

Postgraduate Supervision: Comparing Student Expectations from United Kingdom University and Malaysia University

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ABSTRACT

This study presents empirical findings on postgraduate students' expectations of supervision in Master's programmes, comparing perspectives from the UK and Malaysia in particular. A cross-sectional design was conducted at two universities: one in the United Kingdom (hereafter University A) and one in Malaysia (hereafter University B). A t-test was conducted to examine the differences in expectations between these universities. Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency (mean) and frequency, were used to summarise respondents' expectations for each university and boxplots provided a visual representation of the data. This study suggests that an effective Master's supervisor should demonstrate qualities of affirmation and encouragement while clearly defining his or her role in the dissertation supervision process.

Keywords: postgraduate supervision; supervisory roles; interpersonal communication; supervisory feedback

INTRODUCTION

Universities play a pivotal role in the generation of knowledge through the conduct of research by their faculty and students across several disciplines. Master's degree programmes offered by universities provide students with an opportunity to engage in independent research, enabling them to generate novel knowledge. This acquired knowledge not only helps to their personal and professional growth but also plays a significant role in the overall development of the nation. Postgraduate studies at the master's level involve adherence to university laws and guidelines. These studies require students to undertake defined subjects and successfully complete examinations within a set timeframe. In the United Kingdom, the duration of a Master's programme often spans up to three years, while in Malaysia, students have the opportunity to complete the same programme within a two-year time frame.

Research into postgraduate education provides a variety of explanations for the causes of late completion, which vary marginally by university and nation. It is evident that the primary factors contributing to the delayed completion of postgraduate studies may be broadly classified into three principal domains: the quality of supervision, the prevailing institutional climate, and the characteristics of the candidates, encompassing their initial skill set [23].

The transition from face-to-face supervision to online modes has been identified as a factor that negatively impacts the quality of supervision and contributes to delays in completion [7]. Regular and ongoing communication with a supervisor has the potential to foster a positive relationship between the two parties, so enhancing students' self-assurance in their academic pursuits and facilitating timely completion of their studies [10]. There can be a complex social relationship between research students and their supervisors because their interests may coincide or diverge. The success or failure of a postgraduate student's research project hinges almost entirely on the nature of the supervisor-student relationship [19]. In order to engage in research effectively, it is essential to possess a strong foundation in academia, exert personal diligence, and receive

appropriate advice from a research supervisor. The provision of guidance and supervision during the initial phase of the research process mostly relies on the supervisors [13]. These studies align in their conclusions that universities, students, and supervisors collectively bear a substantial responsibility in facilitating the punctual and prosperous culmination of postgraduate programmes. The importance of supervision in ensuring the quality of postgraduate studies cannot be overstated. Key factors contributing to the quality of supervision include the establishment of a strong supervisor-student relationship, fostering a sense of belonging for the student, providing an appropriate level of academic freedom, and aligning the student's research project closely with the supervisor's research interests.

This study aims to present empirical evidence on the expectations of postgraduate students about master supervision, specifically by comparing perspectives from the United Kingdom and Malaysia. There is a limited body of research that specifically addresses the provision of support for students pursuing research masters degrees, with an even scarcer emphasis on the examination of students' affective requirements in this context [23].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research plays a vital role in the advancement of knowledge by facilitating the process of discovery, generating creative ideas and approaches, providing constructive critiques, and fostering the synthesis of information. The dissertation for a Master's degree exposes students to a research problem or background that stimulates their interest in inquiry, leading to the formulation of questions and subsequent discussions on the theoretical and practical contributions or research implications. Despite its relatively smaller scale compared to a PhD, this procedure necessitates comparable abilities, mindset, and diligent effort at every stage in terms of study complexity and depth. The nature of the supervisory relationship is subject to variation across different disciplines [20], project stages [5], cultural norms [18], learning differences [25], gender [12], geographical separation [25], and the distinction between part-time and full-time student status [5], [6], [25]. Therefore, the roles of supervisors, modes of interaction, provision of feedback, and understanding other expectations from students, collectively contribute to facilitating students' effective completion of their dissertations.

