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Academic Cultures of Postgraduate Supervision: What Influences supervisors in their practices?

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the academic cultures in postgraduate supervision to identify types of supervisory approaches utilized by supervisors and to determine the cultural contexts that influence their practice. Our study is significant considering how much more nuanced and complex supervisors' responsibilities have become to accommodate postgraduates with varying backgrounds. We employed a qualitative-narrative inquiry to interview three senior supervisors at a Malaysian university. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using the holistic content model. Our findings contribute to the literature on supervisory practices that would benefit postgraduates' learning experiences in Malaysia and similar contexts.

Keywords: Postgraduate supervision; Academic cultures; Supervisory practices.

1.0 Introduction

Supervision in higher education is a complex endeavor whereby its outcome is influenced by the standard of enthusiasm, academic excellence, and interpersonal relationship between supervisors and students (Fragouli, 2021). Although there is a growing body of literature on supervision, it remains a multidimensional and complicated phenomenon, with a little empirical study on the activities involved (Grant et al., 2014). Previous studies have found that supervisors' research credibility and issues such as mismatches in expectations between supervisors have been identified as significant factors affecting the postgraduate experience (Cardilini et al, 2021; Almusaed & Almssad, 2020). And given how globalization and internationalization movements have affected and continued to transform the higher education landscape in recent decades, studies on postgraduate supervision are more significant than ever (Wang & Li, 2008). Thus, more studies on supervision are needed to address the more complex and diverse difficulties that have arisen due to the changing student demographics and the increasing complexity of supervisory roles and relationships (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014).

The quality of supervision is critical in Malaysian higher education to avoid poor completion rates, high attrition rates, or enhanced student satisfaction. Poor supervision is like a ticking time bomb waiting to erupt especially with several cases of academic fraud and corruption in higher education (Aziman & Asar, 2021). Recent MQA standards for master's and doctorate degrees (MQA, 2021) have included some criteria to assist higher education institutions in training academics to be supervisors. Despite its significance, postgraduate supervision in Malaysian universities remains an understudied and complex phenomenon (Abiddin, 2018). Hence, the present study seeks to investigate the academic cultures in postgraduate education by addressing the following objectives: 1) to determine the supervisors' approaches to supervisory practices; and 2) to identify the cultural contexts in which the supervisors find themselves that influence their supervisory practice.

2.0 Literature Review
Recent decades have shown how globalization and internationalization movements have significantly transformed postgraduate academic cultures. The transformation is evident in the changing demographic of student populations and increasing numbers of students moving across borders from countries such as China, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia to Western universities for their education (Wang & Li, 2008). The most significant aspects of supervision are as follows.

2.1 Multifaceted identity of supervisors
Identity is "an internalized set of role expectations" of individuals' understandings of experiences, which shapes how they respond to future situations (Simon, 2004, p. 23). Identity is not static but a fluid process in which individuals negotiate and adapt to a particular role several times throughout their lives (Tomlinson, 2010). Identity also represents the distinct, conscious, and unconscious ways individuals assume their organizational parts or duties (Petriglieri, 2020). Academic identity and a sense of belonging have remained a significant concern among postgraduate supervisors (Costa, 2015). In order for supervisors to be recognized by their institutions, they must exhibit some characteristics: teaching, community work, and research (Hao, 2016). The current trend indicates that supervision and publication have a higher value than the other parts of academic life and have a significant impact on promotion (Wadesango, 2014). Therefore, the supervisors are under pressure to retain their prominence by publishing their research regularly to avoid being terminated (Wangyai & Ndofirepi, 2020). The supervisors also need to take on consultancy and entrepreneurial responsibilities. Hence, academic identity is becoming more complicated and multifaceted, as it is no longer limited to its conventional purpose but also includes institutional identities (Badiozaman, 2017). Misalignment of supervisor-student expectations may cause significant shifts in supervisors' identity and supervision practices (Baydarova et al., 2021). A study by Tiong et al., (2018) found that academics in Malaysia who engage in academic dishonesty often feel pressure from students, are overworked, want to be liked by students, and are desperate for promotions.

