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PhD Students' Experiences of Thesis Supervision in Malaysia: Managing Relationships in the Midst of Institutional Change

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Abstract

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Keywords

Supervision, Doctoral Students, In-Depth Interviews, Supervisory Relationships, and Management

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PhD Students' Experiences of Thesis Supervision in Malaysia: Managing Relationships in the Midst of Institutional Change

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Despite the plethora of studies that have been conducted on PhD supervision, little qualitative investigation has been conducted with a diverse, non-Western sample of doctoral students in an attempt to understand how the supervisory relationship is experienced. In response, eighteen students from diverse, non-Western backgrounds studying at one Malaysian research university were interviewed. Results illuminated the theme of “management” of the supervisory experience and included two streams:(a) acceptance of the situation, and (b) response to the situation so as to optimize their experience. The two major themes further included four sub-themes that included managing personal relations, time and accessibility constraints, academic compatibility, and expectations. Implications for the development of international research universities where PhD supervision of a diverse student body is a critical factor for university success and development are discussed. Key Words: Supervision, Doctoral Students, In-Depth Interviews, Supervisory Relationships, and Management

Introduction

From this last year, I now know what I don't want to be when I become a supervisor later on. I know I don't want to be like her.... (Allison, PhD student)

For students of the PhD process, achieving one's goal can feel like a lifetime's worth of education in just three or four years. For those that do not experience the joy of reaching their goal, the failure to do so can result in a lifetime's worth of regret and self-doubt. The “failure” of not getting through a PhD program can be devastating. In quoting her non-completer interview respondents, Lovitts (2001, p. 6) describes the experience as “gut-wrenching,” “horrible,” “disappointing,” and even cites a small number that have resorted to suicide as a result of not being able to complete their programs.

Concern about the level of non- or late-completion of graduate studies is well documented internationally (Grant & Graham, 1999; Lovitts, 2001; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009). Armstrong (2004) reports that in the UK, between 40% and 50% of students fail to successfully complete dissertations in the social sciences. Similar figures were reported in a later study where it was found that out of 1,969 candidates, 46% withdrew. In North America, failure and completion rates are very similar to those reported in the UK, with as many as 50% of students entering graduate programs dropping out before finishing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000; Smallwood, 2004).

A variety of reasons for the increase in attrition rates have been advanced. In her well-reviewed book on the subject, Lovitts (2001) puts forth several arguments regarding factors that affect persistence outcomes and high rates of attrition among graduate students across disciplines. One of her main points is that the background characteristics that students bring with them to the graduate experience are not what matters, but rather what happens after they arrive that affects the overall outcome of their experience. To strengthen her argument, she refers to data that show that those who leave doctoral programs and those who stay are equally capable academically. She says,

Their background characteristics, their external commitments and responsibilities, their socialization as undergraduates, and the clarity of their understanding of the system of graduate education in general and their own program in particular, as well as their adaptive capacities, interact with the structures they confront in their programs to determine their persistence outcomes. (p. 41)

In her review of the literature from Australia, New Zealand and Britain, Moses (1984) identified three categories of student discontent: *personality factors* which include interpersonal differences in language, work style and also personality clash; *professional factors* which include a supervisor who is ignorant, misinformed or who has few or different research interests; and *organizational factors* which include the supervisor having too many students or too many competing responsibilities, and inadequate departmental provisions (Grant & Graham, 1999). Lovitts (2001) broadened the factors influencing degree completion and creative performance to include individual resources (e.g., intelligence, motivation, learning styles and personality), the microenvironment (e.g., location, department, peers and other faculty, and advisor) and the macroenvironment (e.g., culture of graduate education and culture of the discipline).

Although a number of factors have been identified relating to the phenomenon of attrition among PhD students, most researchers on the subject agree that completing the PhD is a process that depends on a close, working relationship between students and supervisors (Grant & Graham, 1999; Grevholm, Persson, & Wall, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Styles & Radloff, 2001; Zainal Abiddin, 2007). Unlike other professional or educational relationships, the PhD supervisory relationship can often make or break one's success. More recently, this relationship has also been linked to the notion of "connectivity" between supervisors and their graduate students (Terrell et al., 2009). Terrell et al. pointed to the importance of students' sense of connectedness in the context of the overall graduate experience, supported by their findings that low feelings of student-to-student and student-to-faculty connectedness in the learning environment may be predictive of PhD attrition.

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 & Scott, 1999; Eggleston & Delamont, 1983; Grant & Graham, 1999; Knowles, 1999; Neumann, 2003; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 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, Acker, & Black, 1994; McAleese & Welsh, 1983). According to Armstrong (2004):

...relationships with supervisors are also known to be related to the satisfaction and productivity that students find in their supervision, are known to be critical for successful completion, and are regarded by most graduate students as the single most important aspect of the quality of their research experience. (p. 600)

Blumberg (1978) further suggested that trust, warmth and honest collaboration are key elements in successful supervision. One study in particular indicated that satisfaction with supervision correlated higher with the students' perceptions of the supervisory relationships than with perceived expertise (Heppner & Handley, 1981).