Supervisory Roles

Postgraduate supervision is the provision of guidance by a supervisor to a postgraduate research student, with the aim of facilitating the execution of high-quality postgraduate research and the gradual acquisition of pertinent disciplinary research expertise. Supervision is more than just the scholarly task of mentoring students, it is a multifaceted process that involves dynamic elements and serves as a transformative journey towards the development and use of rigorous systematic research methodologies [11]. The investigation into students' viewpoints regarding research supervision is a pivotal element in understanding the effectiveness of postgraduate supervision. In order to cultivate a robust and efficient supervisory dynamic, it is imperative that both the supervisor and the student possess a clear understanding of their respective tasks. It is vital to comprehend the disparity between the expectations of students and supervisors in the context of research supervision. The primary responsibility of a supervisor is to offer organised support and direction on educational materials and resources for the purpose of completing a dissertation. In turn, students anticipate that their supervisor will possess strong listening skills and be readily available to provide assistance when required [16].

The establishment of a successful connection between a student and their supervisor is contingent upon the effective alignment of expectations. However, there are variations in the expectations placed on students based on their diverse backgrounds and individual traits. There is a correlation between the level of support perceived by doctoral students in engineering and sciences and the cohesiveness of their research groups [15]. In particular, when supervisors incorporate a pastoral or caring element, the level of support is perceived to be greater. Additionally, the study found that gender differences can influence the satisfaction levels of doctoral students in their relationships with their supervisors. As in [21], four distinct roles of a supervisor that contribute to the establishment of a harmonious relationship between students and supervisors, ensuring alignment of expectations. These roles include *laissez-faire*, pastoral, directorial, and contractual. The *laissez-faire* approach involves granting students greater autonomy in assuming various responsibilities. The pastoral

role entails providing personal support to students while allowing them to independently determine their research projects. In the directorial role, supervisors actively participate in the research project, assuming significant roles. Lastly, the contractual role involves supervisors assuming negotiated responsibilities in both project management and personal support.

Interpersonal communication

In order to ensure successful supervision, it is imperative to establish supportive settings and cultivate trusted connections. Nonetheless, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding on the methods employed by Masters supervisors and students to establish trustworthy, transparent, and constructive partnerships that are characterised by mutual respect [1]. The notion of "social presence" pertains to attributes that foster a sense of connection among individuals, such as empathy, care, and the revelation of one's personality. These attributes have a positive impact on the interaction between supervisors and students. Developing a strong supervisor-student relationship is crucial in effectively meeting research objectives in postgraduate supervision and mitigating the occurrence of divergent expectations between supervisors and students. As in [14], following a specific period of supervision, a shared anticipation will evolve into a consistent communication pattern that can be characterised as an interpersonal style within a relationship, sometimes referred to as a supervisory style. For instance, transitioning from a state of scepticism in the relationship to one characterised by trustworthiness.

METHODOLOGY

The present cross-sectional study was carried out at a university located in the United Kingdom (hereinafter referred to as university A) and another university situated in Malaysia (hence referred to as university B). This study examines Master's students who are pursuing dissertations in social sciences disciplines, including human resources, education, business, and others, as well as those in the field of environmental and development studies. Convenient sampling was employed in this study to obtain responses over a period of four weeks, utilising the online survey platforms Qualtrics and Google Forms. The data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.

The respondents were given a self-report questionnaire to gather data on several aspects. These aspects included demographic information, supervisory roles, interpersonal communication, supervisory feedback, and other relevant factors. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 55 items, including 7 items related to demographic information, 15 items related to supervisory roles, 15 items related to interpersonal communication, 9 things related to supervisory feedback, and 9 items related to other factors. The inquiries pertaining to supervisory responsibilities, interpersonal communication, and supervisory feedback were primarily derived as in [3], while other aspects were independently formulated by the researchers. The instrument was devised using a six-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from strongly agree (6) to strongly disagree (1).

The t-test was employed to assess the differences in expectations between university A and university B. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was utilised to assess the normality assumption. The obtained p-value of .000 (reported as $p < .001$) suggests that none of the variables, including supervisor roles ($D(231) = 0.102$, $p = .000$), interpersonal communication ($D(231) = 0.125$, $p = .000$), supervisor feedback ($D(231) = 0.102$, $p = .000$), and others ($D(231) = 0.102$, $p = .000$), followed a normal distribution. Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency such as mean, and measures of frequency, were utilised to depict the expectations of respondents for each university. Additionally, Box plots were employed as a visual representation of the data.