2.2 Complex social and power within the supervisory relationship
Social and power relation issues inherent in postgraduate supervision have been the subject of several studies. The supervisory relationship can be conceptualized in the master-apprentice model, whereby power relations are overt and formal, with the supervisors being viewed as the experts and the students as the apprentices who learn by doing (Nulty et al., 2009). Traditional supervision has unequal and overt power relationships that might contribute to the abuse of power in the supervisory relationship, such as supervisors being inaccessible, poor feedback, or causing more overt forms of sexual or academic harassment (Grant & Graham, 1999). Some studies show that unequal power relations, disciplinary practices, and institutional bureaucracy complicate the relationship between supervisors and students (Grant, 2003). To ensure successful supervision and to enhance teaching and learning, the supervisors and students need to be sensitive to maintain a balance that will allow progress to be achieved.

2.3 Reconceptualizing cultures of postgraduate supervision: theoretical lens
In the study, we draw on a non-essentialist small cultures framework (Holliday, 1999) to understand culture as a dynamic and ongoing process whereby each group member makes sense of and operates meaningfully regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or international differences. A small cultures approach (Holliday, 1999) offers an alternative means to understand people's behaviors regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, or international differences. The term small cultures are also used to refer to culture as "a dynamic, ongoing process to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within those circumstances" (Holliday, 2011, p. 205). The small cultures approach is significant in this study, considering that the discussion about encounters between students and supervisors from various backgrounds often focuses on the differences often framed within ethnic, national, or international differences. Thus, from the small cultures approach, the postgraduate supervision practice can be seen as a process in which both supervisor and student make meaning of the rules and establish norms and routines by drawing on their cultural residues (Sahar & Abdullah, 2020).

3.0 Research Methodology
This study is positioned within a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to capture the complexity of meaning within stories and the individual's meaning-making process through examination of the story and its linguistic and structural properties (Riessman, 1993). Based on the assumption that experience happens narratively, supervision should be analyzed in a comparable manner (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the study, we employed purposive sampling to recruit three senior postgraduate supervisors from a public university in Malaysia. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018) narrative research may include one or two participants as the nature of the approach is to gain a depth understanding of the phenomena, rather than to establish a generalisation. Before the interviews, we distributed information sheets

and consent forms to the participants to enhance their understanding of the study and record their consent to participate in the study. We then interviewed the supervisors using the narrative interview method to generate thicker and richer data on their supervisory experiences. The narrative interview method involves four fundamental stages of narrative interview procedures namely; initiation, main narration, questioning phase, and concluding talk to create a non-intimidating environment and to elicit stories from participants (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Participant	Position	Faculty	Experience
Alice	Professor	Humanities	More than 20 years
Johan	Professor	Education	20 years
Adam	Professor	Education	15 years

Table 1: Summary of participants' background

Data analysis from the interviews was carried out in four stages. First, we transcribed the interviews by focusing on the content of what was said rather than the structural analysis of the participants' narratives. The transcription was then sent to the participants for members' checking. Second, the restorying technique was applied to organize the events and actions that occurred within the narratives, establish how these story elements relate to one another, and represent the narrative data in a more coherent and readable form (Polkinghorne, 2007). Finally, Holistic Content analysis was employed to identify a central theme for the whole narrative and explores how a specific segment of the narrative can shed light on the story as a whole (Lieblich et al., 1998). The analysis involved five processes: 1) engaging with the text; 2) recording 'global' impression; 3) identifying themes; 4) coding each theme; 5) establishing a connection between each theme and context. To address ethics in research, we assigned pseudonyms to the supervisors, and details that could identify their identities were concealed to ensure their privacy.

4.0 Findings and discussion
In this section, we present the discussion of the main themes of our findings based on the research objectives. In the following discussion, we describe the supervisors' approaches to supervisory practices before outlining the cultural components influencing their practices.

4.1 A transitional continuum model of postgraduate supervision
Our findings reveal that the supervisors adopt a transitional continuum model of supervision ranging from linear to more holistic approaches. They do not exclusively use one supervisory style or preference as a range of supervisory styles are implemented throughout their supervision. For instance, Johan opines that "good supervision is one must know what is the correct or the appropriate form to cater to all the proper destinations of our students' research". Alice narrates that "successful supervision is when students can do their research independently and supervise others. Throughout the process, we must guide them". Adam states the reason for his style of supervision: "some students are willing to be polished while others are not, especially those from an educational culture different from here (Malaysia). So, I use different approaches. Sometimes, students must sit with me for a few hours to draft research objectives".

Within the transitional continuum, linear supervision involves a more structured and directed approach where the supervisors assume the teaching role and monitor the student's progress closely. A more structured approach is employed with students from a different educational system, with zero practical research experience or lack of language proficiency, as these students struggled the most. Each step along the line of students' development is well-defined and communicated. The linear approach takes place at the beginning of the supervisory process. The supervisors would initiate frequent meetings with the students who are new or unfamiliar with their research subject, discipline, or methodology.

