

Students' Views on Thesis Supervision in International Master's Degree Programmes in Finnish Universities.

Kalypso Filippou^{a*}, Johanna Kallo^a and Mirjamajja Mikkilä-Erdmann^b

^a*Department of Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland;* ^b*Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Turku, Finland*

This paper employs an intercultural perspective to examine students' views on master's thesis supervision and the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and students. The 302 respondents who answered the online questionnaire were enrolled in international master's degree programmes in four Finnish universities. The study revealed asymmetric views by students regarding the division of responsibilities between themselves and their supervisors. It was found that very few students and supervisors discuss the differences in study cultures between Finland and students' countries of origin, their cultural backgrounds or the aspects of Finnish society that students do not understand. The research suggests that supervisors and students need to conduct early discussions on supervision and culture.

Keywords: master's thesis supervision; student perceptions; international master's degree; intercultural supervision;

Introduction

This article investigates students' views on master's thesis supervision in the international master's degree programmes (IMDPs) offered by four Finnish universities. In Finland, the number of international degree programmes has been perceived as an important indicator of institutional internationalisation (Välmaa et al. 2013). This trend in non-English-speaking countries like Finland, which offers an increasing number of programmes in English, reflects the increased cultural, economic and political globalisation that has led to a new era of cross-border education and educational internationalisation (Knight 2011; Caruso and De Wit 2015).

The number of studies on the supervision of graduate and postgraduate students has expanded globally since the 1990s. Much of this research is concerned with topics such as effective supervisory processes as a means for successful thesis completion (e.g. Hodza 2007), supervision pedagogies (e.g. Emilsson and Johnsson 2007; Guerin, Kerr, and Green 2015) and the roles and responsibilities of students and supervisors (e.g. McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi 2010; Mhunpiew 2013). However, there has been less research interest in master's theses than in doctoral dissertations (Dysthe 2002; Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin 2008).

Despite the rapid expansion of IMDPs in Finland and the mounting literature on supervision globally, research on these programmes remains limited, especially on thesis writing supervision. The increasing number of international students studying in Nordic universities has changed the premises of supervision and set new requirements for supervisors, who are expected to be more culturally sensitive (Winchester-Seeto et al. 2014). Given the findings that thesis writing is considered the ultimate self-regulated learning task (Sachs 2002) and the most challenging aspect of master's studies – which supports the

assumption that it may hinder the completion of studies – further research into the practices of supervision is important (Ylijoki 2001).

Several studies have expressed concerns that research into supervision does not sufficiently address the emerging complex issues related to intercultural supervision, such as how supervisors can accommodate diverse views regarding the production of knowledge and how to practice this diverse cultural knowledge within the supervisory function (McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi 2010; Grant and Manathunga 2011; Manathunga 2011). The nascent research that seeks to examine the issues of culture in supervision has been based on qualitative studies of a small number of participants, mainly focusing on the region of Australasia (e.g. Manathunga 2007, 2011; Grant and McKinley 2011), or on a large group of students and supervisors (Winchester-Seeto et al. 2014). The current study undertakes research on this field with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse a large sample of data on master's level theses.

Background: the Finnish context for master's thesis supervision

The number of international degree programmes in Finland is amongst the highest in the non-English-speaking European countries, with approximately 20,000 students, which borders on the OECD average (OECD 2013). The Ministry of Education and Culture (2013) aims to triple the number of students from 20,000 to 60,000 by 2025, despite the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU students. In the Finnish context, master's students are considered novice researchers, and the supervisor is responsible for providing help and encouragement (Ylijoki 2001). Moreover, personal supervision, guidance in groups and study counselling are provided to students during supervision (Annala, Korhonen, and Penttinen 2012). Two models of supervision are typically used in the Finnish context: the traditional model, which involves a dyadic relationship between supervisor and student, and group supervision, in which a relationship exists between a supervisor and a student and between a student and other students (McCallin and Nayar 2012). The latter is also referred to as collective academic supervision (Nordentoft, Thomsen, and Wichmann-Hansen 2013).

Master's thesis seminars and meetings with supervisors are common, but the frequency of the seminars as a form of collective academic supervision depends on the discipline and stage of the thesis. Furthermore, the timeframe for completing a master's degree in Finland is usually two academic years, which also involves the completion of a research-oriented thesis. Noteworthy is that although most IMDP students are non-native English speakers, they are expected to have proficiency in English as defined in the application requirements of the programmes. Most of their supervisors are also non-native English speakers; thus, using English as a third language adds another challenge to IMDP supervision.