RESULTS

Respondents' profile

Total sample size for this study was 231, with 129 samples from University A and 102 samples from University B [Table 1]. For University A, most of the respondents were from China and only two from other

countries such as Hong Kong and Malaysia. On the other hand, 82 respondents were from local country whereby 20 from other countries such as China, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jordan, Indonesia, Singapore, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Table I Demographics Profile

University	N (231)	Origin	Gender
University of Manchester (A)	129	China: 127 Others: 2	Male: 60 Female: 67 Others: 2
University of Technology Malaysia (B)	102	Malaysia: 82 Others: 20	Male: 28 Female: 73 Others: -

Descriptive Results: Supervisory Roles

Overall response on supervisory roles received rating between medium to high for both universities. As for university A, the highest mean (m=4.47) was on Item 3 where majority of the respondent almost agree that they expect supervisor to provide them with suitable research questions. Whereas majority of the respondent quite disagree that supervisors should help to handle data analysis software (Item 11, m=3.91). For university B, only items 4 and 14 were assessed as having a moderate level of agreement, while the rest had a high level. The majority of respondents (item 2, m=5.19) anticipate that supervisors will hone the dissertation topic choice. However, they were less in agreement (item 14, m=4.10) that supervisors should counsel students on their health.

Table II Supervisory Roles

No	Item In my view, the role of my supervisor is to:	Uni	Mean	SD	Level
1	Identify a suitable dissertation topic for me.	A:	4.24	1.04	Medium
		B:	4.50	1.23	High
2	Refine my topic selection.	A:	4.33	1.26	Medium
		B:	5.19	0.829	High
3	Give me suitable research questions.	A:	4.47	1.19	High
		B:	4.55	1.27	High
4	Provide me with references to literature on my dissertation topic.	A:	4.27	1.14	Medium
		B:	4.13	1.40	Medium
5	Provide me with goals and deadlines. /	A:	4.12	1.18	Medium
		B:	5.10	1.00	High
6	Encourage me to research in a self-directed independent manner. /	A:	4.32	0.984	Medium
		B:	5.13	0.792	High

7	Give me freedom to study what I want to study.	A: B:	4.27 5.05	1.11 0.872	Medium High
8	Identify ethical issues involved with my study.	A: B:	4.26 5.18	1.17 0.750	Medium High
9	Use their contacts to help me access participants for my study.	A: B:	4.26 4.40	1.29 1.32	Medium High
10	Give me time-specific progress milestones for the future.	A: B:	4.14 4.98	1.17 0.844	Medium High
11	Help me to use data analysis software.	A: B:	3.91 4.60	1.19 1.28	Medium High
12	Make me aware of my role in becoming a self-sufficient student.	A: B:	4.43 5.12	1.32 0.824	High High
13	Let me know how to keep safe on campus.	A: B:	4.06 4.44	1.12 1.31	Medium High
14	Advise me about my health.	A: B:	4.16 4.10	1.23 1.35	Medium Medium
15	Talk with me about my career goals.	A: B:	4.30 4.60	1.17 1.08	Medium High

NOTE: (low=1 – 2.66; medium = 2.67 – 4.33; high= 4.34 – 6)

The Boxplot graph in the diagram clearly shows the difference between university A and B responses (Fig 1). The median value (represented by the black line in the boxplot) for university A was 4.47 whereas for university B was 4.77, indicating that respondents from university B have the highest expectations regarding supervisory roles. There were five outliers at the lower end for respondents at university A.

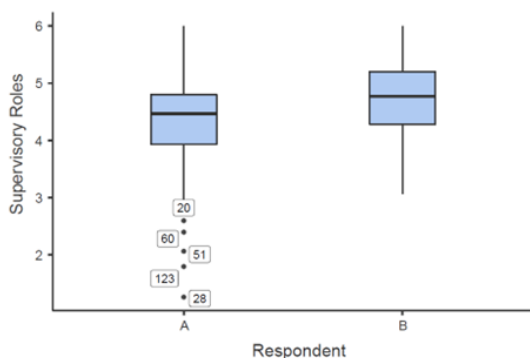


Fig. 1 Supervisory Roles Boxplot

Descriptive Results: Interpersonal Communication

Item 2 received the highest response for interpersonal communication, with a mean score of 4.68 for university A and 5.50 for university B. On the other hand, respondents from both universities had moderate expectations that a supervisor would discuss a student's concerns with family members. This item 12 averaged a 4.05 at university A and a 3.37 at university B.

