

# Student Satisfaction in Research Supervision: Evidence from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Postgraduate Program

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**Abstract:** *This research aims to explore the point of view of Malaysians by determining the satisfaction of accounting students towards the supervision of research in the postgraduate program of Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM). A total of 190 questionnaires were distributed to postgraduate students from the accounting faculty in Selangor branch. Statistical tests such as descriptive analysis, correlation, and regression analysis were conducted. Findings indicate that feedback perception has a significant effect on student satisfaction. However, this study shows an insignificant relationship between supervisor-student relationship with student satisfaction. This research thus contributes to postgraduate students and research supervisory directly. It also gives possible benefits to standard setters, regulators, policymakers, and other higher education institutions.*

**Keywords:** Research Supervision, Feedback Perception, Supervisor-Student Relationship, Student Satisfaction

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## 1. Introduction

The satisfaction of postgraduate students has become a significant focus within higher education, especially as institutions aim to enhance student experiences and outcomes (Gruber et al., 2010; Temizer et al., 2012). Student satisfaction can be viewed as a reflection of immediate attitudes and overall experiences within academic settings, encompassing factors like facilities, services, and—most crucially in postgraduate education—the quality of research supervision (Weerasinghe, 2017). As Tasirin et al. (2015) note, satisfaction within postgraduate programs closely aligns with students' perceptions and expectations of their educational experience. At this level, quality is strongly dependent on the effectiveness and efficiency of the research supervision process, making it a central concern for program success (Alam et al., 2013).

Research supervision is instrumental in postgraduate education, where it shapes not only student satisfaction but also their commitment to completion and timely progression. Supervisory practices, including consistent feedback and a supportive supervisor-student relationship, are essential in keeping students engaged and motivated, ultimately promoting on-time graduation (Hoon et al., 2018). Studies from Malaysian universities highlight the importance of regular supervision and progress monitoring, revealing that consistent supervisor-student interaction can significantly reduce time-to-completion rates (Phang et al.,

2014). A positive supervisory experience is thus seen as a crucial determinant of student satisfaction and retention, as universities aim to maximize student satisfaction and minimize dissatisfaction to bolster enrollment and retention rates (Blackmore et al., 2006).

The quality of the supervisor-student relationship is also highlighted as a fundamental aspect of satisfaction. Research indicates that a supervisor's understanding of their role can greatly impact students' motivation and academic success. For instance, studies have shown that a sense of belonging, autonomy in research, and a supervisor's relevant expertise all contribute to higher satisfaction and decreased attrition rates (Rooij et al., 2019). For international students in Malaysia, these factors become even more vital, as many experienced additional challenges such as cultural adjustments and environmental unfamiliarity. Encouragement and support from supervisors are often seen as essential for their academic and career growth (Amzat et al., 2020).

Feedback perception is an equally important component of postgraduate satisfaction. Defined in the context of higher education as feedback provided on student work—both written and oral—this feedback serves as a foundation for guiding students' research and promoting independent thinking (Ramaprasad, 1983; Askew & Lodge, 2000; Pokorny & Pickord, 2010). The feedback process not only assists in skill development but also encourages a sense of agency and autonomy among postgraduate students, who rely heavily on this input for direction and progress assessment (Arabaci & Ersozlu, 2010). Constructive feedback has been identified as a key element in postgraduate supervision, with students particularly valuing feedback that is timely, relevant, and goal-oriented (Subramanian, 2013; Redmond et al., 2018).

Although a strong supervisor-student relationship is generally correlated with positive outcomes, discrepancies between student expectations and supervisor support can sometimes lead to dissatisfaction (Masek, 2017; Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). The expectation gap is often due to a misalignment in views: while students may hope for greater supervisor involvement, supervisors may expect students to progress more independently, viewing their role as supportive rather than directive (Helfer & Drew, 2019). Consequently, this misalignment can create a challenging environment that, if not managed carefully, may negatively impact student satisfaction (Phang et al., 2014).

