

Graduate Students' Perspectives on Important Qualities of Ideal Research Supervisor and Tensions in Research Supervision

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Abstract

At the Master's degree program level, supervisor-supervisee relationship should be ideally centered on research work. However, the relationship can become more complex during research progress. Master's degree program supervisors play a big role in the transformation by training research students how to investigate, conceptualize and create new solutions (Barnett, 2004). Hence, effective Master's degree program supervision is required to train students how to investigate, conceptualize and create new solutions (Barnett, 2004). Specifically, the study examined research students' perspectives on important qualities of ideal graduate research supervisor and tensions that arose between research students and their supervisors. In this study, 115 student participants from various higher education institutions of Myanmar responded the questionnaire and 63 teaching staff participated in semi-structured interviews in this study. Findings from this study revealed that students identified qualities of an ideal supervisor as one who provides direction and structure of the research, possesses knowledge and relevant expertise in the field surrounding the student's research, has interest and enthusiasm in supervision and gives constant encouragement as well as supportive among others. Findings revealed that level of supervision failed to meet or exceed their expectations. Some major issues reported by the graduate students were also identified when dealing with their supervisors; namely supervisor's selfishness and disrespectfulness in the communication of their learning journey, lack of commitment

and interest of their supervisor in research supervision and the supervisors not being up-to-date with the field. In addition, identifying tensions described by research students can help supervisors to improvise their supervisory skills and deliver effective supervision throughout the various stages of students' research development.

Keywords: Research students' perspective, Master's degree program, Supervision

Introduction

Research supervisors play a big role in the transformation by training research students how to investigate, conceptualize and create new solutions (Barnett. 2004). There have been many previous literatures on effective Master's degree program supervision. Research students highlighted the role of supervisors as key to successful completion of their studies. Supervisor-supervisee relationship should be ideally centered on research work. However, the relationship can become more complex during research progress as it begins to focus on "experiences, tasks, events, conversations which create the opportunity for the student to move both identity and knowledge simultaneously" (Kamler & Thomson. 2006: 18). In Myanmar university context, for research supervisors, the role is assigned as part of

a broader and more complex faculty role that may include teaching responsibilities, research development, and the fundraising and writing tasks that can accompany that research. In that context, being a supervisor may not be perceived as such a central role as it may for the supervisee. But supervisors and supervisees have mostly a good relationship.

The objectives of this research are to explore the perspectives of the graduate students on important qualities of ideal research supervisor and to examine their tensions while they are doing their thesis.

1. The Important Qualities of the Ideal Graduate Research Supervisor

(i) Support

One of the keys to being a good supervisor is being able to adjust to the needs of the students. Different students require different support. Additionally, supervisors need to provide support, autonomy and guidance that promote student's research agenda. A supervisor ensures compliance with the university policies and regulations, including the key policies and procedures relating to supervision and examination. Support involves supervisors being encouraging, mentoring, and aware that students' lives extend beyond the research. Supportive supervisors make an effort to understand how the student prefers to work. In addi-

tion, such supervisors attend to the student as a whole person, rather than purely as a research student. (Kamler & Thomson. 2006)

(ii) Availability

Research students might expect on average to meet formally with their supervisors throughout their studies. There will be times when they may need to meet more often when they are developing research proposal or at the time when they are trying to develop research methods and techniques. Formal supervisory meetings are an opportunity for students to discuss their progress, describe the findings, and alert their supervisors to any problems. These meetings are an important part of working relationship with supervisory team. It is important that students spend some time thinking about what they can do to make these meetings as constructive as possible. This involves supervisors meeting with students regularly, setting aside adequate time for students, and being contactable through several media (e.g., email, phone) – particularly if they are not physically present.

