SUPERVISION FACTORS IN ASSISTING STUDENTS DOING RESEARCH

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Supervisor is key in ensuring the production of quality research by students. Students have more confidence in completing their research with proper support from a supervisor which includse knowledge, skills and motivation. This study focuses on students' perceptions towards the support they receive in the duration of completing their master's project papers and dissertations. The respondents were 15 master's students from School of Education and Modern Languages at Universiti Utara Malaysia who are pursuing their studies in master's of science and master's of education. Qualitative method was employed through face-to-face interviews conducted among students who attended a one-day research workshop organized by the co-ordinators of both programmes. Findings indicated that supervisor's expertise, motivational support, and the frequency of meetings and supervision of students' progress could influence students to complete their research and produce quality research. The study also found that expertise and frequency of meetings with students affect the production of research by students. It is suggested that more programmes should be organized by educational institutions to assist students in their research and to increase awareness among research supervisors about the importance of providing necessary support to their supervisees.

Index: Interview, project paper and dissertation, Supervisor, Supervision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research is central in life. It paves ways for new inventions in technology and enables people to enjoy high-quality life style, comfort, and safety. The term "research" refers to the systematic method consisting of enunciating the problem, formulating a hypothesis, collecting the facts or data, analyzing the facts and reaching certain conclusions either in the form of solutions(s) towards the concerned problem or in certain generalizations for some theoretical formulation (Singh & Choudhary, 2015). In order for the universities to protect their academic integrity, post graduate students are expected to conduct and publish quality research (Kachelmeier, 2002). Quality research can potentially make contributions to the growth of development and betterment of people's lives.

According to Cameron & Blackburn (1981), an individual researcher is influenced by both environmental and personal characteristics. Such characteristics of productive research include distinctive culture, positive group climate, and concentration on recruitment and selection (Bland & Ruffin, 1992). Other personal characteristics as identified by Clark and Corcoran (1985) include research training, personal motivation, early scholarly habits, socialization to academic values, network of productive colleagues, and resources. Therefore, it can be said that the success of a research is influenced by various internal and external factors.

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Looking at previous research, it was reported that one of the characteristics of students who have potentials to produce a high quality research is the ability to submit their assignments according to schedule (Mutulla, 2009), and perseverance and willingness to sacrifice (Mohammad, 2014) to complete their research. These factors are central in producing excellent researchers who are able to produce high quality research. Other factors that help students produce quality research include students' participation in educational seminars or workshops (Jordan & Gray, 2012; John & Craighton, 2011), good relationship with supervisors (Mcallin & Nayor, 2012; Mutulla, 2011), past experiences in doing research (Tareq Taufik Amin, Feroze Kaliyadan, & Essa Abdulatheem Al Qattan, 2012) as well as students' attitude towards research (Burgoyne *et al*., 2010).

Research workshops are believed to be able to instill positive attitudes in students towards research (Tareq Tawfiq Amin *et al*., 2012). A workshop known as Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) was introduced in New Zealand to inculcate certain research ethics to post-graduate researchers (Jordan & Gray, 2012). Varsid (2007) opined that such workshop can increase researchers' credibility as well as assist researchers to increase the level of their research.

II. SUPERVISION FACTOR IN ASSISTING STUDENTS TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH

While all the factors mentioned above were found to be central in the success of research, previous findings have also indicated that high quality research is influenced by supervision factor (Gill & Bernard, 2008; Jordan & Gray, 2012; Lee, 2008; Yarmoud-Ross & Haigh, 2004). Findings from Jordan and Gray (2012) revealed that an important element of students' success in research completion is the element of trust between a supervisor and a researcher. According to Thompson *et al*. (2005), supervisor-student relationship is created to fulfil intellectual and emotional needs throughout the duration of research. Having good relationship with their supervisors would ensure maximum attention and commitment on students' research.