Literature Review

Given that this study focuses on the students' expectations and views (SEV) on the roles and responsibilities during the supervision process in an intercultural academic environment this literature review aims to provide a concise overview of previous studies on these topics.

Roles and responsibilities in thesis supervision

Supervision has been defined as a complex social process (Hodza 2007) and a vulnerable relationship (Delamont, Parry, and Atkinson 1998; Deem and Brehony 2000), with the attendant emotional and cognitive involvement. Good communication (Spear 2000) and adjusting supervision to students' needs (Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin 2006) have been indicated as essential attributes of effective supervision. Students may have different expectations of the supervisory relationship from their supervisors; supervisors are inclined to emphasise the academic aspects, whilst students may consider interpersonal aspects of the

relationship more important than content-related aspects (Johnston 1999; taken from McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi 2010). These mismatched views of the supervisory relationship can potentially lead to communication problems during supervision (McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi 2010).

Supervisors' responsibilities include managing the frequency of communication between supervisor and student (Russell 1996), taking students' schedule into consideration (Hodza 2007) and advising and providing effective feedback (Dysthe, Samara, and Westrheim 2006). The supervisor is assumed to adopt many roles during supervision such as those of challenger (Hodza 2007), guide (Mhunpiew 2010) and the emotional supporter who empowers student effectiveness (Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin 2006). Studies indicate that students have multiple expectations of their supervisors; they expect supervisors to assist them with their time management, provide them with constructive feedback (Lessing and Schulze 2002), be constructively critical and guide them in terms of reading material (Woolhouse 2002). In addition, students expect supervisors to express genuine interest, be friendly and demonstrate empathy when they face academic difficulties (Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin 2008).

Students are expected to be open and committed to learning in order to progress as planned (Duan and Roehlke 2001). They are also expected to decide on the work needed for the completion of the thesis and the method of producing outcomes. However, their responsibilities are not always clearly articulated. For instance, de Kleijn, Meijer, Brekelmans, and Pilot (2012) found that students are not always aware of the manner in which their supervisor might expect them to work, for example, work independently, and as a result of this misconception, they do not acknowledge their goals. This thus suggests that expectations – like goals – should be clarified and agreed upon in advance.

Theorising intercultural supervision

Thesis supervision in international master's degree programmes is intercultural by nature. Intercultural supervision refers to the interaction between supervisors and supervisees from different cultural communities in the supervisory process (Hinchcliff-Pelias and Greer 2004; Manathunga 2007). Research on intercultural supervision tends to focus on a variety of topics. Some studies aim to provide advice to supervisors who wish to empower their culturally diverse students, whereas others are more interested in the issues of power, identity, historicity and the importance of postcolonial theory in analyses of supervisory relationships (Manathunga 2007).

A related term is multicultural supervision, which refers to the relationship between a supervisor and a student, inclusive of different cultural variables such as gender, nationality and native language (Estrada, Frame, and Williams 2004; Toporek, Ortega-Villalobos, and Pope-Davis 2004). The cultural competence of the supervisor is found to be essential during multicultural supervision since it enhances the working relationship and builds an open environment for discussion (Schroeder, Andrews, and Hinds 2009). Another related term is cross-cultural thesis supervision, which can be defined as the supervisory relationship between a supervisor and a student from a different ethnic background (Schroeder, Andrews, and Hinds 2009). Ethnicity refers to 'a shared social identity that has existed for generations among a group of individuals' (Schroeder, Andrews, and Hinds 2009, 296).

McGinty and colleagues (2010) analysed graduate students' views of supervisor–supervisee roles and the contribution of their cultural knowledge to thesis development. Their study indicated that students placed a high value on their supervisors' knowledge and expertise. Yet, their desire was to have responsibility for choosing the thesis topic and the theoretical background while being directed by their supervisor. The students, notwithstanding their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, had similar ideas about the process

of thesis writing, the roles of supervisors and supervisees and the role of cultural knowledge. However, there were some discernible differences in students' views on the basis of their cultural backgrounds. For example, Iranian and Malaysian students expected their supervisor to assist significantly during supervision and seemed to have a more dependent attitude than students studying in Australia.