(iii) Interest and Enthusiasm

Students portrayed the ideal supervisor as someone who is interested and enthusiastic about the student's research work. This is achieved by supervisors who are positive, empowering, motivational, and committed. Such supervisors are often

in the vicinity of their students and are likely to show an interest in the student's progress. Supervisors push the students to write articles, reviews, publish in journals and help them analyze reviewers' critiques - this really helps the students learn how to write academic articles before graduating, learn how to improve/write better thesis, how to interpret and answer reviewers' critiques positively. The supervisor should also support and encourage the students to publish in related journals, attend relevant conferences, and should include him/her in any grant projects.

(iv) Knowledge and Expertise in the Field Surrounding the Student's Research

Students can easily find out about academic's research outputs by exploring their supervisors' past activities (including books, editorials, reports, press articles, as well as public engagement work such as exhibitions or conferences). Ideal supervisors are those who have expertise in the field surrounding the student's research. Students value highly a supervisor who can use their knowledge of the area to understand and demonstrate how the student's research topic fits within the wider field. Having a supervisor with expertise is particularly important.

(v) Interest in the Student's Career

In many institutions where great work is

done, it is the student who strives hard to achieve success and the mentor happily accepts the success and motivates the student for furthering the work. Ideal supervisors are likely to show an interest in the student's career. They help to provide support for the establishment of the student's career in several ways. These include having good contacts and introducing students to their network of colleagues, looking out for and informing students of conferences and seminars relevant to their research and career, and encouraging and facilitating the publication of the student's research.

(vi) Good Communication

Ideal supervisors have good communication skills. In particular: good listening skills; the tendency to maintain an open dialogue about the research project, its progress and problems; the ability to communicate in an open, honest, and fair manner about issues that arise as they arise; and making expectations clear with regard to matters such as the process of completing a Master's thesis, budget considerations, and the role each party must play in performing the project research.

(vii) Constructive Feedback

A supervisor is a person with good knowledge in the field and can suggest the student ways to go ahead. The student has a greater role in thinking, information

collection and self-motivation. Students should receive feedback from their supervisor for all matters – big and small – regarding research study. Students see an ideal supervisor as one who provides feedback and criticism of their work that is constructive and prompt. In addition students value consistency in the feedback given. Some valued consistency across time. Thus, the supervisor and student share the same focus regarding the project.

(viii) Provides Direction and Structure

Whether students are new to supervision or already have extensive experience, it is always possible to learn from their supervisors' experiences. The ideal supervisor is perceived to be one who provides an appropriate amount of direction and structure to the student's research project. She or he is prepared to create deadlines, challenge, and push the student a little when required. Such a supervisor is informative and helpful when it comes to areas of uncertainty. Further, the ideal supervisor helps to encourage good work habits in the student, thereby helping the student to help her or himself achieve the desired outcomes from their research.

(ix) Approachability and Rapport

Supervisors should have great communication skills and the ability to communicate in a clear and concise manner by using

positive language. Supervisors should be compassionate and approachable; there needs to be a relationship of respect and trust between the supervisor and his or her students. Without the help of a good supervisor experienced in the area, it is virtually impossible to do a proper research. The ideal supervisor is approachable and works to establish a good rapport with their students.

(x) Experience and Interest in Supervision

Part of being experienced and interested in supervision, a key quality of an ideal supervisor, is having a complete understanding of the requirements and process of completing a thesis. In addition, students value supervisors who consider the needs of particular subgroups of the student population. It is important that supervisors recognize the individual supervisory needs of each student. These vary between students and between different stages of their studies.

2. The Most Substantial Tensions that Arose between Research Students and their Supervisors in Graduate Research Supervision (Barnett. 2004)

Tension which has arisen between a supervisor and a research student is to be handled swiftly and professionally. Regardless of their nature, it is important to discuss problems at an early stage. According to

Barnett (2004), both the supervisor and the student are obliged to contribute to finding a solution to the situation which has arisen.

(i) The Supervisor is Too Busy to be Effective in their Role

The most common supervisor-related problem that research students face is having a supervisor whose extensive commitments make them too difficult to get hold of. This comes as a result of supervisors having too many other students and commitments. The consequences arising from this are numerous. Students see this as the main barrier to receiving optimal supervision. It is also a likely cause of many of the additional problems students emphasize (see below).

