

# Transforming Ways to Know Your Student

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## ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for higher education programmes globally and locally highlights the importance of effective supervision in master's degree programmes. Effective supervision is one of the important factors for the successful completion of master student's research dissertation. Therefore, higher education institutions must conduct structured postgraduate supervision training regularly. This paper presents insights from the second supervisor training session in a higher education institution, focusing on the importance of understanding students' backgrounds, academic and research interests, and individual challenges. It emphasizes structured approaches for involvement of potential supervisors and co-supervisors since the student recruitment phase, matching supervisors with students, and fostering effective student-supervisor relationships. Through continuous supervision, engagement, and self-reflection, supervisors can tailor the support and guidance to their students to cultivate independent, critical thinking process and academic growth.

### Keywords:

*Supervision training, Higher education, Master degree supervision, Research, Malaysia*

## INTRODUCTION

The demand for higher education degree programs is increasing globally, including in Malaysia (Grohnert *et al.*, 2024). This paper builds on the growing recognition that effective supervision is central to graduate education. The following sections outline how institutions can strengthen supervisory practices beginning from student recruitment through to research completion.

A student's graduation from a master's degree program depends on the successful completion of a research dissertation. Therefore, faculty members should receive proper guidance on effectively supervising master's dissertations (Grohnert *et al.*, 2024; Wisker, 2012).

In Malaysia, attendance and successful completion of supervisor training is a requirement set by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) to qualify as a dissertation supervisor in Malaysian universities (MalaysianQualificationsAgency, 2021). Manipal University College Malaysia (MUCM) launched its master's degree programs in 2023. The first supervisor training session at MUCM was conducted on November 16–17, 2023, followed by the second session on January 16–17, 2025. Grounded on the institutional developments, the following document presents the insights gained from the most recent postgraduate supervision training session. Previously conducted study revealed that

immediate training improved agreement specification and reduced some perceived problems (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2008).

In our institutions' master's programme conducted by research mode, supervision typically begins after the completion of coursework modules and extends through a 21- to 33-month research phase, depending on the programme structure and the mode of study (full-time or part-time).

To the best of our knowledge, literature about post-graduate supervision training is limited. The training guidelines emphasized on compliance with the quality, timeline, and requirement criteria set by the higher institutions. There is limited focus on supervisors' emotional intelligence, cross-cultural supervision, student-centered support and applicable structured frameworks. Therefore, this document presents the core elements of effective supervision such as importance of understanding student diversity, motivations, and needs for the students.

## **SELF-REFLECTIONS ON THE SUPERVISORY PRACTICES AND KNOW YOUR STUDENT PERSPECTIVES**

In order to effectively supervise the postgraduate students, it is crucial to be self-reflected on own's supervisory practice and a need to have a deep understanding of students' perspectives. During the training session, participants reflected on their current practices with summative framework of effective Masters' Thesis supervision (Grohnert *et al.*, 2024) and concept of good supervisor and good supervisory practice by Gina Wisker (Wisker, 2012). We incorporated "know your students" perspective to the framework for effective Masters' thesis/dissertation supervision.

These reflective questions will guide us to the foundational phase of the supervision journey.

- When do you start knowing your students?
- What do you need to know about your students?
- How do you know your students?

## **INITIAL PHASE OF STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND MAJOR MODULES TEACHING**

Knowing about students involved their diverse backgrounds, academic excellence, and individual challenges related to the study programme. Supervisors must participate in student recruitment and thus start to get to know the students and their input on the programme. During the mandatory course work phase, supervisor will have a chance to gain deeper insights into students from various perspectives. This period enables supervisors to observe students' academic excellence, research interests, and work abilities (Table 1). Through this process, supervisors can make informed decisions about whether to accept a student as their supervisee during the supervisor selection stage.