Sidhu and colleagues (2014) surveyed postgraduate students from Malaysia and the United Kingdom about their expectations of the supervisory practices, roles and responsibilities of their supervisors. Respondents from both countries had similar views regarding supervisory practices and agreed that supervisors must provide guidance during the research process and must be experts in their field of study. Comparatively, the Malaysian students focused more on the personal attributes of their supervisor, while the British students were found less dependent and had fewer expectations of their supervisors. These findings support that the students value more the personal aspect of the supervisory relationship and even though there seems to be a general agreement on the responsibilities there is an obvious compound of attitudes regarding students' dependency on their supervisor. Manathunga (2007), (2011) found that students demonstrated an independent attitude towards supervision regardless of cultural background, which contradicted the conventional image that Asian students are more dependent than other students. The author rejected the assumption that non-European students prefer a hierarchical approach to supervision, highlighting that personal experiences, personality and preferences are equally important to the cultural background of both supervisors and students.

Winchester-Seeto et al. (2014) identified challenges that complicate supervision for students in a cross-cultural context compared with students in a domestic context. They found that regardless of cultural background, students encounter the same issues during supervision. However, there are some intensifiers that affect cross-cultural students more than domestic students. These intensifiers include language, cultural differences in dealing with hierarchy, separation from the familiar and separation from support networks.

Discussion between the supervisor and cross-cultural students appears essential for student satisfaction. Nilsson and Dodds (2006) found that students from Africa, Asia and South/Central America discussed the topic of cultural issues in supervision more than those from Europe, Canada and Australia. Their study showed that students who discuss cultural issues with their supervisors were more satisfied and regarded their supervisors as sensitive to diversity issues.

Methods

Aim and research questions

Considering this research gap and the ensuing literature review, the purpose of this study is to examine students' perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor–student relationship and the elements that students consider essential during supervision. Further analysis on intercultural supervision, students' cultural background and field of education, as well as the relation between cultural background and their views on supervision is needed to determine whether and how the cultural backgrounds of students influence the supervisory process and relationship. In this vein, the present study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are students' views on the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor and student during thesis supervision? (2) What differences and similarities on students' views can be identified according to their field of education and cultural background? (3) What aspects do students consider important for master's thesis supervision?

Participants

The study participants comprised students enrolled in IMDPs in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The four universities participating in the research were the University of Turku, Åbo Akademi University, the University of Eastern Finland and the University of Tampere. They all run IMDPs and cover large geographical areas of Finland. The programme coordinators took on the responsibility of disseminating the online questionnaire to their students. The data collection was held in two phases during the spring and autumn semesters of 2013.

The research population consisted of 1280 individuals, with the number of respondents standing at 302 (response rate 23.6%). This low response rate is typical of online surveys compared with paper surveys (Nulty 2008). Another explanatory factor might have been the frequency with which students receive survey requests. The research team believes that the survey language did not prevent students from answering the questionnaire; only students with proficient English skills are enrolled in the IMDPs.

A total of 302 students answered the questionnaire, of which 154 were female and 148 were male. The students were between 21 and 56 years old ($M = 27.66$; $SD = 4.82$). More than half of the respondents had a master's degree (52.6%) and 42.7% had a bachelor's degree. Two of the respondents had PhDs and 3.3% chose 'other' in relation to either a specialist or postgraduate degree. The latter groups of students were excluded from the statistical analysis due to the low sample size; therefore, the number of valid respondents was 288. Sixty-three nationalities were represented among the students, with the largest group being Finnish (15.6%) followed by Russians (7.6%), Pakistani (6.9%) and Chinese (6.3%). To answer the research questions, the responses from Chinese, Russian, Pakistani and Finnish students were compared. These groups of students were selected due to the fact that they were the four largest groups of respondents as well as because the Russian and Chinese nationalities are the two most common nationalities of international degree students in Finland (Centre for International Mobility 2015a). Additionally, students from Pakistan are ranked eighth on the same list from the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO). The sample was distributed according to fields of education: social sciences 15.2%; humanities 19.5%; natural sciences 19.9%; technical sciences 18.8%; information technology and computer sciences (IT) 26.2%; and business 0.4% (business was excluded from further analysis due to the low sample size).

Regarding the sample's representativeness, the research team chose triangulation by including mixed-methods data in the online survey. There were similar percentages between international students in Finnish universities and the sample of this study. In addition, the sample assessed different universities, disciplines and IMDPs, which enhanced the assumption of sample representativeness. Table 1 presents the percentages of international students enrolled in all Finnish universities in 2013 (Centre for International Mobility 2015b) and the respondents of this study by continent.