(ii) Poor Feedback

Feedback which conflicts with previous feedback given, too little feedback, delayed and infrequent feedback, illegible feedback, and too much negative feedback relative to encouraging and positive comments are all problematic issues for students.

(iii) The Supervisor Lacks Commitment and Interest

A supervisor who lacks commitment to, or interest in, research poses problems for graduate research students. Such supervisors fail to show an interest by their lack of presence and their lack of enquiry

into the progress of the work. They tend to make little or no effort to encourage or motivate the student, fail to give guidance and direction on issues and questions raised, and don't cooperate well with the student or help the student to develop skills to help her or himself.

(iv) Tensions or Conflicting

Perspectives from within the Supervisory Panel

Having to manage the relationship between co-supervisors who do not get along with each other is a substantial problem for students. Similarly, students find it problematic when they receive conflicting advice and opinions from each supervisor.

(v) Poor Communication and Disagreements about the Project

Problems arise for students when they feel unclear or in disagreement with their supervisors about what the aims of the project are or how to best use and interpret their findings. A failure to discuss the direction and progress of the research poses problems for the student and their research.

(vi) Conflicting or Unrealistic Expectations of Each Other

Students face problems where there is poor communication with their supervisors about what each person expects of the other.

Consequences include misunderstandings between parties, wasting time, and one or more parties getting frustrated. Another serious consequence is the student possibly being faced with a project that is too large to be completed in reasonable timeframe.

(vii) Selfishness and Disrespectfulness

Some supervisors display selfishness and a lack of respect for their students. Students find it difficult to work with supervisors who only look at their own gains from the student's research, push the research down paths that interest them but not necessarily the student, treat the student as "their property", and expect students to do work that extends beyond the realms of their Master's research. Students also find it concerning when they are not treated as colleagues, despite being at the final stages of their studies. Students struggle when their supervisors fail to recognize and respect that they have lives that extend beyond their thesis work.

(viii) The Supervisor is not Up-to-Date with the Field

The problem of a supervisor who is not up to date with the field means supervisors are unable to help problem-solve and advise. This is particularly problematic for students who also lack access to those who do maintain a current knowledge of the

literature. In some areas, being out-of-date with the field means supervisors are ignorant of the optimal techniques and theories that exist. This has implications for the quality of research that can be performed.

(ix) The Supervisor Lacks Experience in Research and / or Supervision

A lack of experience in research or supervision results in problems for students. Students commented that an inexperienced supervisor is unclear about the amount and quality of research that is sufficient for a Master's. Such supervisors are more likely to allow the student to do far too much research or to submit the research despite it failing to meet the required standards. In addition, a supervisor who lacks research experience is likely to allow the conduct of research that is badly-planned.

(x) Personality Clashes

Students find clashes of personality with their supervisors to be problematic for all concerned. The majority of students saw a personality clash as the reason most likely to drive them to abandon their studies or to change supervisors.

Research Methodology

In our situation, each and every student has gone through a supervision process during their Master's. While the years as university students were probably the best

years of their lives, there were numerous positive and less positive moments related to the studies. As the graduate supervisors in a modern society of universities, both supervisors and graduate students deserve to explore the possibilities to improve the supervision practice. We asked the questions about M.A. / M.Sc. students too. Furthermore, we asked graduate students to list what they expect from a supervisor. This research study involved 115 participants from various higher learning institutions in Myanmar and they have succeeded in obtaining their Master's in Education. All participants met the criteria established, which included successful Master's viva examination (or thesis defense) no longer than two years before the date of the interview. When students have completed all course requirements laid down by the university, they have to spend a considerable time participating in this research.

Study design and participants

This study adopts a mixed-method approach which combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Semi-structured interviews contributed most to the overall volume of the data collected in the study. Questions used in the interview were prepared by the researchers. The study used interviewing as a guiding method of

qualitative inquiry to draw the lived experiences in order to capture the phenomenon in question. Rather than explaining the phenomena, the study focused on descriptions and used phenomenological method to highlight “the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives” (Lester. 1999). The statistical data were described in terms of percentage.

