Towards Quality Assurance in Postgraduate Supervision: The Case of EMOD at USIU

Jimmy Macharia
Assistant Professor of Information Systems & Technology
School of Business
United States International University
PO BOX 14634-00800 Nairobi,   Kenya
+254-20-3606299 254-0722-779770
Email: kmacharia@usiu.ac.ke

Abstract

Good supervision is fundamental to successful postgraduate research, yet it is a teaching-learning process disappointingly understood. This may be the main reason why students experience the process as complex and often unstable. Supervisors increasingly find themselves supervising mature-age professionals who possess equal or greater knowledge of the research subject, thus countering the traditional 'apprenticeship' model of graduate studies such that have been done points out that the majority of graduate enrolments at the doctoral level in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States of America are in professional and practitioner oriented fields. Likewise, in several countries and in particular in developing countries like Kenya, supervisors find that postgraduate students are less prepared for higher degree studies than in the past. The above two phenomenal results is increasing an unprecedented pressures, particularly on young and inexperienced supervisors. In Kenya there is an awakening on quality assurance by many universities, some are going for ISO 2000 assessment, others adopting other initiatives, and the just emerging Association of East African Universities (AEAU) quality assurance initiatives that are going on in a number of universities. However, quality assurance at the graduate research is still an illusion that requires urgent redress, since many masters and PHD candidates are giving up along the way due to frustrations on the supervision process or the lack of quality on the same.

This paper therefore is a case study of quality assurance initiates for supervision of the graduate projects for the Executive Master of Science in Organizational Development project at the United states International University (USIU). The article focuses on the indicators of quality supervision and highlights the vast range of problem areas presently documented as significant areas of concern for both graduate students and their supervisors. Additionally, the paper presents preliminary findings on an ongoing study which aims to survey all Kenyan universities about current supervision and evaluative practices in postgraduate supervision.

Building on literature and the previous survey-based research results, this study develops the USIU EMOD framework case of quality assurance and enhancement that identifies the problems and challenges met by students and supervisors in the graduate research supervision. The University's planning processes provide a framework for monitoring and improving program quality through collection and analysis of data and the assessment of performance; however the set of indicators of quality assurance are neither explicit nor exhaustive. As part of the originality of this paper a set of key indicators for quality graduate research supervision at higher education will be presented. The findings will be of immediate and practical application by universities, where the supervision process and success will then be measured against key indicators and development strategies and targets for improvement identified. These indicators will be critical in achieving the link between program learning outcomes, strategies, goals and performance.

Keywords: *Quality, Variables, Quality Assurance, Graduate Research, Supervision, Process*

1. Introduction

The concept of quality in higher education is a pervasive but elusive one. Although both scholars and practitioners have generally agreed that quality is multi-faceted and embraces three broad aspects: (i) goals; (ii) the process deployed for achieving goals; and (iii) how far goals are achieved, there is no consensus on a single definition or way of measuring quality (Glasner, 1997).

The postgraduate degrees that involve a large component of research and writing at the master's and doctoral level stand at the apex of higher education degrees in any country including Kenya. Their quality depends on the quality of the supervision. However several studies have posited that the process of postgraduate supervision is a complex and demanding task that is full of hurdles (Denicolo, 2003; Vilkinas, 2002). Moreover there are now a few recent studies which indicate that there is considerable - and alarming - variation in how the examination process, and especially the viva, is conducted. These include purpose of graduate supervision, *formal regulation, and the choice and role of examiners.* In the case of *formal regulations* the balance between the assessment of the graduate thesis/project text and the viva or oral examination is unclear and/or ambiguous (Morley, Leonard, & David, 2003). It is ill-defined as to whether it is a one, two - or a three-stage assessment process, and what the relative weight of the thesis/project is to the viva and even the external examiners report. In some universities it is possible to produce a satisfactory thesis /project but fail the Masters/PHD on the basis of an unsatisfactory oral examination or external examiners report. On the other hand, many students can defend a somewhat unsatisfactory thesis if they do a good viva or even obtain a favourable external examiners' report. In addition the clear distinction between a master's thesis and a master's project are not documented in my institutions.

Tinkler and Jackson (2000) quoted in (Morley, Leonard, & David, 2003), in their analysis of a sample of UK universities' policies and guidelines for graduate assessment, found that even on a technical level there appears to be considerable Differences. They argued that despite the fact that there is a general agreement amongst universities on the main criteria on which the graduate research especially PhD should be assessed; there are substantial variations in the range of requirements for the award. There is also considerable dissimilarity in the detail in which these criteria are articulated. Some universities provide one sentence and others two pages outlining the skills and qualities required. These differences are evident in many research hand books for post graduate research. The details of these documents vary greatly, leaving a great deal of speculation and confusion and laborious process of learning on the part of the student.