Based on the Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) by Bandura (1999), which highlights the interactions between behavior, environment, and cognition, this study explores the influence of feedback perception and supervisor-student relationships on postgraduate satisfaction within Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). According to Bandura's theory, social factors and environmental support structures can significantly affect learning outcomes, which in this study refers to student satisfaction. By analyzing the roles of feedback and interpersonal dynamics in supervision, this research aims to generate insights that could support enhanced supervisory practices and contribute to future policy development for improving student satisfaction within Malaysian higher education institutions.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT)**

Social cognitive learning theory by Bandura (1999) states that people learn by looking at what others do, and that human thought processes are important for understanding personality. The theory further explains that the students are learning from the interactions with the supervisor in a social context (Nabavi, 2012). Put simply, it is an act of observing the behavior of

the supervisor and the student is developing similar behaviors. SCLT highlights the influence of social factors on behavior both internally and externally. It investigates the way individuals acquire and maintain behaviors within their social environments, highlighting the role of personal experiences in forming behavior, reinforcement, and expectations (Wayne, 2019). This particularly makes SCLT relevant to explain students' satisfaction with past experiences with their supervisors in the context of feedback and supervisor-student relationships.

SCLT incorporates three elements which are behavior, environment, and cognitive. Behavior refers to the response a person receives after they have performed a behavior that can be directed towards a specific goal and ultimately self-regulated (Betz, 2007). This study examines how students get feedback from their supervisors about focus, explanation, and relationship to purpose. Furthermore, the environment plays a vital role in increasing self-efficacy by providing appropriate support and materials such as leadership, helping or friendly, understanding and responsible, or student freedom. Cognitive factors refer to the characteristics of people that influence performance and learning such as uncertain, dissatisfied, reprimanded, and assertive. Environmental and cognitive elements are very important in studying how supervisor-student relationships affect student satisfaction.

## **2.2 Student Satisfaction**

Student satisfaction is a core component that keeps people motivated, and involved, and helps them achieve their long-term goals. It is just as important as other universities' objectives because it represents the level of well-being of students, and the extent to which these institutions can meet the expectations of their students (US News Global Education). Research on postgraduate student satisfaction has become increasingly important (Celik et al., 2017, Guo & Li, 2018; Damaris et al., 2019; Kerman, Banihashem, Norrozi, & Biemans, 2022). Many researchers study student satisfaction with a perspective of satisfaction with system support from institutions (Weerasinghe et al. 2017; Napitupulu, et al. 2018; Razikina et al., 2018) but less from the perspective of postgraduate supervision systems. The context of student satisfaction adopted in the study refers to the extent to which student expectations of instructors, courses, and teaching methods are met (Rueda, 2017). It can also be understood as a short-term attitude as a result of the evaluation of student educational experience (Shahsavari & Sudzina, 2017). According to Aldosari and Ibrahim (2019), they found that the more collaborative supervisors, the more satisfied students are and the more supervisors use non-instructional interpersonal approaches, the less satisfied students are. Previous research has highlighted problems in research supervision such as inconsistencies between the expected needs and support for supervision (Wang & Li, 2011; Saleem & Mahmood, 2018, Cekiso, Tshotsho, Masha & Saziwa, 2019; Pardede & Purnamasari, 2021), which finally lead to dissatisfaction with supervision. Besides, student satisfaction is complex to achieve as it depends on the supervisor's style of supervision (Sarwar, 2016). This research provides evidence of the existence of problems in research supervision.

## **2.3 Feedback Perception**

Numerous definitions of feedback have been explored by previous researchers (Ramaprasad, 1983; Askew & Lodge, 2000; Pokorny & Pickord, 2010), particularly within the context of its meaning to the management of higher education (Sutton, 2009; Gullet, 2010). The feedback definition used in the study focuses on the students' perspectives, in particular feedback on written work reported by students, and how this feedback is utilized within the context of written and oral learning discussions. Postgraduate students are expected to work independently therefore the skills of research supervisor mentors are very important in educating postgraduate students (Arabaci & Ersozlu, 2010). More importantly, in the process

of researching and writing a thesis, students need to rely on the feedback given by their supervisor, to get input and guidance on the progress of their thesis research and writing. Findings from previous qualitative research indicate that the characteristics of supervisors that are considered important by students are providing constructive feedback (Subramanian, 2013). Self-guidance is training for them to complete their studies (Hoon, 2019). This is the process by which students understand information about their performance and elaborate to be using it in improve the quality of their work strategies (Redmond et al., 2018).