On the other end of the continuum is the holistic approach to supervision, whereby the supervisors integrate more independent and collaborative learning when supervising their students. Holistic supervision involves a considerable amount of trust on the part of the student, in which the supervisors believe that the students possess sufficient subject knowledge and research skills to carry on with their research with minimum supervision. The supervision is usually carried out at the end of the program as the students show considerable progress, competence, or confidence in their research. The supervisors are more flexible with the choice of modality as they prefer to interact with their students through email and text messaging on a need-to basis. For example, Adam shares that: "I usually request the students to see me face-to-face and not online, especially during the early stage of the research proposal. Once the proposal is clear, it will be easier for them to work independently writing up the whole thesis". Similarly, Johan recalls that he would conduct meetings "three or four times a week because the students needed my advice. After, I would monitor [their progress] through email or SMS. If there is no problem, they can go ahead with their research, and if there is a problem, they will come here to meet me".

The relationship between the supervisors and students also ranges from impersonal to personal within the continuum. In linear supervision, the relationship is impersonal and professional as the supervisors are reluctant to engage in non-personal topics of discussion. They would focus on developing the student's academic and research competence instead as reflected in Adam's narrative:
"I put a boundary between myself and students and focus more on academics. The students should settle their [personal] problems with the counselor, not the supervisor. Sometimes, they want to share their problems, but I tell them No! You are here as a researcher". Nevertheless, within the holistic approach to supervision, the relationship between the supervisors and students is closer and more personal. These interactions are in the form of advice and suggestions as the supervisors allow their students to take control of their learning. The supervisors are more inclined to discuss non-academic matters with their students as part of their strategy to bring the relationship beyond the academic domain. For example, Johan shares: "sometimes, the students share their problems with me just like a father and son or a father and daughter. So, we try to solve the problems together". Alice also takes on similar approaches: "During

supervision, you become close to the students and learn a lot about them, their families, and their countries. It is impossible to distance yourself from them. They are part of you because they do not have anybody".

Fig. 1 encapsulates the transitional supervisory model to illustrate how the supervisors move flexibly from one end of the continuum to another to cater to students' needs and learning goals. The model summarizes the main characteristics of linear and holistic approaches that encompass supervisory roles, styles, and modalities. Existing literature depicts postgraduate supervision as complex and containing different dimensions: subject knowledge, research expertise, interpersonal skills, and teaching qualities. Students have diverse support needs, and supervisors must be able to move "flexibly between the various models" (Delany, 2008, p. 8), especially when the students make drastic changes in their studies or when students experience demanding situations (Grant, 2005). This study has illustrated that the supervisors adopt a transitional continuum that ranges from a more linear, structured approach to a more holistic approach depending on the supervision goals and students' progress. Similar supervisory approaches have been discussed in the literature: Sinclair's (2004) hands-on and hands-off pedagogy ranges from more to less supervisory input; Lee's (2008) integrative supervision encompasses organizational, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and emotional dimensions that are interrelated.

Supervisory Role	Teacher	<<<<< Supervisory >>>>>	Facilitator/Advisor
Supervisory Styles	Linear	Relationship	Holistic
	More instructive & directive, less personal, & more academic oriented		Less instructive & directive, more colloborative, personal & pastoral
Supervisory Modality	More structured feedback, regular one-on-one, face-to-face interactions		Less structured feedback, on a needs basis interaction, flexible modality: email/ text messaging

Fig.1: Transitional continuum of the supervisory model

4.2 Influential cultural forces in supervision
Our findings demonstrate three significant cultural components in shaping the supervisors' behaviors and values in their practices. Each component is discussed below.