Table 1. Students' percentages by continent.

Continent	CIMO %	Respondents %
Africa	9	10.4
Asia	42.8	43.7
Australia and Oceania	0.4	0.0
Europe	40.6	38.9
North America	3.4	2.8
South and Central America	3.6	4.2

Instrumentation and procedure

An online questionnaire consisting of five sections – students’ demographic information; statements regarding their learning style; students’ self-efficacy; their expectations regarding supervision; and their views on supervision – was developed by the research team. The last section included three open-ended questions on features of thesis supervision, future goals for studying and working life and suggestions for improving IMDPs. This article presents the findings based on the students’ expectations of supervision and one open-ended question regarding their views on important aspects of supervision. Using a convergent, mixed-methods design (Creswell and Clark 2011), the research team sought to collect quantitative information on specific aspects of supervision as well as provide the students with an opportunity to describe their views through qualitative data.

The questionnaire included 22 statements regarding SEV, which were a combination of Nilsson and Dodds (2006) International Student Supervision Scale (ISSS) and the questionnaire created by McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi (2010). Fourteen statements were adopted in greater detail from McGinty and colleagues (2010), five of which were statements focusing on the responsibility of choosing the topic/ course of study, and seven of which were statements relating to contact and the relationship with the supervisor. The three statements adopted from ISSS focused on surveying the extent to which cultural and language issues were discussed in supervision. Four statements were paraphrased to fit the university environment, and the scales chosen by the research team differed from the original. Overall, seven statements were developed by the research team.

The SEV statements were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = ‘strongly disagree’ to 7 = ‘strongly agree’. The statements focused on students’ views on supervision, specifically on the responsibilities of selecting the thesis topic, the process, thesis seminars, cultural aspects, contact and the supervisory relationship. Example statements are: ‘It is the supervisor’s responsibility to select a promising topic’ and ‘My supervisor and I have talked about my cultural background in supervision’.

Analysis

To analyse the quantitative data, statistical tests were run using SPSS Statistics 20 (a software package for statistical analysis), such as one-way ANOVA and post hoc tests, to examine group differences. Tukey’s test was conducted when the data met the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Duncan’s t test was conducted when the data did not meet the assumption of homogeneity of variances. Quantitative and conventional qualitative content analyses were chosen for the analysis of the open-ended question: ‘In your opinion, what are the features of successful thesis supervision and guidance?’ The students’ responses were numbered in ascending order, depending on their answer date and presented as, for example, ‘R 1’ for the first student answering the questionnaire and so on.

For the conventional content analysis, the responses were divided into categories. These categories were created according to the content of the responses as well as responses that were similar and different. Codes were then created to organise students’ responses depending on their reference to the supervisory process or relationship, the supervisor or the student or both, and the general aspect of supervision they considered important (such as communication or guidance). During the qualitative conventional content analysis, some features were repeated; a quantitative content analysis was therefore chosen as the next step of the analysis. The responses were again examined; each feature was counted, summed and converted to a percentage.

Reliability of the instrument

A reliability test was carried out to confirm the reliability of the quantitative data, and the main 22 statements of the questionnaire showed a good level of internal consistency ($\alpha =$

0.71). However, upon further analysis, the researcher decided to exclude statements 5 and 11, thus increasing the internal consistency of the 20 remaining statements to 0.74. The Finnish students were excluded from the analysis of the cultural subscale (three statements regarding discussions on studying and culture with the supervisor), which was found reliable ($\alpha = 0.89$).

In order to establish reliability, another researcher from the same university as the authors volunteered to check the classification of the responses to the open-ended question. The reliability checker was provided with 25% of the qualitative data, which was selected using systematic random sampling (selecting every five answers). The agreement proportion was 77% and disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results

Students' views on roles and responsibilities

Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the SEV statements, depicting the students' attitudes towards supervisors' and their own responsibilities together with their views on the thesis seminars and the supervisory relationship. Overall, students expected their supervisors to direct them in choosing their thesis topic and to take their ideas into consideration. They also considered themselves to be responsible for selecting the theoretical background as well as the thesis topic. Moreover, students expected to take greater initiative through the process of the thesis research. Students ranked highly the expectation of learning from their classmates' research topics and receiving feedback from them during the thesis seminars. The descriptive results regarding cultural discussions showed that a minimal number of students and supervisors discussed the cultural differences between Finland and students' countries of origin, the students' cultural background and aspects of Finnish society that students did not understand.