The evidence pointing to the importance of the interpersonal aspects of PhD supervision is undeniable. Despite the number of studies that have been conducted, however, important gaps still remain in relation to our understanding of the nature of these interpersonal relationships and supervisory styles, particularly among PhD students from diverse, non-Western backgrounds (Lovitts, 2001). Much of the research in this area to date has been limited to identifying the elements of successful supervisory relationships (e.g., Moses, 1984), while others have developed theoretical models in relation to different aspects of the process (e.g., Gatfield, 2005; Gurr, 2001; Styles and Radloff, 2001). Few, however, have examined the issue using an approach capable of understanding the experiences of students from their own subjective viewpoints.

One exception is a study by McClure (2005), who conducted qualitative interviews with newly enrolled Chinese postgraduate students studying in Singapore. In his study, the author stated that many of the unique challenges in supervising foreign students stem from cultural-based differences in expectations of the supervisory experience (see also Ali & Kohun, 2009). The author discussed the adjustment challenges faced by the students in light of these differences and how it impacts on the experience such students undergo in pursuit of their PhDs. The findings from McClure's study highlighted the fact that different students require different supervisory styles, ranging from a high level of dependency to a high level of autonomy.

The current study

McClure (2005) employed a qualitative approach to study the experiences of newly enrolled students from China. The current study builds on McClure's work by exploring in-depth the experiences of a diverse group of PhD students at the other end of the spectrum; or, those already having several semesters of experience with their supervisors. Using prior studies on PhD supervision to guide the process of conceptualizing, we attempted to shed light on this issue by focusing on several areas related to interpersonal relations between supervisors and their PhD students to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of the PhD supervisory relationship from the perspective of students.

In light of the wealth of literature on PhD supervision, the study considered several key issues in order to query how the supervisory relationship is experienced by the students including personality/personal characteristics, work style, academic compatibility, professionalism and accountability, and expectations. The main research question guiding the study was "how do PhD students perceive the nature of their

supervisory relationships?” The broadness of the main question allowed for students to respond on their own terms by making use of personal stories and reflection to describe their experiences. Thus, we set out to provide depth and voice to the supervisory experiences of PhD students studying in Malaysia.

Methods

The findings reported in this paper are based on a small-scale study at one major public university in Malaysia. This university was recently granted official status as a “Research University (RU)” by the Malaysian government, which has afforded it certain privileges as well as challenges, one of which being the intensification of research and publications expected from academic staff. This newly appointed status has focused on graduate students as an important vehicle for boosting research and publications output. At the same time, however, the increased workload associated with the increase in the number of new graduate students to both supervise and teach has put additional strain on supervisors’ time. As such, the newly granted “RU” status has contributed to a changing university culture that has required major adjustments from all parties in terms of how the university goes about its daily business, including how supervision is conducted.

The changes include more students to supervise, more research to conduct, more writing, more administrative work as a result of accreditation and quality assurance programs such as ISO, and little or no reduction in the teaching workload. These factors made conducting the current study all the more relevant, particularly to universities in the developing world who are choosing an aggressive pathway to international recognition.

As lecturers and PhD supervisors at the university under study, we were spurred on by our direct experiences working with PhD students in the context of graduate courses and supervision. As recent graduates of PhD programs ourselves (i.e., 2005), we were struck by some of the experiences shared by students, specifically around the challenges they were having in working with their supervisors. As supervisors not too far removed from being on the other side of the student-supervisor relationship, we were determined to learn more about what was happening and why.

In our discussions with students in both formal and informal settings, we became increasingly intrigued by the variety of experiences they were having. In addition, we were also hearing from colleagues in our department and others about the struggles they were facing working with their students in light of the changing work environment created by the new Research University-related policies. For example, there was a major shift in emphasis by the University toward more quantitative measures of success and productivity among the academic staff. In both formal and informal forums, fellow supervisors shared with us the difficulties of not being able to devote enough time to their students due to heavy workloads, difficulties with the number of new foreign students who had deficiencies in English, the administrative burden in complying with the university’s quality assurance system (i.e., ISO), and coping with the newly added pressures of having to fulfill key performance indicators.

Although the study could have included “both sides of the story” by formally studying the experiences of both parties, we chose to begin with the stories of the students, in an attempt to understand their experiences in a more structured manner using a contextual and descriptive approach. We chose to use a generic, descriptive method not

based on any formal qualitative research tradition in order to “discover and understand... the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). We found that although much research has been conducted on PhD supervision, certain gaps remained related to understanding the qualitative nature of these interpersonal relationships and supervisory styles (Armstrong, 2004), particularly in non-Western contexts.