The choice and role of examiners in the supervision process is critical, however there are different rules applied to the role and appointment of externals both between universities and between masters and doctoral examinations. Tinkler and Jackson (2000) quoted in (Morley, Leonard, & David, 2003) found that most institutions' regulations contain fairly detailed criteria for the selection of examiners. These criteria relate to three academic dimensions:- namely credentials, experience and independence. Their study reveals that several institutions had a requirement for the external examiner to have examined at least three

doctorates. This does assure a certain amount of experience between the two examiners - though in turn raises questions about entry into existing networks of examiners.

It is clear the problem of graduate supervision is prevalent and there is is no agreed benchmark. Consequently this paper review some of the critical challenges to quality in graduate supervision and give the case of EMOD at UISU.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Learning outcomes for graduate Thesis/Projects

According to Shaw and Green (2002), the actual set of learning outcomes suggested for successful awards at the graduate level are many. Several studies have collected and analyzed evidence on universities regulation and procedures for postgraduate supervision and found that the criteria differ from one university to another (Denicolo, 2003). The fact that the assessment procedures for the graduate studies remain relatively unexamined despite the degrees major gate keeping function is largely because of many factors. In the universities where a single supervisors is the sole examiner, and supervisor guidelines are unclear, then the process is vulnerable to subjectivity issues. On the other hand where external examiners are involved, the strict rules on confidentiality, which mean those examiners' reports and vivas are seldom open to scrutiny or any form of quality control (Morley, Leonard, & David, 2003). However, graduate assessment "horror stories" is slowly amassing in the public domain because the process is as often experienced as mysterious, mystifying and unfair as well as frustrating as illustrated by an example below:

> … I would also like to register my displeasure and frustrations at the project supervision process. to put you in perspective, I was among the first student to hand in my signed copy of my project to research directors office, which I did on 7th July 2008. The turn it in report was out few days later and I acted on it. Then I did not receive the reader's comments until 5th August nearly one month later, worked on the issues raised by the reader together with my supervisor, and he finally signed it on 8th August 2008. I then sent my assistant who delivered the report to your office on 11th August. I made a follow-up and I was told, I will be called when the report is ready. I even met you in your office on 15th August and you promised it will be ready by Monday 18th August. Having not received any communication I came to your office on 20th August and I was told the report is not ready yet, and the secretary promised to call me when it is ready. Yesterday 22nd August, which was the last day for the grades to be posted I called your office and was told that the report is not ready, I still have not heard a word from your office. This puts me in a difficult position because my certificate might be delayed due to systems inefficiency and not my fault. The other issue which is also clearly demoralizing is that some of my colleagues after getting a sign off from their supervisors went ahead and bound without passing the reports to your office, and this makes me wonder why the double standards? While I clearly appreciate the number of papers you have to read, I also hope you will identify with my frustration, because I would like to put this matter to rest as soon as possible. I beg for your assistance in expediting the matter and at least not delay my certificate.

2.1.1 Knowledge-based learning outcomes

Shaw and green (200) has identified three outcomes in this category. The first one is systematic *acquisition* and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice. These

outcomes should normally be archived easily through the thesis/project due to the cumulative effect of knowledge acquired by the other components of program learning. However majority of supervisors find their students level of entry knowledge wanting. Majority cannot construct a problem statement or proposal abstract leave alone correctly reference their work in any standard referencing style such as APA, Harvard or ML. The second outcome is the ***creation and interpretation*** of new knowledge (through original research or other advanced scholarship), of a quality to satisfy peer review or external review, extend the forefront of the discipline and merit publication (Shaw & Green, 2002). Many thesis including doctoral studies are not able to publish the findings or contribution to knowledge. Consequently, the failure this learning outcome a good number of graduate projects is a clear evidence of the fact that the quality of postgraduate supervision does not measure to expected standards. Finally, detailed **understanding of applicable techniques** for research and advanced academic enquiry (Shaw & Green, 2002). Although students usually will have gone through a research methodology course, the learning outcomes of such a course are not exhibited in the thesis/project writing. This has made the supervision process complex since the supervisor is bogged down with imparting the basics of graduate research. This takes additional of the supervisor.   Although, Shaw and green have identified three knowledge outcome areas, this paper posits that in today's world a new knowledge dimension is required to ensure quality graduate thesis/project output. This is effective use of plagiarism and document management software.   Since every quality thesis/project need to be checked for originality today, and due to the fact that plagiarism can lead to thesis/project failure as well as the firing of the supervisor, and even prolonged court case to withdraw degrees and awards given without meeting plagiarism criteria, this paper postulates that this knowledge outcome is important, yet many students in many universities, do not enforce this compliant and hence cannot guarantee that the supervision met the quality criteria.