#### **2.4 Feedback Perception and Student Satisfaction**

Feedback perception and student satisfaction are vital mechanisms in evaluating the quality of higher education. The relationship between feedback perception and student satisfaction is influenced by many factors but a few, service quality (Farahmandian, 2013; Sohail & Hassan, 2021), teaching effectiveness (Uysal & Sarier, 2019; Miao, 2023), overall educational environment (Hanssen & Solvoll, 2015) and others. Many, especially the academicians, have now continued their studies to the postgraduate level to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Given this fact, research has now shifted its focus in this area to a more niche scope that is on the feedback perception and student satisfaction on postgraduate research supervision. Xu (2017) highlights those supervisors must gather insights by evaluating students' answers on their understanding of the feedback provided as well as the subject matter. Xu (2017) further states that supervisors need to realize that no response is a response itself. Alkalash and Farag (2023) assert that the quality of feedback provided by supervisors is closely linked to the postgraduate students' academic performance and satisfaction. Likewise, postgraduate students appreciate detailed feedback that guides their improvement (Groves, Mitchell, & Henderson, 2015). Consequently, this contributes to students' perceptions that their supervisors are supportive and engaged, which is vital for their satisfaction (Su, Qi, & Yuan, 2022). Additionally, Elshami, Taha, and Abuzaid (2021) affirm that timely feedback is important to maintain student engagement and ultimately satisfaction. This previous research has been conducted in other countries. Nonetheless, there is still a lack of local studies in this area. Therefore, the current research is conducted to examine the feedback perception and students' satisfaction in Malaysia, particularly amongst postgraduate students at UiTM.

#### **2.5 Supervisor-Student Relationship**

Wisker et al. (2003) claim that postgraduate supervision should be seen as a form of postgraduate teaching, while research is a form of learning. Moreover, research supervision is not a mere academic process to be experienced by the student, but it conveys difficulty in establishing good relationships between supervisors and students (Walker, 2010). Supervision is seen as a process that is formally done by two or more people based on the relationship that is between a supervisor and a supervisee, where the role of a supervisor is to help the supervisee acquire appropriate professional behaviors and competencies that are typically acquired through an examination of recent professional activities (Sidhu et al., 2013). In supervisor-student relationships, perceived satisfaction with interaction will contribute to behavioral success or failure in thesis writing (Ives & Rowley, 2005). Lessing (2011) shows supervision that efficiently requires relationships and interactions that are good between two or more people to ensure that the research outcome is quality and successful.

#### **2.6 Supervisor-Student Relationship and Student Satisfaction**

The relationship between supervisor and student is complex. Masek (2017) argues that there are no appropriate prescriptive guidelines for supervisors and students to convey expectations effectively to build working relationships. In real-life situations, the expectation from the student to their supervisor is to be able to continue contributing and actively participate in their

research projects. As highlighted by Hoon et al. (2018), students need more support but the expectation from the supervisor is that the students be able to make their progress in their research with little support. Supervisors assume that their role is to only provide guidance and support. (Helfer and Drew, 2019). Students may be dissatisfied with their supervisor (Wadesango and Machingambi, 2011) because of this gap in expectations. If the respective goals and expectations are not discussed before the supervision or before the end of the study, it is likely that it will work in different directions (Phang et al., 2014; Masek, 2017). When this relationship is ineffective, it will produce negative consequences, such as academic failure (Prazeres, 2017).

Without a doubt, students receive strong support from their supervisors. According to a study by Heinze and Heinze (2009), although students know that a dissertation is independent work importantly a self-development, they are comfortable depending a lot on the supervisor that is being assigned to them. Furthermore, they demanded that their tutor be actively involved in their research journey. Helfer and Drew's (2019) study on doctoral supervision in Australia and the main dissatisfaction with their supervisor is because of lack of involvement particularly in the process of writing. Lack of knowledge for supervisors in supervising areas is also included. Sidhu et al. (2013) also found that in Malaysia case studies show that supervisors show the highest level of competence and supervision and provide a lot of help and early-stage guidance in writing a research paper. Supervision is reduced after acceptance of proposals and lack of guidance is given at a later stage. They advise supervisors to understand the various postgraduate supervision approaches to meet the various needs and expectations of students. Supervision depends on the ability and skill that is expert to be applied to a practice or a task to be performed (Lee, 2007). The motivation of students in their research may reduce if not reachable to the expectation level of the student.