Participants

We combined our purposive sampling methods. All respondents were selected using a criterion-based approach, while snowball sampling was used in addition to obtain focus group participants (Creswell, 1998). The criteria for inclusion in the study were four: (a) respondents had to be full-time PhD students; (b) they had to be in their fifth semester or later as it was assumed that those who had more established relationships with their supervisors would be able to provide more in-depth data. However, a small number ($n = 4$) of the participants selected were only in their second or third semester, for the sake of exploring if there were any major differences in their experiences with the others while one participant was a recent graduate (less than six months); (c) they had to come from diverse fields of study; and (d) the overall sample had to include those having both positive and negative experiences with supervisors. This final criterion reflected a maximum-variation approach, which is used to “document diverse variations and identify important common patterns (Creswell, p. 119).

Participants came from a variety of faculties including Engineering, Modern Language and Communications, Human Ecology, Medicine, Agriculture and Science. Half of the students involved in the study ($n = 9$) were international students, while the other half comprised local Malaysians. Of the international students, four were from Iran, three were from Sudan, one was from Sri Lanka and one was from Yemen. Eight of the students were males and ten were females. The majority of the students were full-time students. The age range of the participants was between 32 and 48 years.

Pseudonyms were used in the report out of findings to preserve the identity of the respondents. Prior to each focus group and interview a consent form was prepared and signed by each of the participants, along with an assurance that all data would remain anonymous and confidential and would be used for research purposes only. The university under study did not require any form of review board approval to conduct the study. As the funder of the project was the same university, no additional consent was required to collect data.

Data collection

Fifteen students participated in three focus group discussions (Toner, 2009; five in each group), while three semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews followed to triangulate the focus group data. Focus group participants were selected one group at a time using snowball sampling, meaning that new respondents were selected only after completion of the previous focus group. We added in-depth interviews following the three focus groups to ensure an adequate level of depth from the respondents and to provide an opportunity for sharing information or insights that students may have not

been willing to share in a group setting. We kept field notes that addressed both the content and the process of the sessions, which were immediately written following each session. Throughout the project we relied on memo writing to stay current with insights, hunches, and perceived relationships that presented as the work developed (Toner).

Half of the participants were students in our faculty, while the others were friends or colleagues of students we knew. Thus, when students were approached to participate in the focus groups or in-depth interviews most expressed a willingness to provide information about their experiences. If they did not show an explicit interest in sharing their experiences, we did not include them in the study as we viewed this as an important criterion for participation.

An interview guide consisting of a series of eight open-ended questions was used (Appendix), which was designed to help the students describe the nature of their relationship with their supervisors. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. Both focus groups and interviews were conducted by one researcher, while the other team member was used for peer review purposes, reading over the data and results for possible bias and other threats to validity. The interviews followed the flow dictated by the student(s), which resulted in some difficulties early on solidifying the protocol questions. In response, we kept the questions general and probed according to the flow and content of the conversation. In this way, the interviews were very much informant-directed.

Probes and prompts were used judiciously providing a more open-ended interview feel at times. This was deemed necessary as the topic proved very personal and even emotional at times, and we wanted to allow the students flexibility and freedom in how they responded. In addition, particularly during the focus groups, the respondents were highly engaged, which resulted in lively discussion that we attempted to preserve and encourage, as it resulted in rich data. To ensure accurate transcription of the data, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with the written permission of each participant.

The combination of focus groups and individual interviews was employed to enhance the quality of the data obtained given the nature and goals of the study. According to Morgan (2002), one drawback of focus groups is based on the argument that people are easily influenced around others and are not as likely to say what they really think, as opposed to that which occurs in the context of individual interviews. In researching sensitive topics, there is a greater likelihood for this to be the case. As PhD supervision might be sensitive to some students, we chose to triangulate our focus group data with individual interviews in an attempt to account for possible threats to validity from relying on focus groups alone.

Data analysis

During data collection, we read the transcripts carefully, trying to “immerse” ourselves in the data (D’Cruz, 2002). Although observation was not a formal method used in the current study, we found that working in the research setting of the university helped to better understand the issues at play. Interacting with and supervising students, discussing relevant issues with colleagues and being involved in and witness to policy and other structural changes allowed us to feel highly immersed in the research setting. In

this manner, methodological rigor was enhanced through what could be considered as prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Such immersion helped us to identify themes, categories and patterns emerging from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Research questions were used as the focus for forming the categories. The transcripts from the interviews were coded, and used to analyze and generate themes as well as conclusions. We employed open coding followed by axial and selective coding to arrive at our themes. NVIVO 8 was used to manage and analyze the interview data (Krauss et al., 2009).

Data analysis of the current study was a highly evolving process that underwent several iterations. In the early stages of data collection and analysis there were concerns that the research question was too broad. Thus, as with most qualitative studies, the research as well as interview questions evolved during the process of data collection and analysis. All of the open codes were first examined to find whether individual codes could be combined into higher conceptual categories. Once these categories were developed, they were examined for their properties and dimensions (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006). Through the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the categories were then analyzed to investigate their relationships to each other across the student interviews. After repeated reflection and inspection of our codes and categories it became clear that the concept of "management" was sufficiently broad to become an overarching theme encompassing the preponderance of the statements voiced by the students. "Management" identifies what emerged as the dominant experience for students in this study (McClure, 2005).

