

# International Research Students' Perceptions of Quality Supervision

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## ABSTRACT

*Supervision is a one – to – one interaction between a supervisor and a student which designated the purpose of facilitating students academically especially in higher degree level of study. Supervisor plays an important role in developing interpersonal relationship with supervised students, especially international research students who study aboard and need more attentions. A good quality of supervision is essential in supporting and facilitating them in research. In research studies, supervisions act as important component in determining the successful or failure of studies. This issue is especially crucial to international research students at the beginning of research journey due to the cultural differences and transition of learning styles in new environment. A review of literature shows that international research students have their own perspectives on characteristics of ideal supervisors and factors that influence quality of supervision. This study is based on qualitative data to investigate views and experiences of international research students on characteristics of good supervisors in supervision in an Australian university context and the factors that influenced quality of supervision. The findings discovered from qualitative data on characteristics of ideal supervisors from international research students' views are knowledgeable and experienced in research field, good in planning, follow-up students' works, supportive, caring, and respect students' cultures and religions. In addition, cultural and language barriers could be seen important obstacles for research students at the first stage of the journey. Findings of this study can become guidelines and references to upgrade supervisions' qualities and enhance postgraduate research studies for current and prospective international research students in Australia.*

**Keywords:** Supervision, Supervisor, Research, Cultural, Language

## INTRODUCTION

International students are significant stakeholders of tertiary educational sector in Australia. The enrolment of international students in higher education sector reported by Australian Education International in August 2011, ranked the first among all sectors. There was a 1.1% growth in enrolments volume compared to August 2010. Furthermore, for post-graduate research enrolments and commencements, there were up by 13.1% and 5.0% respectively over the same period (AEI, 2011b). These figures show that international research students have already become a large and indispensable population group in Australian academic discourse. The increment of enrolment number of international research students had greatly contribute to culture, research area and economic of the host country. According to AEI (AEI, 2011a), international education contributed \$18.3 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2010. In fact, each international research students have varied background with unique characteristics that required different needs. It is inevitably that research students facing many

pressures academically, for example, in completing research within candidature time, publishing or presenting conference papers or journals, developing a wider range of skills that will enhance their marketability (Abiddin, Ismail, & Ismail, 2011). To overcome these pressures, international research students acquired more attentions and supports from university, faculty, staffs, peers as well as supervisors who supervised them along research journey. Numerous researchers have found out factors of research students fail in completing their studies within given time. Although there are many factors in explaining the failure, but the main problem is related to supervisory contribution. Thus, supervisors play important role in supervisions as crucial entry point to research culture and guiding research students along the entire research journey, especially at the beginning of journey (Deem & Brehony, 2000). Lack of good student-supervisor relationship in research gives big impacts to international research students, specifically at the beginning of research journey. Supervisors act as “torch” in lighting the research way of international research students who from varied cultural background. In order to produce effective supervisions, supervisors should clear on their roles and responsibilities and fulfill all the requirements in supervision. They should be more sensitive and understand the needs of international research students in cross-cultural supervisions. Furthermore, factors that will influence the quality of supervision should be identified in enhancing postgraduate research studies. A literature review reveals that there are some specific characteristics of supervisors should be equipped and factors should take into consideration to produce effective supervision. This study, based on qualitative data, looks into international research students’ perceptions on supervision based on their experiences in supervisions with supervisors in University of Tasmania through semi-structured interviews. Perceptions of international research students are valuable to treat as guidelines in improving supervisions’ quality and produce effective supervisions for current and prospective international research students.

## **BACKGROUND**

A sum of literature reviews show various challenges faced by international research students in their research journey. One of major issue concerned by international research students is quality of supervision (Abiddin, et al., 2011; McClure, 2005). Supervision is one of important component for research students to guide them throughout the research journey. This is specifically crucial for those who study abroad. In postgraduate research study, supervision plays an important role as an intensive, one – to – one interaction between research students and supervisors. In research journey, supervisors should be considered as “tour guides” who show directions and give academic supports to research students, specifically at the beginning of research. It is important for supervisors to supervise research students and make sure they success in their research studies. It is because research students are valuable to countries in term of their contributions in research area, labor market and economic of the host countries.

“To supervise research students is a great privilege. Students make a huge contribution to the academic research enterprise worldwide. They also provide a considerable effervescence to the academic environment of their host departments” (Spear, 2000, p. 18).