2.1.2 Research skills:

An important research skill in the graduate supervision is for the student to acquire general **ability to conceptualize**, design and implement a project (for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline) and to adjust the project design in the light of unanticipated problems (Shaw & Green, 2002). The student should therefore be able to design procedures and process to conduct the research in a manner that is within acceptable standards. This will normally include methods of data collection as well as data analysis. Quality supervision should also aid in producing candidates that are able to ***make informed judgments*** on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data (Shaw & Green, 2002). This indeed requires critical thinking skill. Finally the oral component or what is called "defense" gives an opportunity to the supervised candidate to demonstrate the **ability to communicate their ideas** and conclusions in a clearly and effectively to specialist and non= specialist audiences (Shaw & Green, 2002). Although this is a critical part of graduate studies, many universities are also demanding that a graduate thesis especially at the doctoral level should not be passed without having at least some publication. Certainly this publication will act as un disputable ability for the candidate to **communicate their ideas** and conclusions to experts in that discipline or field.

2.1.3   Attitudes:

 This learning outcome involves behavioural transformation where the supervised candidate is able to continue to undertake pure and/ or applied research and

development at an advanced level, contributing significantly to the development of innovative techniques, ideas, or approaches (Shaw & Green, 2002). This paper posits that this is one of the outcomes that is hardly achieved in may supervision activities because many supervisors may not be innovative or current within their fields of study. In some cases, the last serious work the supervisor had undertaken is their PhD desertion.

2.1.4 Professional skills:

Academics are largely professionals. However the demand fro professionalism conduct in the supervision process is warranting in many cases. Students have sited delayed and unclear feedback, inconsistencies between supervisors, and subjective, unclear university requirements as some of the major shortcomings in the supervision process. These shortcoming hider the impartation of **qualities and transferable skills** necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments (Shaw & Green, 2002).

2.2 Supervision and the Supervisor

Supervision of postgraduate research has become an increasingly demanding role for supervisors because they need to lead the candidates towards the successful completion of their graduate work. This exerts upon supervisors the pressure to cope with the demands of effectively practicing their role as research supervisors. Supervision issues pose challenges for supervisors in administering the exchange between them and the candidates as well as meeting university requirement. Schön (1991, p. 32) quoted in (Calma, 2004) also indicated that the supervisor as a reflective practitioner must be somebody who is an established expert in his area. Some of the key dimensions of a good supervisor must have research knowledge, related discipline skills, management and interpersonal skills (Beasley, 1999) quoted in (Calma, 2004) as necessary components of his/her supervision practice. The question on the role choice and management dimensions of the supervisor is central in quality enhancement. This role is becoming more intricate and challenging because there is the need to balance several roles to adapt to different candidates' needs and personalities (Vilkinas, 2002). According to (Calma, 2004), supervision is regarded as a form of or apprenticeship and therapeutic counseling. In practice, the supervisor is not someone who merely assumes this role because he or she was selected by a candidate, school/faculty dean or board of postgraduate studies which assigns him or herself a thesis/project to supervise out of convenience. However, with the growing number of graduate candidates who need to be supervised, some supervisors may be forced to commit themselves to candidates whose research interests differ from theirs (Calma, 2004). In addition, some supervisors lack the required expertise to direct the candidates' research. Further, even In instances where supervisors have such expertise, the transfer of such may still not happen due to limited contact hours or other reasons (Calma, 2004). This clearly shows that the supervisors have to overcome several challenge for him to excel in the task of supervisor.