Trustworthiness

As the study was conducted "close to home," both in terms of physical space and our pre-existing relationships with some of the students, issues of bias had to be explicitly dealt with and disclosed to ensure trustworthiness of the results (Flick, 2007). To start, bias was initially addressed through our position as young supervisors engaged in an attempt to better understand the experiences of students for the enhancement of our own practice as supervisors. Biased results would certainly not benefit us in this regard, as we needed as clear a picture as possible of what the students were experiencing in order to be able to maximize our work as supervisors, as well as to provide inputs to fellow supervisors and university decision-makers. Therefore, bias was checked against our strong desire to "objectively study the subjective states of our subjects" (Bogden & Biklen, 2003, p. 33), for we felt strongly that the data could significantly contribute to our own supervisory practices and those of our colleagues. With this in mind, we maintained a high level of sensitivity through the use of detailed transcripts, field notes and by using a team approach, which allowed us to check our data and findings for possible bias (Bogden & Biklen). Having two researchers allowed us to check in with one another as the study progressed. One researcher took the lead on data collection and analysis while the other was used primarily for feedback and review purposes.

Trustworthiness was further established through our relationships with several of the respondents, as either former students from our Faculty or students that we knew from other Faculties. From this initial group, snowball sampling was then used to access the remaining respondents. Potential bias was addressed by avoiding selecting students

that we were currently supervising (with the exception of one student – Allison). The choice of respondents was critical in guarding against bias, to ensure that respondents would not “hold back” due to the fact that the researchers themselves were supervisors from the same university. Thus, we carefully selected students that were aware of this and willing to share openly.

In addition to triangulating our data collection methods by using interviews and focus groups, prolonged engagement in the setting, member checking with respondents and peer reviewing with colleagues were used to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell, 2007). Peer review, in particular, was employed for two reasons: (a) colleagues at our workplace were familiar with the students participating in the study as well as the issues being explored; and (b) several colleagues in the same department were qualitative researchers allowing us to use them as a sounding board to get feedback.

As mentioned earlier, we chose students as respondents with whom we did not have any direct working relationship with the exception of one student named Allison. Allison was being co-supervised by one of us during the time of the study and was only included in the study due to her very negative experience with her first supervisor. For the sake of attempting to include both negative and positive cases, Allison was selected to offset the inclusion of students who had positive supervisory experiences. Thus, on the one hand, Allison having a working relationship with one of us – a potential threat to trustworthiness – was offset by her inclusion as a negative case in an attempt to offset potential bias in another form (Creswell, 1998; Flick, 2007).

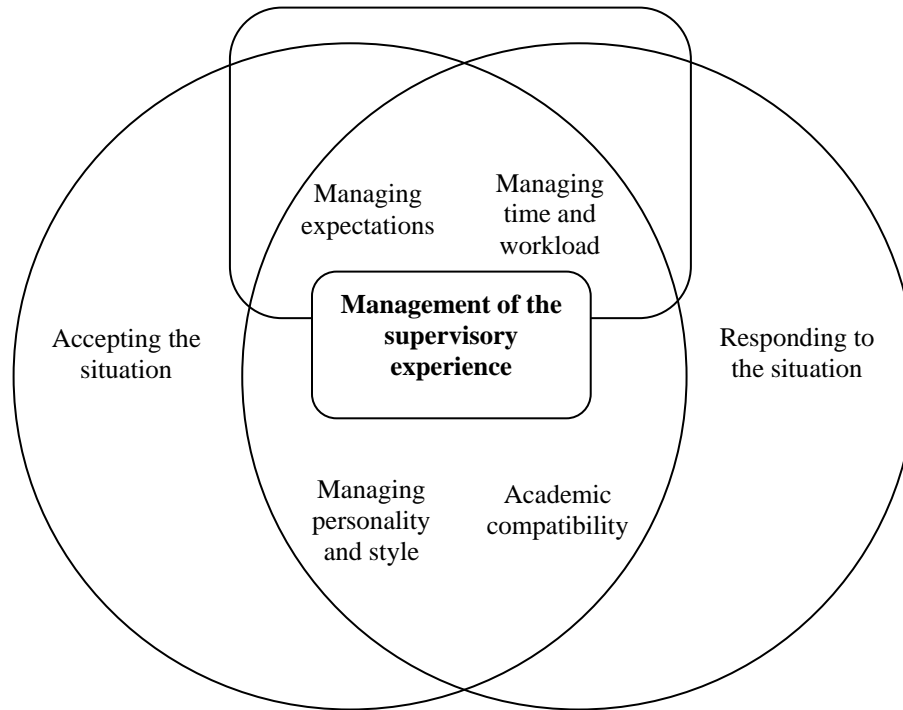
Reflexivity was ensured through detailed notes taken following interviews and recorded using NVIVO 8. The study results were reported to colleagues and other graduate students in two seminars. In addition, the findings were used as a basis of support for the development of a “virtual supervision” program and accompanying study at our department aimed at enhancing the supervisory experiences for both supervisors and students.