Table 1 Participants of interview survey and questionnaire survey

Student participants		Staff participants	
Invited	Completed questionnaire	Invited	Participated in interview
200	115	100	63

The study consisted of 63 teaching staff members for interview survey and 115 students studying at University for questionnaire survey.

Table 2 Staff participants’ interview responses (n=63)

SN	Question	Responses		
		Options	N	%
1	Do you currently supervise Master’s students at your university?	Yes	56	88.89%
		No	7	11.11%
2	Do you currently supervise Master’s students at other institutions?	Yes	16	25.40%
		No	47	74.60%
3	What level of supervision experience best describes your experience of supervising Master’s students?	Not experienced	0	0%
		Have supervised student as a co-supervisor but not through to completion	0	0%
		Currently a co-supervisor	17	26.98%
		Primary supervisor	46	73.02%
		Have supervised students to completion	63	100%

Table 2 (Continued)

SN	Question	Responses		
		Options	N	%
4	How many Master's students have you supervised through to completion?	0 students	0	0%
		1-5students	15	23.81%
		6-10 students	22	34.92%
		11 + students	26	41.27%
5	How many years of supervision experience have you had?	0 year	0	0%
		Range = 1-5 years	19	30.16%
		Range = 6-10 years	33	52.38%
		Range = 11 + years	11	17.46%
6	Do you hold a leadership position at university?	Yes	29	46.03%
		No	34	53.97%
7	What faculty or area of the university do you work in?	Arts	11	17.46%
		Sciences	13	20.63%
		Education	2	3.18%
		Technology	6	9.53%
		Medicine	4	6.35%
		Law	3	4.76%
		Economics	3	4.76%
Languages	21	33.33%		

This study was undertaken involving interviews with 63 research supervisors from a range of disciplines to gain their perspectives on what they feel was the 'ideal' supervisor.

Table 3 Questionnaire responses of participants on the important qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor (n=115)

SN	Qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor	Responses			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
1	Support	My supervisor is encouraging, mentoring, and aware that students' lives extend beyond the research.	47	33	35	662 (13.61%)
		My supervisor makes an effort to understand how the student prefers to work.	41	38	36	
		My supervisor attends to the student as a whole person, rather than purely as a research student.	49	28	38	
2	Availability	My supervisor meets with students regularly, sets aside adequate time for students, and be contactable through several media (e.g., email, phone) – particularly if he / she is not physically present.	38	44	33	225 (4.63%)

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor	Responses			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
3	Interest and enthusiasm	My supervisor is interested in and enthusiastic about the student's work.	49	37	29	662 (13.62%)
		My supervisor is positive, empowering, motivational, and committed.	45	29	41	
		My supervisor is often in the vicinity of his / her students and is likely to show an interest in the student's progress.	44	31	40	
4	Knowledge and expertise in the field surrounding the student's research	My supervisor has expertise in the field surrounding the student's research.	46	24	45	678 (13.94%)
		My supervisor can use his / her knowledge of the area to understand and demonstrate how the student's research topic fits within the wider field.	43	30	42	
		My supervisor has expertise in the methodologies required in the research.	47	31	37	

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor	Responses			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
5	Interest in the student's career	My supervisor shows an interest in the student's career.	57	21	37	590 (12.13%)
		My supervisor helps to provide support for the establishment of the student's career in several ways.	60	20	35	
		My supervisor has good contacts and introducing students to his / her network of colleagues, looking out for and informing students of conferences and seminars relevant to their research and career, and encourages and facilitates the publication of the student's research.	72	26	17	
6	Good communication	My supervisor has good communication skills. In particular: good listening skills and making expectations clear with regard to matters such as the process of completing a Master's thesis.	26	36	53	257 (5.28%)
7	Constructive feedback	My supervisor provides feedback and criticism of my work that is constructive and prompt.	32	43	40	238 (4.89%)

