

CHAPTER 9

The Supervisory Team and Making It Work

Suhailah Hussein

Introduction

Advancing knowledge is the primary aim of academia, and it is contributed largely by postgraduate research students. The success of master's and doctoral journeys heavily depends on the quality of postgraduate supervision. In many developing countries, postgraduate research programs are crucial for establishing themselves as global education hubs (Wan et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2018). Sharing this aspiration, Malaysia's National Strategic Plan for Higher Education, launched in 2015 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), was aimed at producing high-quality, balanced, skilled employees through holistic education (Sidhu et al., 2016; Baydarova et al., 2021). While attempting to generate rapid growth in postgraduate student enrolment, Malaysian higher learning institutions (HLIs) face the challenge of balancing the quantity and quality of postgraduate students.

With slow completion times and high attrition rates becoming increasingly prevalent in Malaysia, the government has advised HLIs to help students 'graduate on time' (GoT) (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2016). A study by Singh (2018) suggests that supervision quality is a major factor contributing to low GoT, high attrition rates, and overall student satisfaction in Malaysia. Moreover, government officials and scholars agreed that aligning student-supervisor expectations is crucial for improving postgraduate students' timely completion and overall satisfaction (Masek, 2017).

In the past, doctoral supervision involved a one-on-one relationship between the student and the supervisor. However, team supervision has become more common in many universities over the past few decades (Guerin et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2018). Studies have found that effective team supervisory relationships contribute not only to timely completion of studies but also to increased satisfaction in postgraduate programs (Pyhältö, et al., 2015; Robertson, 2017). Conversely, individual supervision can result in limited and inefficient monitoring, consequently hindering the development of quality postgraduate researchers (Ngulube, 2021).

For timely graduation, the advancement of holistic and integrated knowledge, and the development of transdisciplinary academics, team supervision has become a standard practice at reputable universities worldwide. However, it is essential to clearly define the roles of supervisory committee members to ensure effective supervision. This chapter examines the relationship between the principal supervisor and co-supervisors, focusing on the credibility in the division of roles and responsibilities within the supervision team. It also explores the dynamics and teamwork required among supervisory team members and highlights the responsibilities necessary to develop a synergetic and dynamic relationship between the supervisory team and the student. Finally, the chapter discusses the challenges in team supervision, often stemming from deficiencies on the part of supervisors and students.

The What and Why of Team Supervision

Supervision plays a critical role in shaping the student's research and the reputation of the supervisor (Van Rensburg et al., 2016). Good supervision requires a firm relationship to be formed first between the student and supervisor. However, the concept of good supervision has evolved in the context of 21st-century education. The traditional technical rational model, where the supervisor acts as a manager guiding a passive student, has shifted to a negotiated order model (Benmore, 2016). This new model views supervision as a collaborative process where expectations are negotiated, empowering students to take a more active role in directing their

research projects and learning processes based on their backgrounds, capabilities, needs, and levels of preparation.

In this model, students are encouraged to put forward their arguments and have a greater say in their learning journey. Consequently, student-supervisor relationships must facilitate not only knowledge production but also the formation of student identity based on mutual respect, trust, and clear, negotiated expectations (Baydarova et al., 2021). Despite this shift, the supervisor's role in broadening the student's understanding and mastery of various research methods and academic skills remains imperative (Wilkins et al., 2018; Sakheni Joseph Yende, 2021).

The Role of the Supervisory Committee

The trend of supervision has shifted from a dyadic model to a triadic or team supervision model, which is widely practised in universities globally (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). This approach is commonly practised in many kulliyahs at IIUM. Team supervision helps to mitigate power conflicts and tensions between a single supervisor and the student by distributing responsibilities among the supervisory committee (Robertson, 2017). A constructive supervisory relationship between committee members and the student, characterised by frequent and productive meetings, further enhances the supervision experience (Cornér et al., 2017).

Team supervision, typically involving at least a main and co-supervisor, enables novice supervisors to gain experience before becoming primary supervisors (Maritz & Prinsloo, 2015). This also allows the supervisory committee to collaborate in monitoring the student, particularly when students opt for remote supervision and are studying from their home country. More importantly, team supervision serves as a safety net, assuring that the student is neither left unsupervised nor his GoT affected when the main supervisor is on extended leave or retires (Johansen et al., 2019).