Results

The results are presented in response to the main research question, “how do PhD students perceive the nature of their supervisory relationships?” Two main themes and four sub-themes resulted from the analysis relating to the nature of PhD supervision. In general, the resulting themes illuminated the experience for the students as one of “managing” one’s PhD supervisory relationship experience. Managing their experience with supervisors could be understood according to two general streams: (a) accepting the situation presented to them; and (b) responding to the situation in order to optimize the experience and complete the process (Figure 1).

On a more specific level, management of the relationship experience also included the following four sub-themes: (a) managing expectations about the supervisory relationship; (b) managing time and workload constraints; (c) managing personality and supervisory style; and (d) managing academic compatibility. The two main themes and four sub-themes are presented and discussed below. Results are reported according to theme and sub-theme.

Figure 1. Diagram of themes and sub-themes



"Management" as a two-part process

The choice of the word "management" to describe the nature of the relationship from the eyes of the students implies a simultaneously occurring two-part process. Management, or managing, conveys action and has been defined as an individual's attempt to handle, direct, make and keep compliant, treat with care, exercise direction, work upon or try to alter for a purpose, and succeed in accomplishing. When one manages, he or she takes initiative to effect a situation. Before any managerial action can be taken, however, there must be some resolution or acknowledgement of the situation to be managed. In other words, one must realize that there is "something" or "someone" to manage. Management, therefore, includes two aspects – an acceptance that there is a process to get through, followed by actual strategies and efforts toward completion of the process. Managing a supervisory relationship thus implies managing people – the student him or herself and the supervisor -- as well as any of the other controllable elements related to the supervisory experience.

The current study findings indicated that the first part of the students' management process included some level of acceptance of the situation, no matter how negative it might initially have been perceived. This acceptance level varied depending on the student. Some found it easier to accept while others less so, but virtually all of the respondents in the current study alluded to acceptance. Even among students having very negative relations with their supervisors, we found that acceptance was an important theme throughout. For example, Allison, a foreign PhD student described her overall

supervisory experience as, “It was not a good experience for me. In my whole life, I had many bad experiences, but I think it was the worst.” Allison’s experience was so negative that she was compelled to change her supervisor just before the interview for this study took place. Despite her negative experience, prior to “giving up” on the relationship, she described her initial acceptance of it:

Our relationship, most of the time -- she was the boss, the leader of many big projects, so she ordered everything -- yes, I accepted it, maybe this was the culture.... So I accepted it, that maybe she wanted to be like that...

Another respondent, Harry, who described his PhD supervisory experience as very positive on the other hand, and who had just completed his program at the time of the interview commented:

...They (supervisory committee) commented but I accepted their comments. I had to accept because these were the people that were going to get me through. So whatever comments (they gave), it was only to help me survive my viva. It was as if they helped me to survive ... so I accepted...

Another foreign student, Matthew, also spoke of the need for acceptance:

...Acceptance of the situation of my supervisor for me is the best way, because I have accepted that the behaviour of my supervisor is like this and I don’t force myself to be angry or to be worried.

Jennifer, a local teacher and part-time PhD student spoke about not only accepting the fact that students cannot always have what they want in a supervisor, but must also be flexible and adjust to their situation:

Because we want him to have the expert knowledge, we want to have this, we want to have that, but you have to adjust. You have to play that kind of thing, you know... we don’t have the choice many times... to suit our style or to get him to be my supervisor. But along the line, we have to adjust.

Management as a two-part process also includes being proactive and even strategic in order to cope with the situation. It reflects the students’ efforts to maintain some level of control of their own situation and fate, despite the difficulties they face. This became evident when students discussed ways of getting through the process in order to achieve their overall goal of completing the PhD. Coupled with acceptance, management in this context refers to the efforts that the students made to not merely accept the situation but also devise a variety of approaches and techniques for navigating their relationships with supervisors and striving to achieve what Terrell et al. (2009) refer to as “connectivity.” Francis, a community health student commented:

We can't close the gap but what we can do as a supervisor and student is a sort of adaptation... we have to adapt to the supervisor's rules and regulations and the supervisor has to adapt to us on our weaknesses, our limitations and how we can maximize and enhance...to close the gap... how are we going to link that gap...

This quote by Francis is indicative of the two-part management mentality emphasized above. She mentions that (a) there exists some sort of gap in the relationship that must be adapted to or accepted, followed by (b) a simultaneous attempt to strategize ways of "closing the gap" or what can the student do to change the situation for the better. Another student Nancy, in facing the reality of having little time with her supervisor, responded with a strategy of her own:

I know the one supervisor is so busy I can only see him for ten or fifteen minutes, that's the most time I can meet him. But I try to be ready with everything. At least for 15 minutes I can have a good discussion. Or at least maybe I email him before. That's what I'm doing to get him to at least criticize my writing, but it's not easy.

Allison spoke about working through the difficulties and trying her best to impress the supervisor through producing high-quality work:

I think I tried my best because during the last year, I didn't sleep well -- maybe every night two to three hours. So I tried to work hard, may be harder than possible. So I pressed myself to do whatever she wanted....