Table III Interpersonal Communication

No	Item In my view, my supervisor should be:	Uni	Mean	SD	Level
1	Friendly, supportive and helpful.	A:	4.42	1.15	High
		B:	5.55	0.740	High
2	Affirming and encouraging.	A:	4.68	1.23	High
		B:	5.57	0.637	High
3	Formal when communicating with me.	A:	4.26	1.15	Medium
		B:	4.27	1.20	Medium
4	Using fairly simple language when talking with me.	A:	4.50	1.20	High
		B:	5.17	0.845	High
5	Providing an atmosphere in which I feel comfortable raising issues that concern me.	A:	4.30	1.15	Medium
		B:	5.28	0.825	High
6	Challenging me to justify what I am doing.	A:	4.45	1.25	High
		B:	4.92	0.930	High
7	Understanding of the difficulties I'm going through.	A:	4.30	1.07	Medium
		B:	5.16	0.741	High
8	Telling me to follow their instructions.	A:	4.29	1.25	Medium
		B:	4.27	1.19	Medium
9	Formally dressed when meeting me.	A:	4.19	1.37	Medium
		B:	4.06	1.32	Medium
10	Available to be contacted by their mobile telephone.	A:	4.09	1.12	Medium
		B:	5.08	0.919	High
11	Willing to tell jokes to make me laugh.	A:	4.10	0.999	Medium
		B:	4.26	1.26	Medium
12	Willing to speak to members of my family if I have problems.	A:	4.05	1.39	Medium
		B:	3.37	1.45	Medium
13	Available to meet me face to face for dissertation meetings.	A:	4.53	1.21	High
		B:	5.21	0.800	High
14	Willing to have online meetings if I don't want to meet face to face.	A:	4.54	1.08	High
		B:	5.04	0.867	High
15	Provide me with feedback on my intercultural communication to avoid misunderstandings with me.	A:	4.37	1.10	High
		B:	4.95	0.999	High

NOTE: (low=1 – 2.66; medium = 2.67 – 4.33; high= 4.34 – 6)

The Boxplot graph in the diagram clearly shows the difference between university A and B responses (Fig 2) on interpersonal communication. The median value (represented by the black line in the boxplot) for university A was 4.34 while for university B was 4.81, indicating that respondents at university B have greater expectations regarding supervisor’s interpersonal communication. There were five outliers at the lower end for respondents at university A.

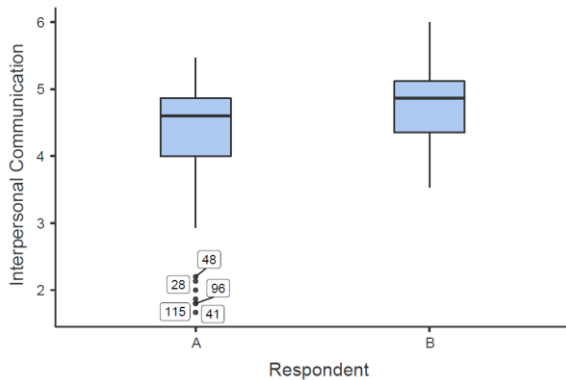


Fig. 2 Interpersonal Communication Boxplot

Descriptive Results: Supervisory Feedback

Overall, respondents from university A had high expectations on all items, with the exception of items 5, 7, and 8, which had medium scores. Respondents had the highest expectation for supervisors to describe their roles (m=4.50). Responses from university B, on the other hand, had all things with a high level of expectation. They also placed the greatest emphasis on a defined supervisory function (Item 9, m=5.13).

Table IV Supervisory Feedback

No	Item In my view, my supervisor should:	Uni	Mean	SD	Level
1	Be available for discussion/consultation as often as I feel is necessary. /	A:	4.40	1.26	High
		B:	4.66	1.08	High
2	Read my work in advance of meetings with me. /	A:	4.40	1.32	High
		B:	5.03	0.938	High
3	Set aside uninterrupted time for us to discuss my work. /	A:	4.46	1.39	High
		B:	4.91	0.955	High
4	Be tough with me to encourage me to improve my work.	A:	4.35	1.38	High
		B:	4.49	1.20	High
5	Assist me with writing skills (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, structure). /	A:	4.32	1.29	Medium
		B:	4.79	1.19	High
6	Be willing to proof-read my work.	A:	4.36	1.37	High
		B:	4.37	1.18	High
7	Assist me by consulting other people for their expertise in my topic area. /	A:	4.31	1.24	Medium
		B:	4.69	1.27	High

8	Provide empathy and support while giving rigorous feedback.	A:	4.33	1.31	Medium
		B:	5.10	0.850	High
9	Clearly describe how they see their role as my supervisor.	A:	4.50	1.16	High
		B:	5.13	0.829	High

NOTE: (low=1 – 2.66; medium = 2.67 – 4.33; high= 4.34 – 6)

The Boxplot graph in the diagram clearly shows the difference between university A and B responses (Fig 3). The median value (represented by the black line in the boxplot) for university A was 4.67 whereas for university B was 4.89, indicating that respondents at university B has highest expectations on Others perspective. There was one outlier at the lower end for respondents at university B.