**Table 1:** Target characteristic of students to be observed before the start of accepting student

Indicators for effective masters' thesis/dissertation supervisions (Adapted from Grohnert et al., 2024; Wisker, 2012)		
No	Targets (input)	Evaluation indicator and role of potential supervisor/co-supervisor
1	<b>Recruitment of student</b> Student knowledge, skill Students' attitude and motives	Entry requirement agreed by MQA/ rigorous assessment result if any Student's Curriculum Vitae (CV) and short research idea/proposal Interview /Supervisor must review potential students' profile and give honest comment propose ways to know students' attitude and motive to join the programme
2	<b>Training of students</b> Knowledge, Skill, Language proficiency and attitude	Taught course agreed by MQA If potential supervisor participates in initial teaching, she /he will get to know knowledge, skill, language proficiency, and attitude
3	<b>Proper Matching of student and supervisors for Master research</b> (student autonomy- Supervisor team recommendation)	Student's prior research publications, experiences & knowledge in the area of chosen topic Supervisors' prior expertise and research work in the area of chosen topic Supervisor 's experiences in supervision Supervisor has a research grant related to the student's research topic Supervisor has lab facilities for the research

## RESEARCH PROJECT SUPERVISION PHASE

Each postgraduate student has own learning styles, unique motivations, and research capabilities. Therefore, supervisors should create an open and supportive discussion to monitor their progress, challenges they face, and mutual agreement on strategies to proceed for the meaningful research project (Wu, Oubibi and Bao, 2024). During the actual supervisions stage, usual indicators like student supervisor meeting report and three-monthly progress report are not sufficient to know the supervisee. The supervisor must put an extra effort into knowing the changes in attitude, confidence, and behavior of students thus supervisor can identify the needs of students and adjust the supervisor accordingly (Table 2). Supervisor should reflect on supervisor-supervisee relationship and honestly analyze the factors related to satisfactory/unsatisfactory professional and personal relationship (Table 3). We can identify more objective ways of knowing our students than usual way. Furthermore, supervisors play a crucial role in guiding students through the regular meetings, timely completion of research proposals, and encouraging dissemination through presentations and publications (Table 4). Self-reflection of supervision process and being attended to students' need enables supervisors to provide tailored guidance to their students to cultivate independent and critical thinking process and academic growth.

To ensure meaningful progress and engagement, supervisors must go beyond regular administrative monitoring, and actively understand their students' behavior, motivation, and challenges. Table 2 outlines specific indicators to guide supervisors during this dynamic supervision process.

**Table 2:** Target characteristic of students to be observed during supervision

Indicators for effective masters' thesis/dissertation supervisions (Adapted from Grohnert et al., 2024; Wisker, 2012)		
No	Targets (process)	Evaluation indicator and role of supervisor/co-supervisor
1	<p><b>Expected actions for students</b></p> <p>engagement with peers/professional networks supervisor/ Co-supervisors</p> <p><b>Proper self-management</b></p> <p>Time management Balance work family &amp; study</p>	<p>Predict student engagement from CV (e.g. Membership in professional associations, institutions, participation in conference).</p> <p>Student guides inform the students what actions are expected from them during master's degree programme and during research projects.</p> <p>Supervisor must observe and create a way to assess students' action. Supervisor must build a rapport and try to know each student's action, reaction and self-management.</p> <p>Punctuality to training, meeting assignment submission deadline</p> <p>Supervisors must build a rapport and try to know personality/ learning style and other personal information which may facilitate hinder students' study,</p>
2	<p><b>Identification of Student's Needs</b></p> <p>Language proficiency Academic reading &amp; writing skills Research Knowledge and skills Knowledge &amp; skills in the subject Emotional needs Communication skills Critical thinking skills Cultural adaptation skills</p>	<p>Student 's CV: Supervisors must identify student's need from CV &amp; information from the admission department</p> <p>build a rapport and inquire about student's needs</p> <p>guide students to do self-assessment to know their own needs and ways to communicate/express their needs</p> <p>guide how to seek help for their needs</p> <p>Give FEEDBACK, FEED UP, FEEDFORWARD &amp; guide the students for clarification (if any of feedback) acceptance, application of feedback for self-improvement</p>