And Katherine explicitly mentioned how her supervisor's advice to her helped her to realize the importance of managing:

Prof. Ramos tells me that, you know... as a student you should know how to manage your supervisor. Don't bring *keropok* (Malaysian delicacy), don't bring fruits for me, don't bring gift for me, but bring your thesis, bring your chapters... that one I need...

Jennifer added the importance of making a commitment to the relationship by being proactive in understanding the supervisor's background, schedule and the like, as an approach to being strategic in managing the relationship.

If you tell the person how you want the relationship to be with your supervisor, you have to make an effort. You have to see his time, you have to see his schedule, you have to understand a little bit of his background, you have to even understand a little bit about his (inaudible)...

The students' responses to the situation and their efforts to make the relationship work took on many forms, but there was a common need to adapt to the situation through management strategies and approaches following their understanding of the situation and

personal level of acceptance of the nature of the relationship with the supervisor. From this overall theme, four sub-themes also emerged that lent more understanding to how students understood the nature of the relationship and how their perceptions of it influenced their management of the experience.

Managing expectations

An important aspect of PhD study, for many students, revolves around how they manage their expectations of the process and the relationship with supervisors. According to McClure (2005), students' expectations of the student/supervisory relationship are often based on previous cultural and educational experiences and their perceptions of whether or not those expectations were fulfilled. This was true for some of the students in the current study, but others expressed having very few expectations either due to their unfamiliarity with the PhD process or because they were foreign students in a new country. Fran, a Malaysian adult education student, commented:

From my experience, with my supervisor actually, from the start, I didn't really expect much, you know. I didn't know what to expect from my supervisor. For me I would rather think that the responsibility is on myself. I am the main mover.

Despite having few expectations, Fran's approach to her relationship was similar to that of Jennifer, reflecting self-regulation in learning by expressing a high level of self-efficacy and sense of control. This could be due to the fact that both students were in the field of adult education and had internalized the values of their field.

Matthew's experience, on the other hand, was more in line with the students in McClure's (2005) study, as he responded to the issue of expectations from the perspective of the experiences of other students that he knew. Thus he compared his experience with theirs when he stated:

Yes, it was different than my expectations and now, when I see that it is far away from my expectation, and when I see that other students in other countries like in the Netherlands, they say that we should meet our supervisors often.... I don't force myself to have the same (as) with (my) previous expectations. Now I want to manage myself to accept the situation of here and now.

Managing time and accessibility constraints

In managing the supervisors' time constraints, many of the respondents spoke about how this was a major challenge, due to the heavy workload of the lecturers. One of the unique aspects of the University chosen for the study is that as a newly established Research University, there are very high expectations placed on lecturers in terms of their supervisory load with students. This heavy workload led to many complaints from students about the difficulties in getting time with their supervisors. Although some of the respondents merely expressed their frustration with the difficulty in getting what they felt

was enough meeting or face time, others went beyond and spoke about their attempts to manage this constraint. Matthew commented:

One of the problems that I think that affects the relationships between the student and the supervisor is the number of students. They have so many students and they don't manage all of them at the same time. My relation with my supervisor, just now, is not very good.... It is regarding our thesis and it is not very good because of the time...

Sam, a Sudanese student nearing completion of his PhD program at the time, spoke about the responsibility of students to do what they can to effectively manage the time constraint issue and thus maintain a good relationship with one's supervisor:

It means that if you're not satisfied with enough time, so...you have to keep this relationship good. This is our rule. You have to keep it good. Otherwise if it's not good you need to change the supervisor. If you want to change the supervisor, you need to look for someone that you can build a good relationship... So keep this relationship good is one of our rules. Basic rules.

Although he didn't elaborate on the meaning of "keep the relationship good," Sam was clear in his sentiment that the onus was on him as the student to do whatever necessary to maintain positive relations with his supervisor.

Being resourceful in the face of dealing with supervisors' time constraints was mentioned as an effective response by several students. Nancy, a Malaysian student, commented:

Of course, I managed to write the proposal but it was not good enough for the supervisors - not to their expectations and that's why I had to get some other lecturers, some other students - I don't know - some other resources to help me because they (supervisory committee) don't have time. Of course maybe they have time for a few hours in a month...

She added:

...The one supervisor is so busy I can only see him for ten or fifteen minutes, that's the most time I can meet with him. But I try to be ready with everything. At least for 15 minutes I can have a good discussion. Or at least maybe I email him before -- that's what I'm doing to get him to at least criticize my writing, but it's not easy.

Managing academic compatibility

Academic compatibility as a sub-theme relates to the supervisors and supervisees having a "shared language about the research topic" (Styles & Radloff, 2001, p. 100). In

the current study, several students discussed the issue of academic compatibility from various contexts. Jennifer spoke about academic compatibility in the context of expert knowledge, and how she was able to both accept her supervisor's limitations in expert knowledge, and respond proactively by engaging other faculty members to acquire the knowledge she felt was needed.