In addition, past literature has also revealed that students have the tendency to like supervisors who are knowledgeable (Denicolo, 2004), love to share, and like to offer advice (Arambewella & Hall, 2004) as well as eloquent in conveying support to their supervisees (Marsh *et al*., 2002). In fact, the aforementioned style of supervision is seen to be able to ensure positive relationship between supervisors and students, which in turn will help students to have clear research direction (De Valero, 2001). If a supervisor is able to steer his or her student towards a clear direction in research, it might motivate the student to work harder in carrying out the research. This reflects the important role a supervisor plays in a research.

The importance of supervision aspect was also reflected in past studies which showed that many students put the blame on their supervisors when they failed to complete their research (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007; Mutulla, 2009).

Moreover, a high quality research is dependent on a lecturer-student relationship which is based on trust (Jordan and Gray, 2012). This is because a key factor in student's achievement is the effectiveness of his relationship with his supervisor as previous studies reported that inexperienced supervisors would negatively affect the process of completing research (McCallin & Nayor, 2012; Mutula, 2011). According to Bierman and Jordaan (2008), having inexperienced lecturers as supervisors may cause students to produce theses of substandard quality and may reduce students' motivation in completing their research. Other than that, weaknesses in the supervison which are impeding theses completion are busy supervisors, supervisors' failure to schedule meeting time with supervisees and supervisors' failure to record discussions that take place between them (Mutula, 2009). In another study by Yarwoud-Ross and Haigh (2004), it was found that communication issues, academic repressions, lack of trust and supervisors' negligence are the main problems faced by students in the process of completing their theses.

Findings from previous studies showed that whenever students are satisfied with the supervision process, the process of carrying out the research would be smooth and effective (Ives & Rowlen, 2005). The aspect which is always prioritized in the process of a research is two-way communication between a supervisor and a supervisee (Marsh *et al*., 2002). Transparent and effective communication helps to increase students' trust towards their supervisors. In research, trust illustrates students' willingness to let supervisors make all the important decisions regarding the research based on supervisors' expertise, reputation and power (Jordan & Gray, 2012). However, it is imperative that supervisors exercise their wisdom in dealing with students and practice open supervison to ensure success on both sides (Deucher, 2008). Subsequenly, this would give positive impacts on supervisor-student relationship and in turn, will help students to produce high quality research.

While supervisors' ability to guide and motivate students has been identified as one of the factors of a successful research, variety in supervision style is also key in ensuring the production of high quality research. It was found that group supervision could benefit the research carried out by post-graduates (Wisker, Robinson, & Scham, 2007). This is because group supervision could increase the quality of thesis writing (AItchison & Lee, 2010) among students by them comparing their work with other group members and through extended sharing or idea dissemination done when carrying out the research (Buttery & Rutcher, 2005). Hence, it can be said that variety in supervision methods including face-to-face, one-on-one, and group supervision could strengthen students' ability and thus help them to produce high quality research.

III. METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study were 15 part-time postgraduate students undertaking their master's study in Education at School of Education and Modern Languages,

at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The participants were in semester 5 to semester 8 of their study. The interview was carried out to explore their experience of the supervision process and the challenges faced by these students in the course of carrying out their master's research. This study involved the collection of qualitative data where structured interviews were done on the participants. To illicit clear responses from the participants, the researchers gave a briefing on the study before conducting the interview sessions with the participants. This was done so that the participants would be clear on what the researcher wanted from them and they would answer the questions sincerely. All the data from the interviews were then analysed and grouped into different themes and categories.

IV. FINDINGS

Based from the findings, there are four charasteristics of supervisor that could help their students in doing and completing their research. The characteristics are supervisors are the experts in students' research, supervisors' willingness to meet and frequency of meetings with students, supervisor gives motivation to students and supervisors constantly monitor students' progress.