Table 2. Descriptive results of the SEV statements.

No.	SEV Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	It is the supervisor's responsibility to select a promising topic.	3.07	1.72
2	In the end, it is up to the supervisor to decide which theoretical frame of reference is most appropriate.	3.47	1.58
3	Students have a right to choose their own theoretical standpoint even if it conflicts with the supervisor's.	5.04	1.52
4	The supervisor should direct the student in the selection of his/her master's thesis topic.	5.18	1.58
6	It is the student's responsibility to select a promising topic.	5.16	1.44
7	I expect to take more initiative during the process of my thesis research.	5.64	1.21
8	The supervisor should take into consideration the student's ideas and give advice.	6.37	0.86
9	A close professional relationship is essential for successful supervision.	5.69	1.25
10	The supervisor should initiate frequent individual meetings with the students.	5.09	1.58
12	The supervisor should know at all times which problems the student is working on.	4.66	1.66
13	The supervisor should lead the student to a new topic if s/he thinks that the present topic is not realistic for the student.	5.63	1.20
14	The supervisor should support the student right through until the thesis has been submitted, regardless of his/her opinion of the work.	3.38	2.10
15*	My supervisor and I have talked about how people study in my native country and how this may differ from the way of studying in Finland.	3.58	2.10

16*	My supervisor and I have talked about my cultural background in supervision.	3.37	2.13
17*	My supervisor and I have discussed aspects of the Finnish society that I did not understand.	3.11	1.96
18	In the master's thesis seminars, I expect to receive feedback from my peer students.	5.11	1.44
19	In the supervision sessions, I feel comfortable talking about my concerns regarding studying and doing research work in a foreign language.	5.20	1.73
20	The supervisor should initiate frequent master's thesis seminars with the students.	5.11	1.44
21	In the master's thesis seminars, I expect to learn from other students as much as from my own individual supervision sessions.	5.15	1.60
22	In the master's thesis seminars, I expect to learn from other students' research topics.	5.45	1.40

*Finnish students were excluded from the analysis of these statements.

Field of education and students' views on supervision

Following the descriptive analysis, further statistical analyses such as one-way ANOVA were conducted. These tests revealed differences regarding the expectations between students from different fields of education. These differences are presented in Table 3 and mostly concern the role of the supervisor in selecting the topic and theoretical framework. Students from humanities and the social sciences disagreed that it is the supervisor's responsibility to select the thesis topic, which contrasts with the views of IT students and those in the technical and natural sciences. Similarly, compared to IT students and those from the technical and natural sciences, students from the social sciences disagreed that it is the supervisor's responsibility to select the theoretical background. Further differences between the students' field of education were observed from the view that it is the students' responsibility to select a promising topic. Humanities students were firmer in their belief than natural science students that it is the student's responsibility to select the thesis topic.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA results and students' field of education.

SEV statement	Groups	M (SD)	ANOVA
1. It is the supervisor's responsibility to select a promising topic.	Social sciences	2.05 (1.05)	$F(4, 267) = 9.815$
	Humanities	2.44 (1.39)	
	Natural Sciences	3.36 (1.97)	
	Technical Sciences	3.47 (1.45)	
	IT	3.68 (1.75)	
2. In the end, it is up to the supervisor to decide which theoretical frame of reference is most appropriate.	Social sciences	2.67 (1.35)	$F(4, 266) = 6.474$
	Technical Sciences	3.59 (1.68)	
	Natural Sciences	3.69 (1.33)	
	IT	4.03 (1.51)	
6. It is the student's responsibility	Natural sciences	4.82 (1.40)	$F(4, 265) = 3.233$

to select a promising topic.

Humanities

5.65 (1.15)

Results for the groups showing $p > 0.05$ are not reported.

The groups were selected based on the pair comparisons (post-hoc tests).