**Table 3:** Target characteristic of students to be observed in terms of student supervisor relationship

Indicators for effective masters' thesis/dissertation supervisions (Adapted from Grohnert et al., 2024; Wisker, 2012)		
No	Targets (Student – supervisor relationship)	Evaluation indicator and role of supervisor/co-supervisor
1	<p><b>Appropriate professional relationship</b></p> <p>Student initiative expected Two-way relationship dependent to independent, free to disagree or agree Goal setting together Two ways feedback Both parties' application of feedback</p>	<p>Student guide for student-supervisor relationships.</p> <p>Regular student-supervisor meeting minutes</p> <p>Feedback notes. The supervisor must mention ground rules, goals, targets, timeline in advance.</p> <p>The supervisor must observe and use appropriate supervision style adapt to the development of student.</p> <p>The supervisor must create a way for students to give feedback to supervisor and incorporate students' feedback for improvement of support and supervision</p>
2	<p><b>Appropriate long term professional relationship</b></p>	<p>Presentation of thesis/dissertation finding in conference and master graduate and supervisors as authors</p> <p>Number of Master graduates become MUCM alumni</p> <p>Master graduate and supervisor research collaboration</p> <p>Master graduates give talks to future/freshman master students</p>
3	<p><b>Acceptable personal relationship</b></p>	<p>Mutual respect and trust, non-judgmental communication, mutual sympathy and empathy, practice flexibility without disturbing the set timeline.</p>

In the supervision process, the effectiveness of supervision could be evaluated through student progress, achievement, and satisfaction. Table 4 presents outcome-focused indicators that reflect both academic success and relational outcomes of supervision.

**Table 4:** Target characteristic of students to be observed in terms of student progress and achievement

Indicators for effective masters' thesis/dissertation supervisions (Adapted from Grohnert et al., 2024; Wisker, 2012)		
No	Targets (outcomes)	Evaluation indicator and role of supervisor/co-supervisor
1	<b>Progress of research</b> <b>Timely completion of research</b>	Regular supervisor/supervisee meeting and meeting minutes mentioned the work done and work to be done before next meeting Proposal of research/Final thesis/dissertation submitted before the last date
2	<b>Performance</b> (research topic selected, research proposal, proposal defense). Performance related to dissemination of research finding (confidence, attitude)	Timely completion of feasible rational and topic selection for research Timely completion of proposal/proposal defense Student presentation/ publications/participation in conferences
3	<b>Quality of</b> assignment/proposal and final thesis/dissertation report	Passed proposal defend, research able to implement according to proposal, good comments from assessors Passed final thesis/dissertation defend, good comments from assessors, Grade
4	<b>Reaction</b> (Student motivation /engagement/satisfaction)  Supervisor satisfaction	Mutual respect and trust, non-judgmental communication, mutual sympathy and empathy, practice flexibility without disturbing the set timeline.

While the frameworks by Grohnert et al. (2024) and Wisker (2012) provided structured guidance, they may not fully capture outcome of the supervision training and culturally specific supervisory challenges in Malaysian context. Therefore, further adaptation and improvement could be done for local institutional contexts and student diversity.

## CONCLUSION

Offering the supervision trainings will upskill the supervisors to enhance research excellence, to aware the updated guidelines, and to contribute to timely completion of students' research projects. Internationally, structured supervisor training programs are considered essential to improve awareness on importance of well-being, balance, support and successful completion of the students' projects (Riches-Suman and Delderfield, 2021; McCallin and and Nayar, 2012). In Malaysia, the MQA guidelines mandate for the requirement of training for the postgraduate supervisors (MalaysianQualificationsAgency, 2021). Therefore, it is essential that supervisors remain aware of updated guidelines, strategies, requirements, and proactively seek strategies to navigate these changes, while maintaining the quality and integrity of the supervision process.

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