How could you expect your supervisor to have all the knowledge? When I started my research Dr. Shilling told me very frankly, I don't know that subject Jennifer, you have to teach me. We went along the line, so I made sure I consulted Prof. Ramos and Prof. Anthony, for other expertise, for other knowledge. Right or no? You can't expect him to be good in everything – he's supervising 20 students, you can't expect him to have all the knowledge in all the fields that he is supervising the students.

Jennifer's response to the situation reflects a highly self-regulated approach, whereby self-efficacy and adaptability toward achieving one's goals are employed (Styles & Radloff, 2001). Her response also reflects a high level of intrinsic motivation on the part of the student, which has been shown to act as a protective factor against attrition (Terrell, 2002). This same theme was evident in other students as well, some who spoke directly about "managing" the relationship. Abbott, another foreign student, talked about his experience.

I look at the relationship as a dialectical process. So I try to manage my relationship with my supervisor. Fortunately, he is also in communications and he knows these (same) issues. Always I try to manage my relationship by dialogue, I always tell him these are my limitations and these are my needs. Fortunately, up to today he (is) always up front with me.

Abbott thus relies more on dialogue in his attempt to manage his supervisory relationship. Perhaps it is this approach – being pro-active and assertive to establish clear communications -- that helped him avoid some of the other problems that other students experience in dealing with the difficulties related to academic compatibility.

Managing personal relations

Managing personal relations is a common theme found in much of the literature on supervision that often pertains to student and supervisor personalities, work styles and chemistry. Like any professional relationship managing personal relations is an important element to healthy and productive interactions that requires a shared commitment from both parties. In the current study, despite being queried directly about personality and work style, the study participants focused more on the overall process of building chemistry or rapport. Nancy commented:

I think that's one of the keys... when we look for a supervisor, we need a good relationship by them knowing what we are doing, by knowing our background. I know what my supervisor's doing, where she's going. I also know what she's doing. So we have a good rapport on that. That's why

she will advise me if there's any problems because she knows what happens. I think it's a good start to get to know each other and then the relationship will get better and better.

Rapport between supervisor and student can be strengthened by taking an interest in each other's work and lives. Rather than approaching the relationship by focusing expressly on what the student's were not getting out of the relationship, or what their supervisor was or was not doing for them, several respondents mentioned the importance of taking the initiative to build rapport, and likewise appreciated having a supervisor taking an interest in them and their work. Ruth, a middle-aged foreign student, shared her own efforts at managing the relationship through gaining her supervisor's trust:

I wrote for her two or three articles and every time when I met her she told me it wasn't good. I changed my article and wrote, wrote, wrote and then when I went to her office after that she believed that I could do it and I want to do it. Now I think she has trust in me because she wanted me... We are now joined for writing an article for a journal. It shows that she trusts me.

The students interviewed cited many examples of how the friendliness and helpfulness of the supervisor made a huge difference in building rapport and chemistry. It also encouraged the students to be more engaging and open with the supervisors as well. Betty, a Malaysian student, said:

Okay, socially my supervisor is very good with me. She's very kind... sometimes I feel really surprised the way she treats me. She's very, very nice really. She always takes care of my needs, especially when I had some family matters during my master's (degree). She helped me a lot.

Yusuf, a foreign student studying English Literature, echoed Betty's experiences in discussing how his supervisor's helpfulness contributed to developing positive feelings and rapport with his supervisor:

So whenever I need a book or anything... She's a very good supervisor. Very accessible. Whatever book I need, she asks me to go and look in the Malaysian local libraries. If there's no book, she'll just make the order. I think now more than 17 books she has ordered for me and I am very, very grateful to have those.

From their accounts, it was clear that much of what the students experienced in terms of personal relations with their supervisors boiled down to mutual respect, professionalism and an openness to engage in the conscious work of relationship-building. Management, in this sense, occurred through the work of attempting to establish reliable lines of communication and a respectful working relationship. This was evident by some of those who had negative experiences as well such as Allison who commented:

You know, it is not a matter of academic relationship. It is not a matter of academic subject. It is a matter of human relations. We should understand each other. I think that we are here to understand each other.

Discussion

Of the numerous studies investigating PhD supervision, few have addressed the issue of "management" at length, and how students not only "do it" but also how they experience it. Styles and Radloff (2001), in their study on self-regulated learning in PhD supervision, put forth a four-part model for supervision that includes "Management Strategies," as one of the major components of the process. The authors describe it as "organisation of self and task, and selection and use of strategies and relevant resources at optimal stages of the research" (p. 97). Apart from this, however, they do not elaborate on what management means to students or supervisors.

Grant and Graham (1999) describe the supervisory relationship as a "pedagogical power relation" where both supervisor and student are both capable of acting to change the relationship dynamic. They assert that the supervisory relationship is one that allows for the empowerment of students. They emphasize the fact that despite students' institutional disempowerment, students do indeed have the ability to co-manage themselves and their supervisors to facilitate the pedagogical process in spite of some supervisors' unwillingness to adapt to the needs of students. The current study findings support the assertion that students can empower themselves to be better co-managers of the supervisory relationship; however, in certain cases this may be less realistic as not all relationships and certainly not all supervisors are indeed "manageable" by students, such as in the example of Allison. This is also supported by Grant and Graham in reference to their experience conducting university-based programs on reconstructing supervision for both academic staff and students, where the authors cite supervisor resistance to attending the program as a barrier to changes in their supervision approach.