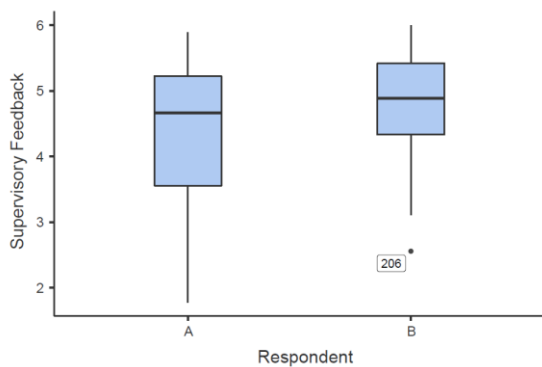


Fig. 3 Supervisory Feedback Boxplot

Descriptive Results: Others

Overall, Item 1 (gender), Item 2 (seniority), Item 3 (professorship), Item 4 (publications), and Item 9 (social media) elicited moderate expectations from respondents at both universities. Respondents from both institutions had the highest expectation that supervisors possess a PhD (item 5) and refrain from using foul language (item 10).

Table IV Others

No	Item Ideally, I would prefer a supervisor who:	Uni	Mean	SD	Level
1	Is the same gender as me.	A:	4.07	1.35	Medium
		B:	3.48	1.52	Medium
2	Is an older member of staff rather than a younger member of staff.	A:	3.95	1.35	Medium
		B:	3.46	1.38	Medium
3	Hold a professorship.	A:	4.09	1.22	Medium
		B:	3.68	1.36	Medium
4	Has lots of publications.	A:	4.12	1.23	Medium
		B:	3.86	1.25	Medium
5	Has a PhD.	A:	4.58	1.22	High
		B:	4.85	1.23	High

6	Has travelled to different countries.	A: B:	4.05 3.51	1.12 1.36	High Medium
7	Has relevant work experience outside the University.	A: B:	4.34 4.27	1.20 1.26	High Medium
8	Smiles a lot.	A: B:	4.33 4.62	1.16 1.17	Medium High
9	Is active on social media.	A: B:	4.13 3.39	1.28 1.16	Medium Medium
10	Does not use bad language.	A: B:	4.43 5.51	1.30 0.741	High High
11	Does not drink alcohol.	A: B:	3.91 5.13	1.36 1.38	Medium High

NOTE: (low=1 – 2.66; medium = 2.67 – 4.33; high= 4.34 – 6)

The Boxplot graph in the diagram clearly shows the difference between university A and B responses (Fig 4). The median value (represented by the black line in the bloxplot) for university A was 4.36 higher than university B which was 4.27. There were two outliers at the lower end for respondents at university A and three outliers at the lower end for respondents at university B.

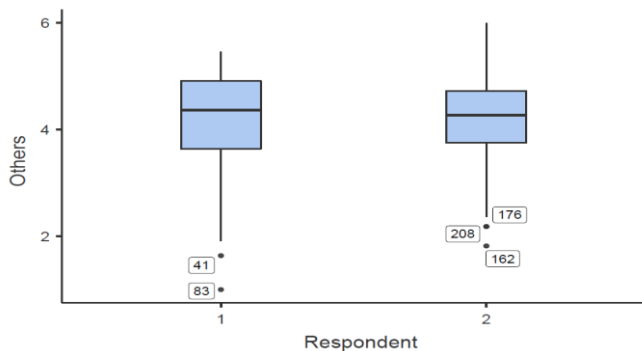


Fig. 3 Others Boxplot

Mean Comparisons: t-test

The results on mean comparisons for University A and University B was summarized in Table 5. Both universities had significant differences in aspects such as supervisory roles, interpersonal communication, and supervisory feedback. There was a t-value (229) of -5.210, $p < 0.000$ for supervisory roles, a t-value (229) of -5.016, $p < 0.000$ for interpersonal communication and a t-value (229) of -3.577 for supervisory feedback. A comparison of university A and university B results for the others aspect did not reveal any significant differences.