In addition, the growth of interdisciplinary research demands a wider range of experts from multiple perspectives for inputs on theoretical, methodological, and content-knowledge matters, which is more likely to be achieved with team supervision

than with a single supervisor. However, supervisors need to find the most appropriate team mode and pedagogy to support their postgraduate research students.

Co-supervision between experts from different universities across borders is also a common practice today. This approach facilitates knowledge sharing and cross-cultural exchange, fostering robust networking among experts in various fields. The resulting synergy broadens perspectives and enhances both the supervision process and practices among supervisors.

Role Distribution, Power Dynamics and Synergy of Effective Supervision Approaches

An effective supervisory team requires a clear distribution of roles between primary and co-supervisors. The primary supervisor maintains frequent and direct contact with the student, guiding the overall research direction, providing feedback, and supporting the student's academic and professional development. Meanwhile, co-supervisors contribute additional perspectives and specific expertise that complement the primary supervisor's skills.

At IIUM, the supervisory committee (SVC) members typically include two to three experts who guide various aspects of the thesis, including the focus of the study, the research methodology, and the Islamisation of knowledge. The SVC members must agree on the specific aspects of the student's research that each will guide and monitor. This agreement is crucial as it clarifies the role and function of each SVC member within the team while also setting clear expectations for the student. Recognising and respecting the individual roles and styles of SVC members allows for the integration of diverse perspectives, resulting in a well-rounded supervision experience (Everitt, 2024).

Balancing role distribution with power dynamics is crucial to avoid tension or conflict. While the primary supervisor plays a significant role, the input of co-supervisors must be valued, and decisions should be made collaboratively, prioritising the student's best interests (Jackson et al., 2023). The supervisory committee must understand the student's interests, needs, and capabilities to practice adaptive supervision pedagogy. Regular

meetings among supervisors ensure aligned guidance and cohesive advice for the student (Robertson, 2017). This is imperative as the SVC needs to present a unified decision and consistent stance in all decisions, advice, guidance, and directions provided to the student. Establishing a structured routine in team supervision, such as regular deadlines for student's work, holding consistent meetings among SVC members and with the student, establishing a timeframe for supervisors' feedback, and scheduling semesterly presentations of student progress, ensures that each SVC member effectively fulfils their role in supervising and monitoring the student's progress towards a timely graduation. In this regard, an agreed-upon system for regular, constructive feedback and efficient documentation is essential for continuity and accountability. This system should also provide an avenue for the student to express concerns or suggestions and facilitate immediate two-way communication between supervisors and the student.

Finally, the supervision experience should prepare the student for an academic career. Supervisors should encourage and facilitate opportunities for professional growth, such as attending workshops, presenting at conferences, participating in competitions or exhibitions, and writing articles for publication. All these elements contribute to a synergetic approach to supervision that blends various methods for effective and successful team supervision (McKenna et al., 2017).

Relationships, Support and Academic Identity

Postgraduate students rely heavily on their supervisors' guidance at the beginning of their research journey. Gray and Crosta (2018) suggest that sustained student-supervisor interactions are crucial for student enculturation into the academic world, generating a sense of belonging. This mentoring process aims to provide students with personal and professional support throughout their research (Lewinski et al., 2017). It also strengthens the personal relationship between students and supervisors, offering the psychological support students need (Baydarova et al., 2021). High attrition rates and challenges to psychological well-being often result in depression, stress, anxiety, and other negative

emotions among postgraduate students (Virtanen, Taina, & Pyhältö, 2016). In the current context, many postgraduate students are also working while opting for remote supervision. In such cases, the supervisors are compelled to provide effective supervision within the constraints of the students in terms of time, distance and the virtual mode of supervision. These challenges may add more stress on the students' part if they do not know how to manage their commitment to their studies. Hence, supervisors are now required to not only manage students' research activities to induce them into the academic world but also to closely monitor their mental well-being (Roach et al., 2019). With a team of supervisors with different skills and talents, student needs can be addressed in a more effective manner when each supervisor employs a different approach to understanding and assisting students.