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor	Responses			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
8	Provides direction and structure	My supervisor provides an appropriate amount of direction and structure to the student's research project.	44	44	27	869 (17.87%)
		My supervisor prepares to create deadlines, challenge, and pushes the student a little when required.	47	38	30	
		My supervisor is informative and helpful when it comes to areas of uncertainty.	31	44	40	
		My supervisor helps to encourage good work habits in the student, thereby helping the student to help her or himself achieve the desired outcomes from the research.	48	45	22	
9	Approachability and rapport	My supervisor is approachable and works to establish a good rapport with his / her students.	34	30	51	247 (5.08%)

Table 3 (Continued)

SN	Qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor		Responses			Total Score
			Disagree	Not Decided	Agree	
10	Experience and interest in supervision	My supervisor has a complete understanding of the requirements and process of completing a thesis.	45	38	32	435 (8.95%)
		My supervisor recognizes the individual supervisory needs of each student.	48	31	36	
		Total Score				4863 (100%)

Research students commented that they expected appropriate amount of direction and structure when required to have professional success which is mostly derived from research and publication. Knowledge and expertise required in the research is also accepted as one of the important qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor. In addition, they felt that interest and enthusiasm is likely to mention as an important quality in the student’s progress. They described the ideal supervisor as one who is an expert in the field surrounding the student’s research. Supportiveness enables the students to fit within the wider field, thus raising the student’s platform of understanding to better conceptualize his or her area of study.

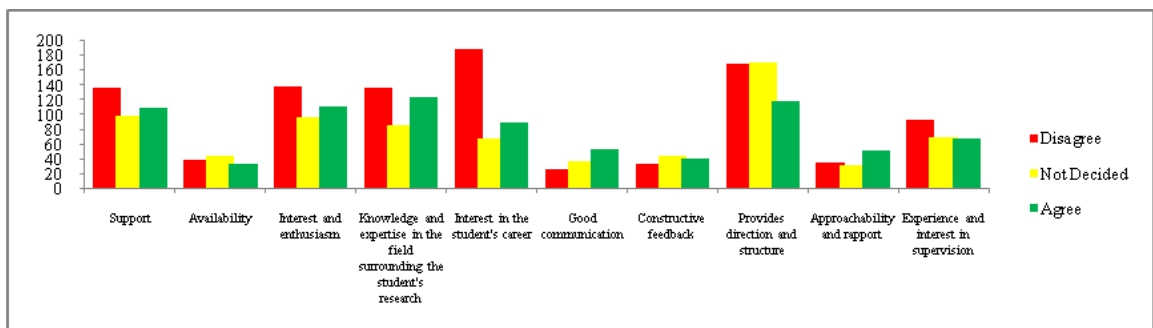


Figure 1 Questionnaire responses of participants on the important qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor

The right style of supervision plays an important role in the student's academic role development. Student-supervisor relationship plays a key role in students' success. Some issues reported by the research students when dealing with their supervisors were mentioned in the following table. Identifying tensions described by research students can help supervisors to improvise their supervisory skills and deliver effective supervision throughout the various stages of students' research development.

Table 4 Questionnaire responses of participants on the most substantial tensions that arose between research students and their supervisors in graduate research supervision (n=115)

SN	The most substantial tensions		Response Options			Total Score
			Disagree	Not Decided	Agree	
1	The supervisor is too busy to be effective in their role.	My supervisor has such extensive commitments that he / she makes students too difficult to get hold of.	56	35	24	262 (6.73%)
2	Poor feedback	My supervisor gives feedback which conflicts with previous feedback given, too little feedback, delayed and infrequent feedback, illegible feedback, and too much negative feedback relative to encouraging and positive comments are all problematic issues for students.	47	30	38	239 (6.14%)

Table 4 (Continued)

