who could set an example as a good leader (about 9.2 percent). So, the result is a good match with a 10.0 percent difference between those who gave undecided responses to these similar statements and a 9.2 percent difference for those strongly agreed or agreed with them.

**The responsibilities of students:** There are eight questions in the questionnaire concerning the responsibilities of students. The results for this section are grouped in the same way as in 'the responsibilities of supervisors' section for the reasons already stated. Table 7 below shows that most respondents tended to choose strongly agree or agree in relation with the eight statements regarding responsibilities of a Ph.D student.

In response to statement no. 2: "A Ph.D student should have a timetable of research for the Ph.D", 72.7 percent of respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. On the other hand, 6.3 percent of respondents said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed and 20.9 percent of them were not sure about it. This statement received the second largest proportion of strongly agree and agree answers. Most respondents chose this statement as an important responsibility of a Ph.D student. Many authors in the literature wrote about Ph.D students' timetables[6-8].

Regarding statement no. 6: "A Ph.D student should provide a brief formal annual report on progress", 60.9 percent of respondents stated that they strongly agreed or agreed with it, 12.7 percent said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed and 26.4 percent of them were not sure about it. Normally, the department requests the student to provide a formal annual report. However, some departments request the supervisor to provide this report. Overseas students also need to submit this report to their sponsors to let them know about their current progress and their study plans throughout their studies. So, from this result, it can be seen that most respondents agree that they are responsible for providing the progress report.

In relation to statement no. 8: "A Ph.D student should provide written work to the supervisor", 73.7 percent of respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed, 3.6 percent of them said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed and 22.7 percent said that they were not sure about it. This statement received the largest proportion of strongly agree and agree answers, indicating that respondents chose this statement as

reflecting one of the main responsibilities of a Ph.D student. This statement matches the literature since Spear[9] mentions that students should submit written work in some form as early as possible in their course so that writing problems can be recognised and corrected.

**The responsibilities of school:** There are six questions regarding the responsibilities of the school or department. Table 8 shows that respondents tended to choose strongly agree and agree in relation to six statements regarding the responsibilities of the school from their point of view.

Responding to statement no. 1: "The school should ensure that the supervisor and student are issued with safety instructions", 63.6 percent of respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed, 7.3 percent said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed, and 29.1 percent of them were undecided about it. The percentage of those agreeing or strongly agreeing matched the total number of respondents from science disciplines, as the science students represent 62.7 percent of the sample for the study. Most science students need to take safety instructions into account because they have to work in laboratories that may be equipped with dangerous materials. Therefore, they think that the school should highlight the importance of safety to all students.

Regarding statement no. 2: "The school should provide care for overseas students who may need frequent contact and advice and have language problems", 79.1 percent of respondents stated that they strongly agreed or agreed, 9.1 percent said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed and 11.8 percent of them were undecided about it. The results show that this statement was one of those with which the largest percentages of respondents strongly agreed or agreed. This matches the results reported in the literature, where it is commonly found that overseas students find difficulties, especially in the early stages of research, because they have to adapt to a new environment and new language. They really need assistance from an appropriate person who can handle the problems. The staff members of the schools are the most appropriate persons to do this. The school should recommend that students take English classes in order to improve their English and also offer advice if they are facing any other problems, such as with accommodation or tuition fees. They should act as a platform in giving advice to students and in seeking information in order to solve their problems.

Regarding statement no. 6: "The school should provide good facilities to all students enabling them to work in a conducive environment", 80.0 percent of respondents said that they strongly agreed or agreed, 2.7 percent said that they strongly disagreed or disagreed and 17.3 percent of them were undecided about it. As stated in the literature, Ph.D students have few places to do their work depending upon the nature of their research. Science students spend most of their time in the laboratory, whereas social science and arts students can spend most of their time doing their work either at home, in the library or in the postgraduate office. If the office or laboratory provided by school is not well arranged and lacks facilities, this may affect their progress. If good facilities are provided to students, they can make full use of them to speed up their work[9-10].

## CONCLUSION

The main issues in this research have been supervisory patterns and practices, the responsibilities of the supervisor, the responsibilities of the student, the responsibilities of the school and research student policies in British universities. The first main issue is the supervisory patterns and practices. Most students prefer to meet their supervisor frequently, especially in their first year. When they have moved to the second year, they reduce the meetings to once every two or three weeks. On the other hand, they tend to meet once a month or less in their third year. This means that the further they progress, the fewer meetings they have with their supervisors. The results also reveal that this applies generally across science, social science and arts disciplines. The respondents were of the opinion that it is good to discuss their research or other related problems with friends in the same field. Most respondents said that they only seek their supervisor's help when the problems cannot be solved in their circle. The results also indicate that a student log, diary or tape recorder is important for future reference and that timetables are essential for better planning. Students create a timetable in order to manage and occupy their time more effectively. They believe that they have to set up deadlines in order to make progress or work according to plan. The findings also reveal that the reasons why students are unable to complete their study within the time given are failure to complete their experimental work, lack of supervision, family commitments and language barriers.

The results show that the main responsibility of a supervisor is to guide and advise on the 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 Ph.D students are not homogenous, but highly diverse in their academic ability, personality attributes, motivation and attitude. Obviously, it is not easy to be an overseas student, since a lot of problems can arise throughout the period of study, and there is a need to find the best way to overcome them. Therefore, 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.

The third issue is the responsibilities of the student. As the student is the owner of the research, it is he/she who has ultimate responsibility for the decisions taken. The results show that students should be independent throughout their study. They need a supervisor to assist them but they have a large responsibility to manage their own work. This includes selecting the research topic, searching the literature, devising the methodology, collecting the data and writing the thesis. However, the process of choosing the research topic differs across disciplines. Science students may be given a research topic by their supervisor, but this is not the case for arts and social science students. By working as Ph.D students, they are expected to gain skills, which include writing reports, planning, receiving and acting on feedback, collecting the relevant literature and many others. Students doing a Ph.D must bear in mind that without a thesis, there will be no Ph.D. So, they need to produce written work in order to make progress. The results have also shown that Malaysian students are committed to their sponsors to complete their Ph.D in the specified period of time if this is at all possible. Having completed their study, they have to return to their respective sponsor or university and to start work. However, the result reveals that students who have experiences in the field they are studying or already have an educational background relevant to the Ph.D that they are doing, still need maximum supervision and assistance from their supervisor. 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.

The fourth issue is the responsibilities of the department or school. The findings show that the school's most important responsibility is to ensure that the facilities are excellent and all properly equipped.

Most of the students from science disciplines said that the facilities provided by their school in the laboratory are very up-to-date. However, most of the students in all disciplines, and especially those in social science and arts disciplines, said that the general facilities for students, such as postgraduate study rooms, photocopying services and printing all need to improve, because they want the facilities provided to be equivalent to the amount of the tuition fees paid by their sponsors. A good school should have good supervisory support systems. This includes the school's responsibility to appoint an advisor. Students think that this is very important when the student and supervisor are facing problems. The school should also place emphasis on giving safety instructions to the students, supervisor and staff members. The findings suggest that other important support that school should give includes providing a substitute supervisor in the absence of the student's supervisor from the university for a certain period of time. This study also suggests that the school has to provide care for overseas students, who may need frequent contact and advice and have language problems.

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