Szen-Ziemiańska (2020) asserts that postgraduate students, too, are in great need of social interaction at the university, apart from the student-supervisors' interactions. She notes that interaction with peer students helps students clarify their values as researchers. Participating in epistemological debates with peer students provides them with opportunities for knowledge production and value assimilation, which are pertinent in forming the identity of academic institutional support, such as research skills workshops and seminars, which not only develop research skills but also enhance a sense of community and belonging by bringing together peers, novice and senior researchers, and other university staff (Posselt, 2018). 'Psychosocial support generated in such contexts cements the sense of self and belonging and students' growth' in postgraduate education (Posselt, 2018, p. 65). Social relations and networks within and outside academia aid perseverance, combat isolation, and improve the postgraduate experience (Mantai, 2019). Peer interactions provide social support, assist in forming academic identity, and foster a sense of belonging in the academic community (Mantai, 2017; Posselt, 2018).

One evident benefit of team supervision is that supervisors can bring together all their supervisees to form a supportive student circle. This circle allows students to connect, discuss their research, exchange knowledge and ideas, and share

and compare their research progress. Regular meetings of this kind encourage students to stay focused and committed to their studies, maintaining the momentum of their research and writing. Additionally, sharing the challenges within the group may help students better understand their supervisors' personalities and supervision styles.

Another equally important outcome of mentoring in postgraduate supervision is the cultivation of scholarship for the formation of students' professional academic identities. Intense individual mentoring introduces students to the academic community through professional networks, although few achieve full integration by the end of their research journey. A scholarly community significantly influences how students experience the research process and develop a mindset about scholarship during and beyond their postgraduate studies (Zygouris-coe & Roberts, 2019). Students' learning is a synergistic outcome of engagement in various activities, interactions, and professional relationships within their discipline, institution, and professional organisations, fostering a scholarship mindset. With team supervision, postgraduate students would have more opportunities to be integrated into the academic community since a team of experts can facilitate this process more effectively, enriching students' research knowledge and skills through the combined expertise and networks of the SVC members.

Research Ethics and Integrity

Postgraduate supervision aims to equip students with research skills and ethics, ensuring strong research integrity (Abdulghani Muthanna & Ahmed Alduais, 2021). The development of research skills and the true application of research ethics lead to stronger research integrity (Abdulghani Muthanna & Ahmed Alduais, 2021). In embodying research as praxis, students are required to develop ethical knowledge of research for the practice of scholarship integrity. Mentoring and developing student's professional academic identity should include these aspects through supervisors' modelling. This can only be successfully achieved through supervisors' good research practices and supervision. Roos et al. (2021) argue that the values and practices

expressed in postgraduate supervision are rooted in the academic community traditions and practices.

However, violation of ethical principles may occur when students are neither acquainted with the academic community nor have received good modelling from the supervisors. For instance, if the relationship between the supervisory team and the student is misused in one way or another, it compromises research integrity. For instance, the hierarchical nature of student-supervisor relationships may compromise research integrity if the main supervisor inappropriately claims first authorship of a student's manuscript, which the student feels compelled to accept to maintain a good relationship (Li & Cornelis, 2018). In some cases, co-supervisors become the co-authors, though they may not contribute at all or only contribute minimally, which does not warrant the need for the co-authorship. In such cases, it is important that matters like this are discussed from the beginning of the supervision process so that expectations and distribution of roles in co-authorship are well defined to avoid dissatisfaction and misperception between the supervisors and the student.

It is crucial to address and rectify students' values and practices if they emulate the negative examples set by their supervisors. Institutional intervention plays a vital role in realigning students' values and practices. However, the pursuit of high research rankings and the pressure to publish in top-tier journals can sometimes lead to unethical practices among supervisors. Additionally, the widespread use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in research introduces new ethical challenges. Ensuring research integrity requires a multifaceted approach, including stringent ethical guidelines, robust oversight mechanisms, and comprehensive ethics training for researchers and postgraduate students. By fostering a culture of transparency and accountability, the academic community can better navigate the pressures of high-stakes research environments and maintain the integrity of scholarly work.

A recent study has found that the commercialisation of scholarly publications by a few for-profit companies, such as Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Nature, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley, has turned the academic world into an oligopolistic market structure (Butler et al., 2023). This raises concerns about the 'publish or

perish' culture, primarily driven by university rankings, and whether these publications are read outside the academic world or provide tangible benefits to society.

Breaking away from this ranking-centric approach, IIUM has taken a different stance. IIUM emphasises responsible research and innovation, prioritising community service and sustainable development over rankings. Recognizing the detrimental effects of the ranking game on the academic mindset, IIUM focuses on humanizing education and the value of humanity. Unique among universities, IIUM mandates that its postgraduate students contribute to the Islamization and integration of knowledge while focusing on sustainable development in their research, aligning with its distinctive vision, mission and educational philosophy.