To ensure the success of research studies, quality of supervisions should be given attentions. Quality of supervision is a key to determine the successful or failure of students in research study. This is supported by Abiddin, Ismail and Ismail (2011) with the statement on supervision is “a central process for the successful completion of graduate programs.” (p.207). Supervision functions to supervise and guide research students in research journey; meanwhile, it is extremely crucial for those international research students at the beginning of research. International research students need more attentions and guides from supervisors in research journey compared domestic students. Thus, Supervisors should

pay more attention to international research student because international research students have higher demand compared local students in which they need more guidance and time in adjusting and transmitting to new learning style in new environment (Burns, 1991). In some previous research studies on supervisions, it is shown that international research students have their own perspectives on how “an ideal supervisor” should be. Asian international postgraduate students had concepts that an ideal supervisor is someone who provide guidance at the initial stage of a research project (McClure, 2005). Furthermore, postgraduate students have their views on effective supervisors who take initiative to create a positive climate in research community (Conrad, 2003). This will make research students feel more comfortable and get the supports throughout their research journey. To form this phenomenon, close supervisor-student relationship is essential to build up. Supervisors should make sure they have good relationship with their research students because “the supervisory relationship often leads to lifelong friendships” (Spear, 2000, p.18). Thus, it is challenging for both international research students and supervisors in maintaining good relationship.

There are some factors that threaten relationship between supervisors and research students identified in some previous research studies. The conflict exists due to the lack of some sources in both supervisors and students such as lack of openness, time, feedback; unclear expectations; and poor English proficiency (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007). The lack of sources will affect the relationship between supervisors and students. Besides, gender is also one of the factors that influence supervisory relationship. Gender power always an issue in a relationship. Gender power relation between women and men are very important in determining the success or failure for research study (Acker et al., 1994; Conrad, 1994; Conrad & Philips, 1995; Rhedding-Jones, 1997; Margolis & Romero, 1998) (as cited in (Deem & Brehony, 2000, p. 161). Male and female supervisors will have different way in communication, different expectation and feedback pattern on those they supervised (Shakeshaft et al, 1991). Same-gender and cross-gender in a supervisory will have different interaction and impact on supervision. In a study done by Sosik and Godshalk (2005) in mentoring relationship, they found out cross-gender in mentoring will receive more benefits in the amount of psychosocial supports compared same-gender mentoring. Another factor to be consider is supervision time which is significant in maintaining the interpersonal relationship between supervisors and students (Harrison & Emmerson, 2009). Supervisory time plays important role for students to clarify, discuss and solve their problems in research. However, there are some supervisors do not fulfill their responsibilities. They tend to spend more time in their own stuffs rather than on their supervised students. This makes international research students lack of guidance from supervisors and lost their focus and direction, especially at the beginning of their research. Therefore, factors that potential to influence quality of supervisions should take into consideration to make sure supervisors conduct good quality of supervision with international research students.

## **RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

This study aims to investigate quality of supervisions from the perceptions of international research students in an Australian university context. Three research objectives are developed to achieve research aim:

- To identify the characteristics of ideal supervisors from the international research students’ points of view.
- To examine the factors that influenced the quality of supervisions.
- To investigate international research students’ strategies from their own experiences.

## METHOD

Qualitative research approach method was designed in this study to collect qualitative data that provide a picture of knowledge on participants' perceptions. Qualitative data were collected to explore in-depth understandings of participants' perceptions and experiences on challenges in their studies and lives in the University of Tasmania. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken between researcher and participants in face to face mode. Open-ended questions were prepared to give guideline to researcher when they asking questions during interviews. There were ten interviewees were recruited from a list of those volunteers to participate in the interview. The selection criteria were international research students who were currently studying at Launceston campus from different faculties. These students also provided their reflective journals of research journey which present their views and experiences related to the quality of supervision. Convenience and purposive sampling were utilized in the recruitment of international research students for the interview. Besides, participants' demographic also take into account to provide broader range of participants. Demographic characteristics of participants shown in the table 1 below:

*Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics*

Variables	Number of cases (N = 10)
Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Male</li> <li>Female</li> </ul>	1 9
Age groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>20 – 29</li> <li>Over 30</li> </ul>	3 7
Country of origins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mainland China</li> <li>Korea</li> <li>Malaysia</li> <li>Sri Lanka</li> <li>Vietnam</li> <li>Pakistan</li> </ul>	3 1 2 1 2 1
Academic faculty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Education</li> <li>AMC</li> <li>UDRH</li> </ul>	4 4 2
Lengths in study (research) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Less than 1 year</li> <li>Over 1 to 2 years</li> <li>Over 2 to 3 years</li> <li>Over 3 years</li> </ul>	3 3 3 1

## FINDINGS

Audio-recorded files from interviews were transcribed into textual files and provided to interviewees for checking. There was no alteration suggested to the transcripts indicated interviewees were satisfied with the accuracy of the records. Then, transcripts were proceeded to analyses the data using

qualitative data analysis software - Nvivo (version 8). With the help of qualitative data analysis software, researcher started with reading of the transcripts carefully sentence by sentence, drew and grouped those same meaning codes together and linked all discovered codes to form connection. Gradually, three themes were emerged at the final stage of data analyzing.