Cultural background and students' views on supervision

The results from the SEV statements and the student groups according to nationality (one-way ANOVA) are presented in Table 4. Finnish, Russian, Pakistani and Chinese students share similar views on students' responsibilities but not on supervisors' responsibilities. More specifically, fewer Finnish students believed that it was the supervisor's responsibility to select a promising topic, initiate frequent meetings or direct students in selecting their master's thesis topic than Pakistani students who believed that these responsibilities lay with the supervisor. Furthermore, Finnish students disagreed that the supervisor should decide on the appropriate theoretical framework and that he or she should know at all times which problems the student is working on. This compared with students from Pakistan, China and Russia who had more resolute expectations of their supervisors regarding these responsibilities. Chinese students had a higher expectation of receiving feedback from their peers compared to Finnish and Russian students. Conversely, compared to Pakistani and Finnish students, Chinese students disagreed that the supervisor should support the student until the thesis has been submitted regardless of his or her opinion. Lastly, compared to Finnish students, Chinese students had a stronger belief that a close professional relationship was essential for successful supervision.

Table 4. One-way ANOVA results and students' nationality.

SEV statement	Groups	M (SD)	ANOVA
1. It is the supervisor's responsibility to select a promising topic.	Finnish	2.11 (1.40)	$F(3, 98) = 7.216$
	Pakistani	4.05 (1.58)	
2. In the end, it is up to the supervisor to decide which theoretical frame of reference is most appropriate.	Finnish	2.45 (1.19)	$F(3, 97) = 7.393$
	Russian	3.59 (1.99)	
	Chinese	3.63 (1.14)	
	Pakistani	4.16 (1.58)	
4. The supervisor should direct the student in the selection of his/her master's thesis topic.	Finnish	4.27 (1.53)	$F(3, 97) = 4.751$
	Pakistani	5.74 (1.72)	
9. A close professional relationship is essential for successful supervision.	Finnish	4.89 (1.24)	$F(3, 97) = 4.248$
	Chinese	5.88 (1.14)	
10. The supervisor should initiate frequent individual meetings with the student.	Finnish	4.45 (1.48)	$F(3, 97) = 6.224$
	Pakistani	5.79 (1.45)	
12. The supervisor should know at all times which problems the student is working on.	Finnish	3.68 (1.50)	$F(3, 97) = 9.391$
	Russian	4.77 (1.41)	
	Chinese	4.81 (1.55)	
	Pakistani	5.74 (1.40)	
14. The supervisor should support the	Chinese	4.13 (1.96)	$F(3, 94) = 3.880$

student right through until the thesis has been submitted, regardless of his/her opinion of the work.	Finnish	5.65 (1.60)	
	Pakistani	5.67 (1.28)	
18. In the master's thesis seminars, I expect to receive feedback from my peer students.	Russian	4.23 (1.97)	
	Finnish	4.82 (1.94)	$F(3, 95) = 3.133$
	Chinese	6.00 (0.92)	

Results for the groups showing $p > 0.05$ are not reported.

The groups were selected based on the pair comparisons (post-hoc tests).

Findings from the open-ended question

In their responses to the open-ended question on successful thesis supervision and guidance, students mostly mentioned and described the interpersonal (relationship) aspects of supervision. They considered that the nature of the supervisory relationship should be professional [R 46], respectful [R 51] and pleasant [R 184]. Almost half of the responses (44.5%) referred to the thesis topic as an important feature of thesis supervision, such as 'I can choose the topic that I am interested in' [R 45] and 'an interesting topic that both the student and the supervisor are excited to work with' [R 17]. These students' responses demonstrated their concerns regarding topic content and selection. Other aspects that students deemed important for successful supervision were frequent communication (23.8%), regular meetings (22%), emotional support (12.2%), feedback (9.2%) and guidance (10.7%). These issue areas were noted in shortlists such as 'trust', 'sense of understanding', 'continuous support' and 'mutual communication and cooperation' [R 176] or in more descriptive responses such as:

successful supervision and guidance require a functional professional relationship, good communication, mutual feedback, and an understanding of supervisory responsibilities by both parties. [R 95]

Fewer than 10% of the responses referred to the students' own responsibilities:

A master's student should be free to choose his/her topic and approach and work independently but constantly submitting work to the supervisor so that he/she knows where the thesis is going and can give feedback. [R 159]

The necessity for balanced and personal supervision was also described:

A healthy balance between assisting, guidance, and letting the student work independently is most important. It also depends on students' personalities; some need more guidance, some need less. The supervisor should be able to recognize the needs of the students in an initial talk and adjust to that. [R 160]

The roles of the supervisor and supervisee

Nearly 60% of the responses alluded to the roles and personal characteristics of the supervisor and student. These responses mainly concerned supervisors' responsibilities and roles and much less those of students. The most frequently mentioned supervisory roles were advisor, supporter and guide. According to some students, the supervisor should follow the entire thesis process 'from the beginning to the end very carefully' [R 21]. Some of the features that the students linked to the supervisor were flexibility, being a sounding board for students, a motivator who '[e]ncourage[s] students to dig deep into their topic' [R 192], a guide 'showing otherways and possibilities to overcome issues and resolve problems' [R 15].