SN	The most substantial tensions	Response Options			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
3	The supervisor lacks commitment and interest.	My supervisor fails to show an interest by his / her lack of presence and lack of enquiry into the progress of the work.	33	31	51	659 (16.93%)
		My supervisor tends to make little or no effort to encourage or motivate the student, fail to give guidance and direction on issues and questions raised	37	30	48	
		My supervisor does not cooperate well with the student or help the student to develop skills to help her or himself.	41	31	43	
4	Tensions or conflicting perspectives from within the supervisory panel	I find it problematic when I receive conflicting advice and opinions from my supervisor and co-supervisor.	64	31	20	274 (7.04%)
5	Poor communication and disagreements about the project	I feel unclear or in disagreement with my supervisors about what the aims of the research are or how to best use and interpret my findings.	35	41	39	226 (5.81%)
6	Conflicting or unrealistic expectations of each other	I face problems where there is poor communication with my supervisors about what we expect of the other.	54	43	18	266 (6.83%)

Table 4 (Continued)

SN	The most substantial tensions	Response Options			Total Score	
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree		
7	Selfishness and disrespectfulness	My supervisor displays selfishness and a lack of respect for his / her students.	63	33	19	763 (19.60%)
		I find it difficult to work with my supervisor who only look at his / her own gains from my research, treat the student as “his / her property”, and expect students to do work that extends beyond the realms of our research.	45	29	41	
		I struggle when my supervisor fails to recognize and respects that we have lives that extend beyond our thesis work.	54	32	29	
8	The Supervisor is not Up-to-Date with the field.	My supervisor is not up to date with the field and he / she is unable to help problem-solve and advise.	32	33	50	426 (10.94%)
		My supervisor is ignorant of the optimal techniques and theories that exist.	31	37	47	

Table 4 (Continued)

SN	The most substantial tensions	Response Options			Total Score (%)
		Disagree	Not Decided	Agree	
	The Supervisor lacks experience in research and / or supervision.	50	42	23	508 (13.05%)
	My supervisor is unclear about the amount and quality of research that is sufficient for a Master's.				
	Personality clashes	59	37	19	270 (6.94%)
Total Score					3,893 (100%)

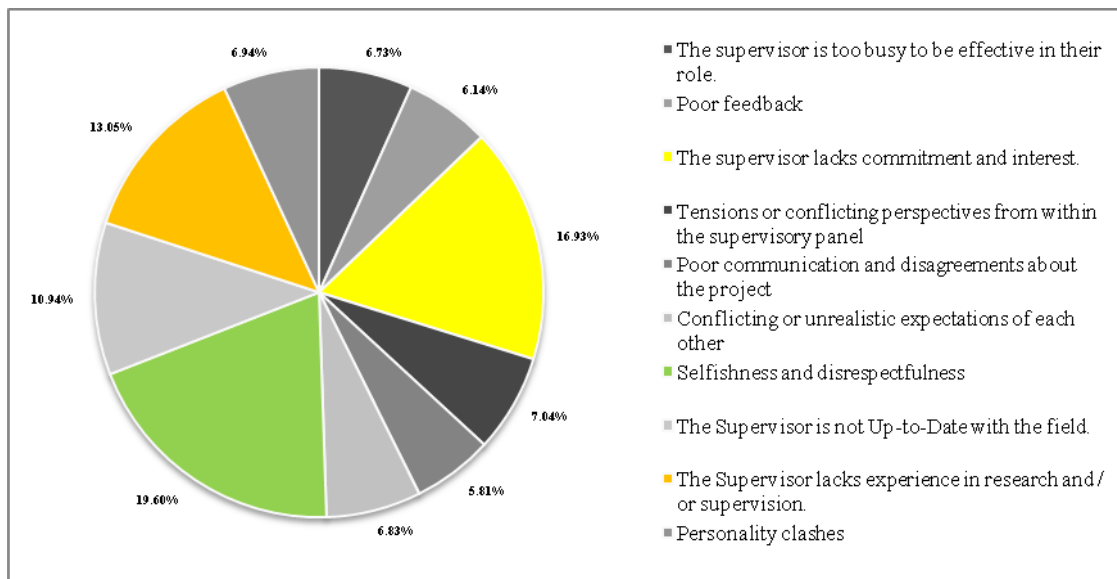


Figure 2 The most substantial tensions that arose between research students and their supervisors in graduate research supervision