### 3. Hypothesis Development

#### 3.1 Relationship between feedback perception and student satisfaction

This study explores student feedback perceptions of postgraduate supervision by using a questionnaire on student feedback perceptions (QSFP) by Klein (2013). QSFP consists of three parts, namely (1) feedback focus, (2) feedback elaboration, and (3) the relationship of feedback goals that explore in-depth student feedback perceptions during postgraduate research. The focus of feedback could be the focus during the completion of the task given, such as thesis writing. Furthermore, the focus on student self-organization could be in the context of student motivation, planning, and attitudes. The feedback clarification can be explained in terms of the positive explanation felt such as the explanation of the aspects of what has been done well by the student. Relevance to the purpose of feedback can be described as feedback that has been provided by the supervisors on how good writing is (De Kleijn, 2013).

Based on the social cognitive learning theory by Bandura (1999), feedback perception in this context is essential to one of the elements which is the environment. The environment is when there is increased self-efficacy by providing appropriate support and materials such as leadership, helping or friendly, understanding, and responsibility. In this study, the supervisor is expected to provide feedback regarding the focus, elaboration, and goal-relatedness that will help students in their research journey. Thus, the feedback is expected to have a positive effect on student satisfaction in research supervision. Therefore, this study tends to examine student satisfaction in the Malaysian context, based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed; ***H01; there is a significant positive relationship between student feedback perception and student satisfaction.***

### 3.2 Relationship between Supervisor-Student relationship and student satisfaction

The study adopts a questionnaire on supervisory-doctoral student interaction (QSDI) developed by Mainhard (2009). This questionnaire aims to gather information on the perceptions of students about their supervisor's interpersonal style. QSDI appears reliable and a good tool to be used for research, especially between both parties in providing relevance feedback to supervisors on their style towards specific supervisee. The questionnaire consists of two parts namely behavior and distance.

The behaviors in this study were participant behaviors related to the dimension of influence that tend to evoke conflicting behaviors. For example, the more supervisors can provide direction for the research project, the more students become more dependent on the supervisors. A person who views himself as a person who collaborates will empower the supervisor to determine how the performance of their research project (Boehe, 2016). However, Devos (2017) suggests that supervisors are considered to play a role in the process, but this role is complex. Another dimension of process proximity is that behaviors in this context tend to evoke behaviors similar to those of other participants (Mainhard, 2009). For example, the more friendly the supervisor states the more friendly the student will be shown.

According to the Social cognitive learning theory by Bandura (1999), the supervisor-student relationship in this context is essential to two of the elements which are behavior and cognition. Behavior refers to the response a person receives after they have performed a behavior. In this study, the supervisor is expected to behave in a professional setting when carrying out the research supervision. Cognitive is the characteristic of people that influences performance and learning. Thus, the supervisor-student relationship is expected to have a positive effect on student satisfaction in research supervision. Therefore, this study tends to explore the supervisor-student relationship in the Malaysian context. Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed; *H02; there is a significant positive relationship between the supervisor-student relationship and student satisfaction.*

### 4. Research Framework

Figure 4.0 is a research framework based on the Social Cognitive Learning Theory for the present study that embodies the overall idea of the study. The discussed factors are illustrated in Figure 4.0, feedback perception and supervisor-student relationship (independent variable) that affect student satisfaction (dependent variable) of research supervision for postgraduate programs.

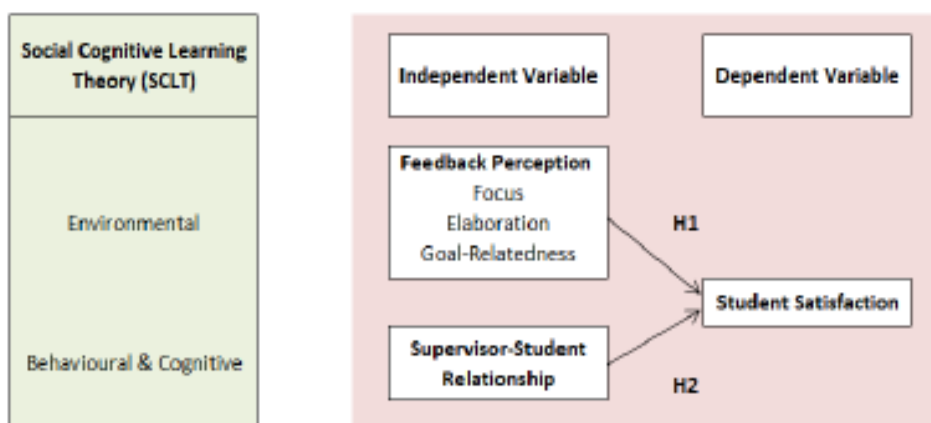


Figure 1: The Student Satisfaction in Research Supervision: Evidence from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Postgraduate Program

Figure 1 signifies the independent variables, which are feedback perception and supervisor-student relationship, might influence the dependent variable, which is student satisfaction.