The students were of the view that the supervisor should ‘suggest tools ... ask for personal meetings’ [R 165], offer supervision by telling the student ‘you can always ask/come to see me if you have any questions’ [R 154], ‘give constructive feedback, suggestions ... and directly tell the students whether their plans and schedules are realistic’ [R 95]. Further details on the supervisor and student were provided by R 78, who suggested that:

[t]he supervisor should not allow the student to forget that he/she is still doing the thesis. If he/she has not heard from the student after a certain period of time, he/she should send an e-mail to ensure that the student is still active. There are students who are scared of asking questions, so the supervisor should initiate questions to ensure that the student knows what he/she is doing.

The student’s role, which was given scant attention in the students’ responses, was construed as that of an initiator: to ‘take initiative and contact the supervisor ... every time it is needed’ [R 187] and be responsible for choosing his or her thesis topic, contact, and keep supervisors up-to-date. Some personal characteristics that the students believed that a student ... ought to have during thesis development were the desire for cooperation and to accept criticism [R 26] ... whilst also being active [R 57], responsible, disciplined, and hard-working [R 35].

Educational field and important aspects of supervision

Students from the different fields of education did not differ in their opinions on important elements of supervision. Yet, one student acknowledged that supervisory responsibilities vary in each field of education: In ‘fields like natural science or technology, it’s more [the] supervisor’s responsibility to choose a master’s student’s topic, but it’s different in [the] social sciences, such as in education’ [R 179].

Cultural background and important aspects of supervision

As the results of the SEV statements showed, a minimal number of students and supervisors discussed the differences between studying cultures, and only three students mentioned the cultural perspective in their responses to the open question. One student stated that the cultural exchange with the supervisor was important during supervision [R 51], and another commented that ‘taking into account my background, current situation, and future plans’ [R 163] are important attributes of supervision.

A few differences were observed between the responses of Pakistani, Russian, Chinese and Finnish students. They all placed considerable value on the interpersonal aspects of supervision such as cooperation, problem-solving and frequent communication. A Pakistani student maintained that:

Successful thesis supervision and guidance depend on the frequent interaction of the supervisor and student, with the student giving updates on how much of the thesis work has been completed. [R 137]

Similar to the results of the quantitative analysis, the Finnish students acknowledged that they were the main actors in the supervisory relationship but that they saw the supervisor as the expert who will help and guide them through their problems:

The student leads the thesis process, but the supervisor has to ... know what is going on. If the student has problems, s/he can easily seek advice from his/her supervisor. If everything goes fine, there is no need for frequent meetings. If the supervisor notices that there might be problems, s/he should advise the student to take steps in order to prevent problems. In general, problems should be solved together. [R 88]

In their responses, Chinese students emphasised the student's independence and the supervisor's support. This trend is illustrated in responses such as 'I can choose the topic that I am interested in, and the supervisor can give me some advice on the processes of my study' [R 45]. They also suggested that '[t]he student and supervisor should share certain research interests' [R 133] and 'know each other's background' [R 88].

Some Russian students reported that the student is mainly responsible during supervision, but others were more dependent on their supervisor:

I need to feel that my supervisor is competent and that I can trust him/her. The supervisor should not only be a specialist in the research topic but also know about practical things (deadlines). The supervisor should also answer e-mails on time, keep her/his promises, offer supervision ('You can always ask/come to see me if you have any questions'). [R 154]

Discussion

The primary aim of the present study was to investigate students' perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of the supervisor–student relationship and the elements that students consider essential during supervision. Special attention was paid to students' cultural groups and fields of education. Frequent communication, an interesting topic and emotional support from the supervisor were the most important aspects of supervision for the students. The students' preferences in terms of supervision converged; they sought 'safe independence', that is, to be able to make their own decisions whilst having the supervisor at their side. The students seldom referred to their own responsibilities, tending to concentrate on their supervisor and acknowledging less their role in the master's thesis supervision. This asymmetric view regarding the responsibilities between the supervisor and student might result from a lack of communication and different expectations of supervision. As some of the respondents stated, another factor that may have affected their views, are their personal traits.