Tensions discussed among the research students in this study were mentioned in Table 4. Some research students responded to the negativity of their supervisor's selfishness and disrespectfulness in the communication of their learning journey. The research students expected more encouragement from their supervisor especially when so much effort had been put into their research. In addition, they felt that supervisor's feedbacks were too vague to help them focus on searching for the right topic for their study. Moreover, some supervisors fail to recognize and respect that research students have lives that extend beyond their thesis work. Other students commented on the lack of commitment and interest of their supervisor when given guidance in the field especially for thesis development. Other issues that emerged from the findings included lack of experience in research and/or unclear guidance, and the supervisors not being up-to-date with respect to technical competences of the Master's project. Some students commented on university's practice of allowing inexperienced academicians to become second supervisors as part of their on-the-job training. This practice was not particularly welcomed by a few research students who felt that, at their level of study, they should be given guidance by experts in the field especially when troublesome

knowledge acts as barriers to further thesis development. They also reported as having to juggle conflicting advice and the need to please two or more supervisors instead of just one. Having two or more supervisors proved to be difficult for the research students participating in this study. The findings were in line with other related studies on Master's degree program supervision such as Gurr (2001), Janssen (2005), Vilkinas (2008), and Wiskeret al. (2010).

Discussion

The current study was conducted to explore graduate students' perspectives on important qualities of ideal research supervisor and tensions in research supervision. The interview study involved 63 supervisors from different universities of Myanmar. Approximately 115 postgraduate students across Myanmar took part in the questionnaire survey. Data were collected via a questionnaire and semi structured interviews. Findings indicated that supervisees from Myanmar looked for a supervisor who was a motivator and they stressed the need for a supervisor to be an expert in their specific field of study. More importantly, findings from the questionnaire survey revealed that level of supervision failed to meet or exceed their expectations. Findings from the study also reported some most substantial tensions

in supervision faced by Myanmar research students. Among the tensions highlighted in this study included supervisor's selfishness and disrespectfulness in the communication, lack of commitment and interest in research supervision and conflicting expectations between supervisors. Respondents had higher expectations of their supervisors.

Conclusion

There are many factors that determine the success of research students in doing their postgraduate programs. Of these are the supervisors and effective supervision. The aim of this research is to identify the important qualities of ideal research supervisor and examine the tensions in graduate research supervision from the graduate research students' perspective. Descriptive statistics has been used to describe the important qualities of ideal research supervisor and the students' opinions on their supervisors and effective supervision. Our results suggest that the most important attributes of supervisors are: supervisors should be friendly, approachable and flexible; knowledgeable and resourceful; and encourage students to work and plan independently. In addition, the results indicate that effective supervision means that supervisors are able to establish good and professional relationships with students; give support

and guidance; and provide continuous motivation and inspiration. Specifically, the study examined tensions that arose between research students and their supervisors at different stages of their learning journeys. Semi-structured interviews contributed to the overall volume of the data collected in the study. Findings from the study identified some major issues reported by the research students when dealing with their supervisors; namely lack of positive communication, lack of necessary expertise to give support and power conflicts. Findings from this study informed research on learning and supervision, particularly in providing support in students' crossing of threshold concepts during their learning journey. In addition, identifying tensions described by research students can help supervisors to improvise their supervisory skills and deliver effective supervision throughout the various stages of students' research development. Even if tensions were often considered as part of the process in learning, these tensions needed to be addressed by various stakeholders involved in pedagogy. While communication was found to be the most discussed tension in research supervision, lack of experience and interest in supervision, deficiency of expertise in the field surrounding the student's research and absence of constructive feedback were also barriers that needed to be

addressed. In addition, identifying tensions described by research students can assist supervisors to improvise their supervisory skills and deliver effective supervision throughout the various stages of students' research development.

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