## 5. Research Method

This research uses self-conducted electronic system questionnaires which are distributed randomly via email to the selected participants. The survey is disseminated to the respondents through an online survey, where the platform, is easily reachable and accessible to respondents. Data collection is done from November 2020 to December 2020. The questionnaire comprises four (4) sections, specifically: Section A gathers general information about the respondents' demographic profile such as age, gender, mode of study, and frequency of meeting. Additionally, section B measures student satisfaction with research supervision. Meanwhile, section C measures the feedback perception on research supervision. Lastly, section D measures the supervisor-student relationship in research supervision. A total of 144 questionnaires out of 190 questionnaires. Several analyses are being undertaken for this study such as descriptive analysis, normality and validity test, reliability, correlation, and multiple regression analysis.

## 6. Findings and Discussions

Each independent and dependent variable was measured in the interval scale, suggesting that they are continuous scales. Discussions from the normality test unconcealed that the information for each variable is commonly approximately distributed where the Skewness and Kurtosis are between -0.787 and 0.828. Natural distribution of Skewness and Kurtosis between -2 and +2 (Malery, 2010) is considered. This study used bivariate correlation, namely, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient to identify the correlation between both variables since it meets the assumptions. the correlation results between two factors and the student satisfaction in research supervision. Based on the data analysis, there is a significant positive strong correlation between feedback perception and student satisfaction in research supervision ( $r = 0.718$ , ( $p < 0.001$ )). However, the results of the correlation analysis between the supervisor-student relationship and student satisfaction also show a positive but weak relationship ( $r = 0.294$ , ( $p < 0.001$ )). Hence, when there is an increase in a supervisor-student relationship, it is associated with a small increase in student satisfaction and contrariwise.

Given the results, it shows that feedback perception has a significant influence on the dependent variables while the supervisor-student relationship is insignificant. The multiple regressions for the student satisfaction in research supervision of the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) postgraduate program demonstrates the independent variables namely feedback perception ( $\beta_1 = 0.709$ ,  $t = 11.254$ ,  $p$ -value is 0.00;  $p < 0.05$ ) positive significant relationship with the student satisfaction in research supervision of the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) postgraduate program. This shows that the postgraduate students believe that feedback perception from their supervisor will ultimately increase the student satisfaction towards the way supervisor carries the research supervision. Therefore, the first hypothesis (H1) is accepted. In the context of postgraduate research supervision, feedback has a significant impact to the student throughout their experience with their supervisors. This is supported by Agricola (2019), who stated that feedback encourages the active role of students in finding opportunities to take responsibility and this allows for the regulation of the learning process. The experience could be in the context of focus, elaboration, and goal-relatedness. According to the result, feedback for goal-relatedness from their supervisor has the most impact on the student. This is supported by Subramanian (2013) stated that in the process of researching and writing a thesis, students rely

on the feedback provided by their supervisor, to get input and guidance on the progress of their thesis research and writing.

In contrast, the supervisor-student relationship had no significant relationship with the dependent variables ( $\beta_2=0.114$ ,  $t=1.022$ ,  $p$ -value is 0.309;  $p>0.05$ ) indicates that with a good or bad relationship with their supervisor, they are accepting the relationship to ensure their thesis or dissertation paper to complete. At the end of the day, the students need to accept the behavior of the supervisor since they are the ones who appointed the supervisor. Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) is rejected. Based on the findings, the supervisor-student relationship appears to not affect influencing student satisfaction. The possible reason could be because that supervision is a formal process, where the role of the supervisor is to help the supervisor acquire appropriate professional behaviors and competencies that are usually acquired through and written or verbal examination of recent professional activities (Sidhu et al., 2013). This also could be supported by Masek (2017), that there are no prescriptive guidelines appropriate for supervisors and students to convey expectations effectively to build working relationships. In real-life situations, students may expect their supervisors to continue to contribute and actively participate in their research projects.

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