3. Framework for best practice

Current researches in postgraduate supervision include examination of frameworks for postgraduate supervisor generally and in particular doctoral education, mapping the development of new research programs responsive to the needs of the economy, surveys on students' satisfaction with programs or supervision, use of students' evaluation to benchmark universities, and frameworks for postgraduate supervision or evaluation (see Zuber-Skerritt & Roche, 2004) quoted in (Calma, 2004). From Literature and practice at USIU on EMOD projects supervisor, thus paper proposes a supervision frame work adopted from (Calma, 2004) and modified to reflect current challenges and practices in a modern university.
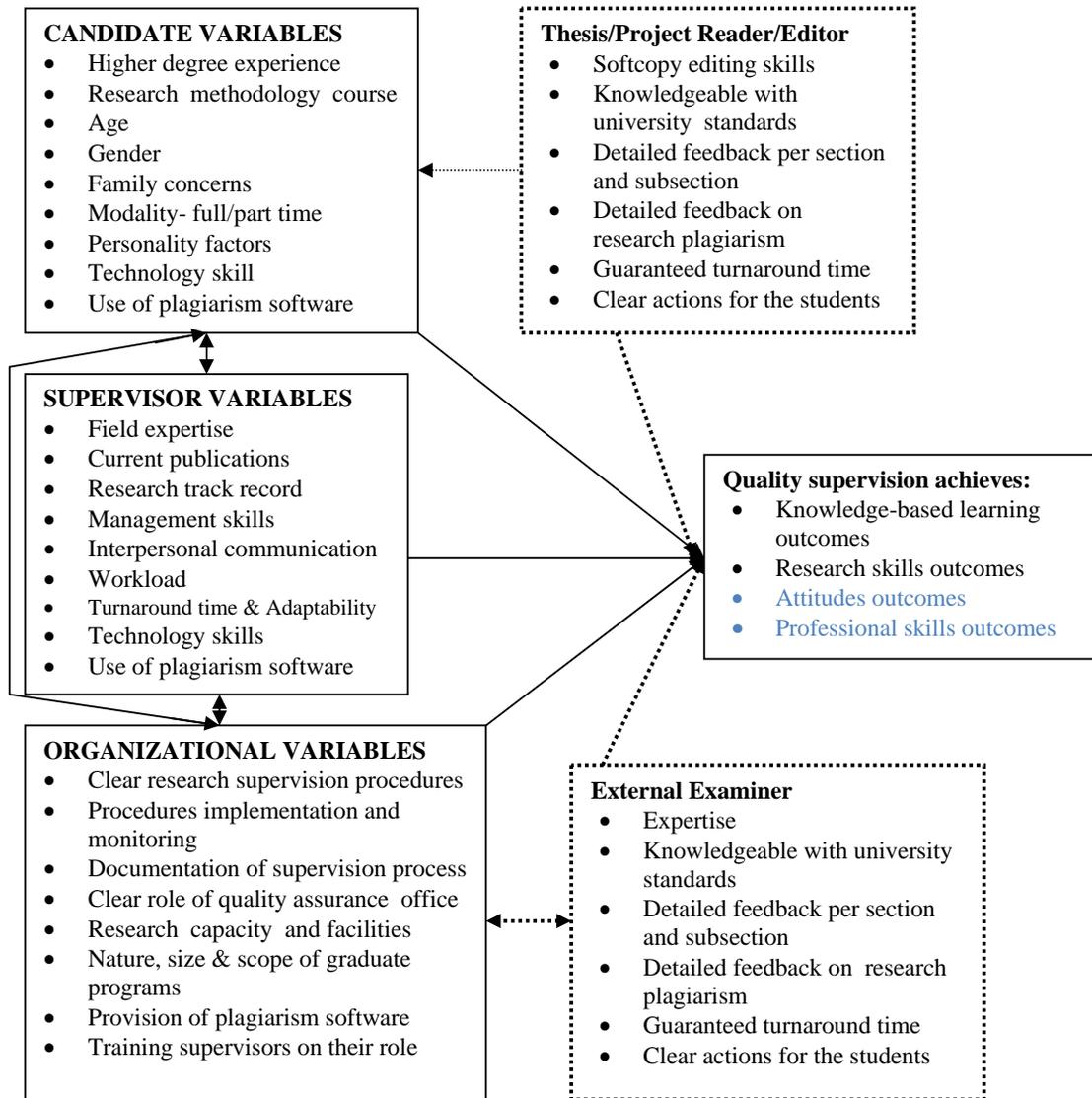
CANDIDATE VARIABLES
- Higher degree experience
- Research methodology course
- Age
- Gender
- Family concerns
- Modality- full/part time
- Personality factors
- Technology skill
- Use of plagiarism software

Thesis/Project Reader/Editor
- Softcopy editing skills
- Knowledgeable with university standards
- Detailed feedback per section and subsection
- Detailed feedback on research plagiarism
- Guaranteed turnaround time
- Clear actions for the students

SUPERVISOR VARIABLES
- Field expertise
- Current publications
- Research track record
- Management skills
- Interpersonal communication
- Workload
- Turnaround time & Adaptability
- Technology skills
- Use of plagiarism software

Quality supervision achieves:
- Knowledge-based learning outcomes
- Research skills outcomes
- Attitudes outcomes
- Professional skills outcomes