Table V T-Test Analysis

Aspect	University	Mean	SD	t	df	p*
Supervisory roles	A(n=129)	4.24	0.77	-5.210	229	0.000
	B(n=102)	4.74	0.67			

Interpersonal communication	A(n=129)	4.34	0.79	-5.016	229	0.000
	B(n=102)	4.81	0.58			
Supervisory feedback	A(n=129)	4.38	1.09	-3.577	229	0.000
	B(n=102)	4.83	0.77			
Others	A(n=129)	4.18	0.90	.190	229	0.849
	B(n=102)	4.15	0.79			

*significant at $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

Our study reveals that university B (Malaysia) students had higher expectations regarding supervisory roles, interpersonal communication, and supervisory feedback than university A (United Kingdom) students. Local students (Malaysians) made up the majority of respondents at university B. The majority of responses from university A were Chinese, nevertheless. International Chinese university students are very concerned about getting support and encouragement from their supervisors. As this form of communication can strengthen "*a symbiotic supervisory connection*" and is likely to continue after graduation, respondents in our survey had higher expectations for affirming and encouraging communication from their supervisors [17]. Effective interpersonal communication can help Chinese students, who are typically seen as struggling to initiate social contacts due to their weak English skills and lack of familiar discussion subjects.

Both respondents at University A and University B expected supervisors to completely guide students in dissertation/master project tasks such as topic refinement and research question generation. Supervisors should be adaptable and flexible in their degree of directiveness in response to students' requirements, such as employing a democratic approach in guiding students' dissertations or master projects [9]. We discovered that students must be given support and encouragement in order to become more independent and to comprehend the roles of both students and supervisors. In addition, respondents expected their supervisors to be more firm or demanding, particularly with regards to enhancing dissertation/master's projects. As in [8], demonstrating empathy and continuing support during feedback delivery can encourage students to generate new ideas and queries, as well as accept the challenge of completing their studies.

Further empirical research is warranted to investigate the perspectives and attitudes of students towards It is interesting to note that respondents at university A and B' views about supervisory expectations on other aspects were very similar. Both participants expressed a lack of concern with being monitored by senior or junior supervisors, or supervisors of a different gender. However, their preference leaned towards supervisors possessing a doctoral degree rather than a high quantity of articles. In contrast, participants from the university in Malaysia expressed greater expectations for their supervisors to abstain from alcohol compared to those from the institution in the United Kingdom. Although female students may get advantages from having female supervisors for their academic pursuits post-graduation [4], our study reveals that respondents from University B in Malaysia, where females constitute the majority, exhibit less concern over gender issues in relation to their expectations of supervision. Additionally, as in [4] senior supervisors often serve as mentors, offering guidance on academic career paths and motivating young researchers, such as postgraduate students, to engage in publishing and research projects. However, our research revealed that the respondents did not express significant levels of concern on gender towards supervisory roles.

CONCLUSIONS

Further empirical research is warranted to investigate the perspectives and attitudes of students towards postgraduate supervision at the Master's level, as past studies have been limited in scope. It is vital to acknowledge the significance of comprehending the expectations of Master's students, notably the disparities in the approach to handling master dissertations between universities in the United Kingdom and Malaysia, as

evidenced by variations in supervision approaches and students' anticipations. Malaysian students have shown a clear preference for close supervision and strong assistance in both the academic content and personal aspects of their dissertations. This is particularly evident when they encounter difficulties, as they anticipate to be able to contact their supervisors through mobile phone. The Master dissertation guidebook at university B does not specify any restrictions or impose a maximum limit on the number of meetings that can be held with supervisors. This study finds that an effective Master's supervisor should exhibit qualities of affirmation and encouragement, while also clearly delineating their intended function in the process of dissertation supervision. The students from both universities had anticipated this. In contrast, at university A, it is anticipated that the supervisor will assume the responsibility of furnishing the dissertation research question, while at university B, students anticipate the supervisor's involvement in refining the dissertation topic. Given that research students can be seen as customers of universities, it becomes imperative for academic institutions and dissertation supervisors to possess a comprehensive understanding of the expectations held by students towards their supervisors. This awareness is crucial in order to facilitate the provision of personalised and student-centric services to research students. In the case of University A, where a significant portion of enrollment growth is attributed to foreign Chinese students, it is imperative to comprehend their concerns and adopt a customer-oriented approach to effectively provide learning assistance and study services to this particular cohort of students.

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