The current study did not target the PhD process as a whole but rather focused on the qualities and strategies of the supervisory relationship in particular. Management as a key theme can be due to contextual factors. There are several possible explanations for this. For one, as half of the respondents were comprised of foreign students, it is possible that much of the management employed was in response to the fact that so much of the experience itself was new and in many ways – foreign. These respondents were not only trying to adjust to the academic life of a graduate student, but were also experiencing a new culture (both on a national level as well as academic level), a new language (much of the campus uses the local Malay language), new food, different climate and others. In addition, the University was going through a process of structural development, resulting in major changes in the everyday work of supervisors. This had a major impact how the supervisors were able to work with students, for example, less time to devote to student development due to heightened demands for research and publications. Therefore, beginning with the students' expectations themselves, of which many said they had no idea what to expect, the adjustment process to a new setting and new academic environment can greatly shape the overall experience for the students, including their supervisory relationships.

In reflecting on the findings as they relate to our own experiences as supervisors, we can identify much with Styles and Radloff (2001) when they write that in the context of graduate supervision, both supervisor and student are involved in self-regulating processes. In the current study, although not one of the explicit objectives at the outset, the findings expound on Styles and Radloff's synergistic model of supervision by providing a greater level of understanding as to why management of the supervisory relationship is a major element within this unique professional relationship. Too often, perhaps due to cultural differences as elaborated on by McClure (2005), students enter into the PhD process assuming that management is entirely the responsibility of the supervisor. Perhaps only by necessity, many students over the course of their study realize that to be successful in forging a positive, working relationship and thus increasing their chances of not only finishing the process but making their time together tolerable and even enjoyable, they need to take on the responsibility of managing their supervisory relationships to the extent allowed. This is a deeply reflective process for the students as they often find themselves spending as much time and mental energy on relationship management as on their research and coursework.

One of the major differences between the current study of PhD students in a non-Western setting and McClure's (2005) study of Chinese nationals in Singapore is the fact that the current study results went beyond describing the experiences of the students in the context of their supervisory relations and attempted to show how the students actually react and respond. Although the original research questions focused on trying to understand their experiences, the resulting themes went beyond mere description of the experience and included the all-important element of "now what?" In other words, how do the students respond, strategize and understand this relationship situation and what are the different ways that they do it? How does it affect them personally and impact on their overall course of study? We believe this is the current study's main contribution to the current body of knowledge on PhD supervision in a cross-cultural, non-Western context.

Like most qualitative research studies, this study has certain limitations particularly in regard to generalizability, as the sample was purposively selected and small. However, in complementing previous studies, particularly McClure's (2005) and others, we find certain thematic consistencies across different settings despite the limitations. Although the study questions and samples differed in a number of ways, some similarities can be seen such as in the students' need to develop a high level of independence in order to solve their research problems; a good supervisor is one that provides a high level of guidance to "keep students on track"; from the process students develop a deepened level of self-awareness concerning their personal strengths and limitations; and tensions in experiences of the student/supervisory relationship may be understood in terms of unrealistic or unfulfilled expectations being brought to the new study context but grounded in the home culture (McClure).

The findings, although limited in scope, can help students and supervisors alike better understand the need for conscious management strategies, especially in the context of organizations experiencing rapid and dramatic change such as the university that served as the setting for the current study. In such settings, the excessive burden on supervisors to manage the change process can be overwhelming. Thus, they may be unaware of how change is affecting their supervisory efforts and effectiveness with their students. In such settings, it is all the more important for students to be able to co-manage

their supervisors and their experiences so as to more easily facilitate the process. Likewise, supervisors must recruit their students to be co-managers in the process. A student empowered with the knowledge that he is a co-manager of his experience as a PhD student could lead to added confidence and decision-making ability, thus reducing the burden on supervisors. Students' and supervisors' combined awareness and acceptance of students as co-managers of the supervision process could develop into an added dimension of self-regulated learning, which has been identified as an important element in graduate education (Styles and Radloff, 2001).

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Appendix

Interview guide

1. In your experience so far, how would you describe your relationship with your supervisor?
2. What do you think makes the relationship positive/negative?
3. In what ways does your research topic or field of study influence your relationship with your supervisory?
4. In what way does professionalism (or lack thereof) influence your relationship?
5. What kind of expectations did you have going into your PhD study in regard to your relationship with your supervisor?
6. If you could give a label to your relationship, how would you describe it? Parental, apprenticeship, mentoring, coaching, supervising, etc.??
7. What role do non-relationship factors (either within or outside the UPM campus) play in influencing or shaping your supervisory relationship?
 - Culture?
 - Infrastructure/resources?
 - Others?

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