### **THEME 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD SUPERVISORS**

The data analysis showed that all participants held common views on the characteristics of good supervisors. The first character of supervisors identified was that supervisors should be knowledgeable and experienced in research field. Supervisors can provide useful guides to lead research students in the right pathway of research journey. A Chinese research student indicated that: "I think a good supervisor should be very knowledgeable in research, very professional, experienced in research, especially in research methodology. For example, they can provide me with a lot of theory in research methodology, including research philosophy, and tell me how to select the correct research method, and help me in ethics application, and also give me a lot of ideas in data collection and data analysis. I think this is quite important."

Secondly, supervisors should fulfill their responsibilities in supervising and following-up research students' works to make sure they do not lag behind in their work. A Sri Lankan student said, "We meet fortnightly, for two hours. Within that time, we can build a good relationship, communication, and spend the time productivity to clarify things. So that is our rules. Beyond that, of course, I am free to go to find him anytime, for small clarification."

Another two participants also gave similar responses:

We have a regular meeting time. Normally we just meet weekly or sometimes. It is a quite effective meeting I think. Many problems I meet in my research I can get my supervisor's feedback and their comments, and so I can solve the problems very quickly. Also my supervisors are very caring; they care about my personal life in Australia. (Student 1)

We contact normally via e-mail. It is always e-mail and they always reply, not to say immediately, but it always fast replied. Sometimes I sent in the morning, they reply in the afternoon or before they off work. (Student 8)

Another characteristic of good supervisors was being supportive. Supervisors should take the initiative in supporting and encouraging their students in research. A Malaysian student shared her experiences:

I am glad to have them. Both of my supervisors are supportive. That is what is good about studying abroad. The supervisors are very supportive. The same goes for my previous supervisors when I did my Master degree. Very supportive...They are always there when you need...and they not only support you academically, but they also support you as a person, especially when you have no family with you. (Student 8)

Apart from being supportive, supervisors should understand students' needs so they can match their supervision approach with their students' needs and expectations. A participant from China gave her opinion with the following response:

I think a good supervisor should understand a student's need. They know their students' strengths and weaknesses. And they can take student's background into consideration based on each student individually to adjust their supervision approach to adapt to them, to help this student to adapt to academic environment. And finally I think a good supervisor should be patient and friendly, dedicated and caring. And they will always be with you in research journey, you will not feel lonely or frustrated in your research, because they always give you encouragement and inspiration. (Student 1)

The last characteristic of a good supervisor that emerged from the results of data analysis in interviews was that they respect students' cultures and religions. Supervisors need to be sensitive to different cultures and religions of international research students. A participant from Pakistan gave the following response:

My supervisors are very respectful of my religion and culture. They know I am Islam, they are very careful when interact with me. They won't ask a lot about my religion. (Student 8)

## **THEME 2: CULTURAL BARRIERS**

From the data analysis, it is found that culture does have a significant effect on the quality of supervision. Based on the demographic data in the table 1, it is obviously shown that those research students in the sample are from different countries and this multicultural group brought into the research fruitful narratives illustrating their unique cultural backgrounds. Regarding learning styles, Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean students contribute the most informative responses as they did encounter considerable difficulties in dealing with their supervisors at the beginning. The difficulties mainly come from their passiveness as an effect of cultural values in their home countries. Most of those students' answers reveal the fact that the relationship between teachers and students are so different in Australia compared their home countries. One student from Vietnam said, "In my country, students just listen to the teacher with unreserved respect. Thus, initially I found it very difficult to discuss and ask questions frankly". Similarly, another Chinese student shared that "I was so confused with what I had to do. I dared not to share with my supervisor about my problem. It was so hard that I had to do so many things on my own. Then I shared with my friend about my problem. He said that I should contact my supervisor and discuss with him in person. It was a very good advice. Then, I found that my supervisor is supportive. He is always willing to offer me very good guidance as long as I ask him." There are some responses mentioning the issue of sexuality as a barrier of research student and supervisor relationship. For female student, sometimes it is quite embarrassing to communicate personally with a male supervisor, as it is a quite sensitive issue in countries such as Vietnam and China. However, most of the students in interviews commented that gender of supervisors will not influence quality of supervision, but rather personalities of supervisors will influence their attitudes in supervisions and indirectly give impacts on supervisors-students relationship. However, there were some comments given by another participant on gender issues in supervision. A Chinese student opined that female supervisor was more attentive compared male supervisor, while male supervisor put more attention on research as a whole.