The results regarding the students' views are comparable with those of McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi (2010), who, in a manner similar to the present study, found that students agree on the important aspects of supervision while pointing out that supervisors' responsibilities entail being continuously supportive and aware of students' problems. However, our studies diverge on the view that the majority of the students expected to choose their own topics and that the supervisor would direct them during this process. Furthermore, the results indicated that the supervisor is expected to initiate both frequent individual meetings with students and master's thesis seminars. The comparisons between students from different fields of education did not manifest itself in many variations. The main disagreement was between students from theoretical fields like humanities and the social sciences, who had stronger beliefs that the student was responsible for choosing the thesis topic and theoretical background, compared with the remaining fields, considered more practical, such as IT and the natural and technical sciences. These contrasts might have resulted from the different nature and structure of the programmes and master's theses as well as the research methods used in each discipline.

Similar to the results of Sidhu et al. (2014) and McGinty, Koo, and Saeidi (2010), the findings of this research show that international students had higher expectations of their supervisors' responsibilities than native students. Several context-related issues may account for these findings. The Finnish higher education system traditionally assumes that students work independently, and Finnish students might already have established a relationship with their supervisors during their bachelor's degree. Moreover, the internationalisation of higher education and the establishment of IMDPs have taken place over a very short period of time,

which means that supervisors in Finnish IMDPs may still possess little or no experience supervising students from different cultural backgrounds. Finland, together with other Nordic countries, has long been regarded as a homogenous nation (cf. Lasonen 2011), and the recent internationalisation and related challenges of Finnish higher education institutions, such as those relating to intercultural supervision, may be partly explained within this context.

There seems to be a variety of students' expectations according to their domestic or cross-cultural status. The analysis of the data on students' cultural background revealed that Finnish students were more independent and self-directed than the remaining students. Conversely, students coming from China were found to have firmer expectations of their supervisor and the supervisory relationship. There are therefore differences in how students deal with hierarchy, in this case their expectations of their supervisor, according to their cultural background which are in agreement with the results of Winchester-Seeto and colleagues (2014). However, these results contradict Manathunga's results (2007, 2011) and raise questions whether this difference resulted because the Finnish students have already experienced the norms of supervision and know which attitude is expected or do students' previous educational background and university traditions differ widely from the Finnish universities? Moreover, the results of this study indicated that the international participants did not discuss cultural issues in supervision. Considering that cultural discussions are related with students' satisfaction (Nilsson and Dodds 2006) more questions could be raised regarding the participants satisfaction with supervision and how do they view their supervisor.

The findings of this study are in line with previous research by Spear (2000), who presented good communication as the most important element of supervision. The results of Anderson and colleagues (2008) were significantly similar to the results of the present study since supervisors are expected to show genuine interest and have a friendly attitude towards their supervisees. The fact that some respondents mentioned emotional features as a significant part of successful supervision reinforced the implications in de Kleijn et al. (2012) that emotional involvement is linked to student satisfaction and learning. This result also emphasises the interpersonal aspect of the relation as previously noted by Johnston (1999) and increases McGinty's and colleagues' (2010) assumption that students and supervisors have mismatched views on supervision; students look for an emotional supporter and the supervisors focus on the academic aspects of supervision.

Conclusions

To bridge the gap between asymmetric views on student-supervisor responsibilities and possible mismatching aspects of supervision, this study suggests an individual approach to supervision and early discussions on students' expectations and needs. University-level guidelines for students and thesis supervisors could also strengthen the regulatory basis for thesis supervision. These guidelines should highlight the responsibilities and roles of students and supervisors. In addition, in negotiating these guidelines, cultural and pedagogical aspects could be discussed. Early discussions on students' learning plans and previous experiences with regard to supervision and expectations would give the supervisor an opportunity to adjust to the student's needs and support interaction as well as mutual understanding regarding cultural differences. Seminars and online discussions that would further enhance the exchange of information on cultural differences are also recommended.

Future research could focus on students' responsibilities during supervision and could be extended to analyse and compare students' views on studying and thesis supervision in degree programmes in other non-English-speaking countries. The current study focuses on students enrolled in IMDPs; therefore, the views of supervisors in IMDPs could enrich this

research field by providing their own expectations and perceptions of the thesis process and intercultural supervision.

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