Realities and Challenges in Team Supervision

Understanding the realities of the supervisory process is essential to addressing its challenges effectively. Without this understanding, efforts may only address symptoms rather than the root causes of poor supervision (Kettle, 2015; Choonara, 2016; Wilkins et al., 2018). Van Rensburg et al. (2016) highlight that postgraduate students' supervisory challenges are a universal issue in higher education. Matsolo et al. (2018) report that approximately 50% of postgraduate students do not complete their studies. Both studies identify two major reasons for this high attrition rate: inadequate preparation at the undergraduate level and a lack of regular meetings between students and supervisors.

Many postgraduate students are first exposed to research methods late in their academic careers, often resulting in a lack of necessary skills for successful postgraduate study (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). With the rise of compressed and accelerated postgraduate programs, such as the one-year Master's and fast-track doctoral programs, students need more than minimal knowledge and skills in academic writing and research, which are not always adequately developed during undergraduate studies.

To address these challenges, HILs should consider offering additional research skills and academic writing workshops to postgraduate students. The university's Centre for

Postgraduate Studies (CPS) should also provide transdisciplinary workshops so that postgraduate students from various fields can benefit. Since many postgraduate programs now require postgraduate students to publish in refereed or indexed journals before submitting their thesis, CPS and various kulliyahs at IIUM organize annual postgraduate colloquia, symposia and three-minute thesis presentations. These programs aim to better prepare students for their proposal defences and viva presentations. Additionally, CPS and Kulliyah's offer financial assistance for students to present their research at conferences and seminars. These institutional supports have significantly helped postgraduate students develop their academic identities with encouragement and guidance from their SVC.

Another significant challenge that supervisors face is ensuring the completion of students' research projects. Vereijken et al. (2018) note that many postgraduate students have unrealistic expectations about their studies. Comley-White and Potterton (2018) point out that many students lack the commitment needed to complete their dissertations within the given timeframe. Effective supervision, therefore, requires a strong commitment from both students and supervisors. However, literature shows a lack of balance in these relationships, often leading to issues in the supervisory process. The flexibility of postgraduate programmes presents challenges, particularly for adult students who juggle multiple roles as employees and parents, which can affect their commitment to their studies.

To resolve this issue, supervisors need to understand and identify students' strengths, weaknesses, capabilities, and commitment levels. Tailoring the right mode and pedagogy of supervision to the student's needs can help the SVC provide relevant support to ensure the timely completion of research and graduation. Regular meetings and feedback help students stay focused and maintain their commitment to their research project and thesis writing.

It is undeniable that postgraduate students may face many challenges in their efforts to complete their studies. However, with the adoption of relevant strategies, supervisors can help students manage and resolve them to achieve timely graduation.

Conclusion

Supervisors must learn to handle multiple roles, such as expert, mentor, coach, manager, and career guide (Reguero et al., 2017). A postgraduate research student benefits immensely from the exemplary qualities and attributes that effective supervisors display. According to Dimitrova (2016), an effective supervisor offers professional guidance on the subject matter, coordinates the postgraduate study process, acts as a flexible personal guide, provides opportunities for professional development and networking, and monitors the progress of postgraduate studies according to set timelines. In this sense, supervisors must first be active researchers in their field and knowledgeable about research methodologies (Reguero et al., 2017). Novice supervisors, who may lack research and supervision experience, must continue to develop their professionalism through personal and institutional efforts (Fulgence, 2019).

Team supervision is one of the best ways to achieve these aims. However, the team supervision process must be supplemented by institutional guidelines, mentorship through effective co-supervision, and ongoing learning (Fulgence, 2019). Indeed, novice supervisors need to make a concerted effort to consult and review institutional procedures and guidelines, while more experienced supervisors must stay updated with changes in institutional policies and procedures (Botha & Muller, 2016).

Ethics are a crucial aspect of postgraduate supervision. Supervisors play a central role in shaping students' understanding of academic ethics. Postgraduate students adopt academic norms by observing their supervisors and participating in the academic community, making it one of the best strategies to develop an ethical academic community.

The realities and challenges that postgraduate students face require a structured team supervision approach, including clear role definitions, effective communication strategies, and ongoing training in both research tools and ethical practices. By fostering a collaborative and adaptive supervision environment, team supervision can better support the academic and professional development of postgraduate students.

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