Firstly, students' pedagogical experiences derived from their educational background, ideal learning styles, or educational belief influences the supervisors' expectations and practice. The supervisors felt that supervision is more challenging with students coming from more traditional educational backgrounds (e.g., more traditional, didactic, and teacher-centered) and trying to adapt to a more student-centered, independent, and technology-infused learning environment. Adam stresses that "with those who come from a traditional, didactic educational system, I will see them more often in the beginning, and once they have completed their research proposal, I let them do their work". Alice shares the same concern: "It's difficult, especially when the students come from a non-research educational background; they would struggle with the postgraduate structure. If they have research and publication, it is easier, but when you have students from educational systems that do not require them to do any research, you will face more problems".Personal and financial difficulties are some of the common obstacles that hinder supervisory progress and, often, the supervisors are the ones to assist as highlighted by Johan: "when the students move back to their countries due to financial or personal problems, you cannot do anything except contact them and advise them to either defer or leave formally. Students who completed their coursework sometimes would face problems with writing. I would advise them to go back to their countries and continue writing. I have to push and encourage them because they have their commitment". Apart from that, other students' characteristics such as poor language proficiency, lack of knowledge of the subject understudy, and limited research skills can affect the dynamic of supervision. The students' attitudes and behaviors toward the learning process also could aid or hinder their progress. This is evident in Adam's story: "One of the challenges I face is when some students are too dependent on us. The students should know that they must read (journals) a lot. Many do not know how to brainstorm ideas and put them in writing. Alice shares a similar view: "I do not like students with attitude problems, like international students, who tend to misuse their student visas. Local students who are working tend to focus on their work and not their studies. I have to chase after them".

The second component that affects the supervisors' practice is their 'large' cultural values. The findings of the study show that the supervisors carried with them residues of past education or institutional experiences and values that they may have created and co-created either from their educational experiences, engagement with previous students, or their interaction with the scholarly community. For instance, Johan admits: "The way I supervise the students is greatly influenced by my own. My supervisor and I would have our supervision regularly at the university. Our supervision meeting was done once in two weeks for half an hour. For every meeting, I would submit my draft to her so that she would give her feedback". Alice, however, had a less pleasant experience with her supervision:
"I did not have a good supervision experience at one of the universities in the UK. It is a lesson to be learned that when supervising, we should take it seriously and guide the students as much as possible. The supervisors' engagement with the academic-professional learning community, both locally and internationally, also provides a discourse platform to improve their practices. The supervisors believe that being part of a scholarly community allows them to interact with other supervisors and gain visibility and support but also inform them of

the best practice that they could incorporate into their supervision. For instance, Adam highlights the benefits of engaging with the learning community: "Being involved with other universities and supervisors helps improve our supervision because we can see different supervisory approaches from other universities. From there, we can share ideas and strengths. We should not just confine ourselves within our working environment".

The third and final component is the extent to which the institutional shared values and practices play an essential role in the supervisors' expectations of their students. The supervisors' aspirations for their students and how they position themselves are aligned with the institutional core values. Moreover, the institution's implementation of internationalization and research-oriented agendas has some impacts on the supervisory outlook. The agendas promote awareness of different learning needs and goals supervisors, and students must negotiate in their supervision. This is evident in the supervisors' reflection on the influences their institutions have on their practice. For example, Johan professes: "I love this university because of its vision and mission. It has motivated me to be here to realize the aspiration of Muslims worldwide and to seek how we can enrich the knowledge and educate students to become good human beings, not only for the Muslim community but for the rest of the world". In a similar vein, Adam shares: "I like being a supervisor because when we supervise our students, their research can help us improve our teaching and learning in class. That is the reason why my university is trying to promote and encourage staff to do research. Research and publication are one of the performance indicators of the university for supervisors to research because research can contribute to quality teaching" (Adam).

In sum, the findings propose that supervisors often adopt and replicate appropriate approaches in their supervisory practices based on their interpretations of the shared activities and values that might be derived from the three cultural components (see Fig.2). The findings resonate with past studies' results that suggest these interpretations are shaped by the supervisors' ontological, political, epistemological, and ideological residues. Additionally, students' varying educational experiences and the institution's values contribute to the complexity of the supervisory practice (Grant et al., 2014). Apart from that, engagement with the academic-professional learning communities plays a significant role in shaping how the supervisors perceive the underlying assumptions for their practice (Lave & Wagner, 1991).

Fig. 2: Influential cultural forces in supervision

5.0 Conclusion

This paper unravels one of the most significant, private, and complex domains of postgraduate supervision practice. The findings of the study shed some light on the types of supervisory practice and the cultural components that shape the practice. As part of the study's delimitation, the purposive small sampling of the participants is meant to achieve depth understanding of the phenomenon from the supervisors' narrativised experience thus the findings are not representative of all supervisors from all backgrounds and fields of study. We believe that future studies with a larger number of participants, greater diversity, different fields, and different postgraduate programs will provide more insights into the academic cultures of supervision in Malaysia.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the literature on academic cultures of postgraduate education about supervision and its practices in Malaysia

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