(A) Supervisors are the experts in students' research

Out of 10 participants interviewed, 4 reported their supervisors' willingness to offer advice and motivate them in the course of completing their research. The findings are as follows:

> *"My supervisor seems to be lacking in statistical knowledge, thus he asked me to get assistance from other lecturers who have expertise in statistics. I met another lecturer who is more well-versed in the field. If my supervisor is an expert in statistics, I would be able to refer to him when the needs arise"*– Student 1

> *"I am very grateful that my supervisor is an expert in my research area. If not, I would have been in trouble"* – Student 9

> *"I encountered no problems in carrying out and completing my research as my supervisor is an expert in the research area. He also helped me in my writing. I am lucky to have him as my supervisor because he helped me a lot in my research"* – Student 15

Nevertheless, as reported by the participants of this study, having a supervisor who has expertise in the research area did not guarantee that a student can carry out his research well. Student factor can also affect the research process. The findings are as follows:

> *"As far as expertise is concerned, my supervisor is okay. It was me who did not exercise enough discipline in my study"* – Student 7

> *"I have no complaint when it comes to my supervisor's expertise and experience. It is just that I lacked the necessary skills in carrying out research as I have no experience. This proves to be my problem"* – Student 2

The above findings show that student factor is also an important element in ensuring a successful research. Despite having supervisors who are experts in the research area, students will not be able to produce high quality research if the do not have the drive and discipline to complete their research.

(B) Supervisors' willingness to meet and frequency of meetings with students

Out of 10 participants, 4 reported having problems with supervisors' willingness to set meetings with them.

"I encounterd problems in comprehending journals in English and in Statistics. It is problematic and I really need my supervisors to give me some guidance regarding my problem. Unfortunately, he is always busy and I don't get many opportunities to see and ask him questions" - Student 1

"I found it very difficult to be in touch with my supervisor, let alone having face-to-face meeting with him. We mostly connect through emails. However, despite having only a few meetings with him, he always push me to complete my research. I'm grateful for that and for having many friends who always motivate me" – Student 4

"My supervisor rarely asks me about my research progress or motivate me. I feel alone and clueless as to what to do next for my research" – Student 6

"Our meetings are always short, thus I find that I am always not clear about the things we discussed" – Student 8

In contrast, other students said that they did not encounter problems in competing their research as their supervisors are always available for meetings.

"So far, I have no problems with my supervisor. I like him because he shows his concerns and we always keep in touch with each other. He is very flexible when it comes to supervision meetings. He shows that he cares and I think we have a very good communication" – Student 5

"My supervisor is okay. However, I am the one with persistent health problems. Sometimes, I am so mortified that he always takes time to ask about me" – Student 2

"My supervisor is always easy to contact and we always meet to discuss my research. Otherwise, it would have been problematic for my research" – Student 9

Based on the reports by participants of this study, it can be concluded that supervisors' availability to meet with students will help students in competing their research. Supervisors' frequent willingness to meet with students is seen as a factor that helps them in their research.

(C) Supervisor gives motivation to students

5 out of 10 participants reported that their supervisors are always willing to offer words of advice and motivate them in their research endeavor. The findings are as follows:

"I am basically clueless about my research dan really need some motivation from my supervisor. I have problems in academic writing and at the same time have difficulties to juggle between work and study. I have been busy with work" – Student 13

My supervisor rarely asks me about my research progress or motivate me. I feel alone and clueless as to what to do next for my research" – Student 6

"I consider myself a little bit slow in studies and I lack statistical skills. The problem is, I am doing a pure quantitative research. I am in need of motivation from my supervisor but he always tells me that his schedule is tight" – Student 1

"I don't have any close friends who can help me in my research. I feel that I am alone. Things get worse because my health is not good. I also find it difficult to balance my time between work and my study. Therefore, I really need advice and motivation to progress in my research now" – Student 2

"I feel lost. I even have problems in looking for resources for my research. My supervisor always thinks that I am good at this, when the reality is I am not good in statistics at all. Thus, I need motivation, especially from my supervisor. I am supposed to have finished my master's study" – Student 3

Based on the findings above, it can be said that motivation given by supervisors to their students could help students to feel motivated to continue with their research and complete their studies.