## **THEME 3: LANGUAGE BARRIERS**

Although research students are expected to be equipped with English proficiency to deal with their research journey before studying abroad, many of them still considered language as an important factor that sometimes spoiled the communications between students and supervisors. The difficulties in communications come from two sides, the supervisors and the research students. Firstly, some of respondents indicate that Australian accent is so challenging to them. Many words are pronounced quite strange by Australian supervisors, especially when they are produced very fast. Besides, most of the students, who come from Asian countries, dare not to disturb their supervisors to ask for repetition or more explanation due to their passiveness as well as unreserved respect to their supervisors. Evidence is introduced below:

In my case, my supervisor is a native speaker and her accent is a big challenge to me at the first time. Although, we were talking about the same topic, I could not follow her. However, I rarely ask her to repeat because I am afraid of interrupting her talk. (Student 6)



On the other hand, the international students' accents also cause difficulties for the supervisor. For some students, their English is still remarkably affected by their mother tongue and that sometimes makes them failed in communication with their supervisors. Some student confided that by looking at their supervisors' facial expression, they knew that their supervisors could not understand much what they are talking. In another case, one student from China expressed: "At first, I found it unconfident when discussing with my supervisor. Sometimes it was so hard to make myself understood. It is not rare that I ask about one issue and he answers about another issue." Regardless the issue of accent, Student 5 commented, "Because of the culture, you use the language in a different format. Our style of English usage is different from native English speakers".

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of the study are discussed in relation to the research objectives and the relevant literature review. In terms of characteristics of a good supervisor, most of the students have the same ideas which take the root from their own experiences as well as their own opinions. The data collected provides insightful information which reflects the research students' expectation on a good supervisor who plays vital role in the research journey. The findings also supported the theories mentioned in the literatures. Supervisors require a great deal of contribution in time and energy on supervision (Adams & Cargill, 2003; Ingleby & Chung, 2009). Time commitment in supervision is essential for international research students. Supervisors should set schedule on regular meetings with supervised students for the purposes to solve their research problems and to fill the gap in supervisor-student relationship (Spear, 2000). Besides, supervisors should have great commitment with supervised students and be sensitive to their needs in order to produce high quality of supervision (Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear, 1994; Dong, 1997; Spear, 2000). Thus, it can be concluded that the supervisors should invest their time and energy to follow up students' work and understand their students' needs and then can support them timely.

Cultural and language barrier emerges from the findings as an important issue where supervisors and research students should take into account to improve the effectiveness of their supervisions. According to Spear (2000), one of the criteria to build up a good supervisor-student relationship is through an effective communication. Supervisors who interact well with their students, willing to listen, respond and understand students' needs as well as wise in exchanging opinions with students without embarrassment can build up close relationship with supervised students. However, there is always miscommunication between international research students and supervisors in supervision due to language barrier and cultural differences. It is a big challenge in communication behavior for both supervisors and students. Miscommunication can happen when students with different cultures do not have high proficiency English communication level. On the other hand, according to Deem and Brehony (2000), gender equality is an issue should take into consideration in supervision. They found out female students are more difficult to access in supervision compared male students when they have male supervisors. Gender matching in supervision influenced the quality of supervision and supervisor-student relationship (Worthington & Stern, 1985). In this research, most of the participants come from Asian countries such as China, Vietnam and Korea, where traditionally the contact in person between male and female is a sensitive issue. Thus, female students may find it uncomfortable to communicate with male supervisors. However, the major respondents in this study find out the issue of gender may not an issue that influences the quality of the supervisor, as the characteristics are much more significant. In terms of learning style, the passiveness of international research students was highlighted as a factor that may influence the research journey. In fact, this obstacle may just happen for novice research students at the beginning of research journey when the supervisor-student relationship is still

new to the students as one-one interaction between supervisor and student may gradually erase this barrier.

## CONCLUSION

Quality of supervisions is one of the important issues for international research students in research journey. By the means of qualitative research method, this study investigated the perceptions of international research students on characteristics of ideal supervisors and the factors that influenced the quality of supervision. Through the results of qualitative data analysis, this study indicated that international research students had some similar perceptions on good supervisors in generally. They totally agreed that a good supervisor is the key point to success in research studies. Personality of supervisors became one of the factors in influence the quality of supervision. With hope, the discoveries in this research on characteristics of supervisors and factors such as culture and language barriers that influence quality of supervisions will become guidelines for both international research students and supervisors in upgrading the quality of supervision and enhance quality of postgraduate research studies for current and prospective international research students.

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