(D) Supervisors constantly monitor students' progress

Of 10 participants, 3 of them said that they find it easier to move forward in their research if supervisors constantly monitor their progress. The findings are as follows:

"Even though I get a lot of help from friends in completing my research, I know that research requires self discipline and supervisors' monitoring. Without supervisors monitoring us, we would really lag behind" – Student 10

"Being a part-time student is challenging. I have helps from friends but still without my supervisor's monitoring, I will have problems. I like a supervisor who would push me so I can make some progress in my research" – Student 4

"My supervisor is very concerned about my progress and thus always monitors my work. He always keeps in touch and follows my research progress closely. I feel that it's the way he constantly pushes me to that help me to progress well in my research" – Student 5

The above findings indicate that supervisors' constant monitoring of students' research progress will help students to complete their research.

V. DISCUSSIONS

Supervison is an important factor in students' success in carrying out research. Based on research findings, it was revealed that supervisors' expertise, support and frequent motivation from supervisors, frequent lecturer-student meetings, and frequent monitoring on students' work can help student to expedite their research progress (Emilsson & Johnsson, 2007; Mutulla, 2009).

Effective supervision has been found to be a deciding factor in students' success in research (Gill & Bernard, 2008; Lee, 2008; Yarwood-Ross & Haigh, 2004). According to Thompson *et al*. (2005), a good lecturer-student relationship will help fulfill intellectual and emotional needs of students throughout a research process.

In addition, supervisors' expertise in the research area and supervisors' knowledge in research methodology are important elements in ensuring students' success in their research (Denicolo, 2004). IT was found that students prefer to have supervisors who are knowledgeable (Denicolo, 2004), like to share and give advice (Arambewella & Hall, 2004) and always show their support on their students (Marsh *et al*., 2002).

Motivation is also an important factor in students' research. In the case where a supervisor is able to direct his student to a clear path in research, the student will be more motivated to carry out the research. This shows that supervisors play a huge role in high quality research (De Valero, 2001).

However, students' attitude is also an important element in ensuring a successful research process (Bullen & Reeve, 2011). Positive attitude towards research can help students produce a quality research. In a study conducted by Bolin, Lee, GlenMaye and Yoon (2012) on the relationship between orientation to research and attitudes toward research among social work students, it was revealed that belief in the importance of research increased research interest in students. Moreover, according to Papanastasious (2005), research usefulness is significantly related to students developing positive attitude towards research.

In addition, the skill of critical thinking must be emphasized on post graduates so they can produce high quality research. Kelly, Russell and Wallace (2012), opined that the transition of thinking is central in research at degree and master's level. This is because critical thinking is one of the most important disciplines in publishing quality research (Tareq Tawfik Amin *et al*.'s 2012; Webber, Laird and BrckaLoren, 2013).

Accordingly, past experiences in conducting research has been found to help post graduates produce high quality research. This is because past experience will increase students' interest in carrying out research (Lopatto, 2004) and can hone critical thinking skills in students (Buckley., Korkmaz, & Kuh, 2008). This is possible as students are able to process all the research information that they get (Ruselle, 2005). Clear understanding of a particular area of knowledge will help increase the momentum of expertise in the filed. This is due to the fact that expertise is central in the production of research with high esthetical values (Biermann & Joraan, 2008). The findings of Tareq Tareq Tawfek Amin *et al*.'s (2012) study revealed that past experience in conducting research helps students create positive attitudes towards research. In turn, students find themselves to be mentally and physically stronger in facing all the obstacles in their research (Kur *et al*., 2008).

Past experience in research has been found to build students' maturity in producing high quality research. This is because quality research is not just about the significant findings, but individuals' potentials in becoming analytical and critical in their thinking (Dulaimi, 2005). However, the most important factor is the students themselves.

VI. CONCLUSION

Effective supervision is not only key in helping students to complete their research, but it is also important in producing research of high quality. Among the characteristics of effective supervisors are knowledgeable, skillful, onsiderate, always monitors students' progress, always motivate students, and are always available for supervision meetings with students. Therefore, it is suggested that the universities give priorities to effective supervision to ensure that students are motivated and able to complete their research. Future studies should put the focus on how lecturers can improve on their supervision and on how universities can work on effective strategies to produce intellectual, skillful, and mentally strong researchers. In addition, universities must design a more effective strategy in helping students to produce research with standard quality and complete their theses within the stipulated time

Acknowledgment

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