ORGANIZATIONAL VARIABLES
- Clear research supervision procedures
- Procedures implementation and monitoring
- Documentation of supervision process
- Clear role of quality assurance office
- Research capacity and facilities
- Nature, size & scope of graduate programs
- Provision of plagiarism software
- Training supervisors on their role

External Examiner
- Expertise
- Knowledgeable with university standards
- Detailed feedback per section and subsection
- Detailed feedback on research plagiarism
- Guaranteed turnaround time
- Clear actions for the students

Figure 1: Key variables associated with postgraduate supervision

4. Methodology

The aim of the study was to present a case study of the EMOD post graduate supervision at the United States International University (USIU) in Kenya, and propose a model that can be used for quality assurance and enhancement fro postgraduate thesis/project supervision.

4.1 Design

This overall supervision process had two phases. In the first phase a measuring by issuing request for comments to faculty and management. The instrument was comprehensive measuring all aspects of the program and a specific section capturing details of the project supervision process. In addition over 7 forms were developed for capturing the supervisor process. In the second phase, the focus of this analysis, the results of the questionnaire on the and the opinions of the students on project supervision were measured and analyzed. The supervision section of the questionnaire had the following nine statements for the students to give their opinions

1. *My supervisor was able to **communicate ideas** and information clearly.*
2. *My supervisor was willing to **negotiate** on important details of my research project.*
3. *I found the **frequency** and value of student-supervisor meetings appropriate.*
4. *The **turn-around time** for feedback was acceptable*
5. *My supervisor **encouraged** my work.*
6. *I found that the advice offered by my supervisor was **valuable.***
7. *Comments and feedback provided by my supervisor on my written work have been **helpful.***
8. *On balance, I would **recommend** other students to be supervised by my supervisor*
9. *The **quality** of the EMOD project supervision was excellent.*

4.2 Sample

A total of 54 students were allocated a total of 39 supervisors at the beginning of the semester. Each supervisor had at most 2 projects and a minimum of one project. There was a contract for each project to be supervised which contained clear deadlines and remuneration for completed project.

4.3 Data Collection

A questionnaire was designed based on seven key areas: university mission, school mission, and program learning outcomes, Program Delivery and Quality, Courses experience, Support Services, and EMOD project supervision. Respondents rated indicators of all these sections on a Likert scale from 6 to 1, representing 6-Strognly agree, 5-Agree, 4-Neutral, 3-Diagree, 2-Stongly Disagree and 1-N/A. This instrument was designed without reference to the different models of supervision, in an effort not to have an instrument biased towards a

specific model of supervision. The questionnaires were handed out at week 12 of the semester by the program administrator, and the students were asked to come back with them in the next day class. The questionnaires were accompanied by a leading paragraph to explain the research and to invite participation.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire was issued as an exit questionnaire. Consequently it had ethical clearance from both USIU office of the research director, and the director of Center of Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT).

5. Data & Results

5.1 Supervisor interpersonal communications skills

Data was collected using an exit questionnaire with an elaborate section with nine questions related to the supervision process and quality. On the variable of supervisor interpersonal communication, the student's responses are summarized in Figure 5.1.
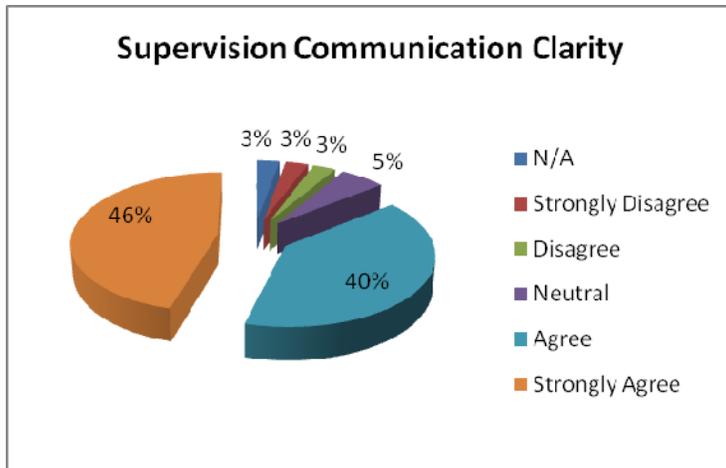

Figure 5.1: student evaluation of supervisor interpersonal communication.

From the results of Figure 5.1, only 46% of the students were able to strongly agree that their supervisors communicated to them effectively, while the lest 64% had reservations with their supervisors communication. Of particular concern 14% who did not agree at all with the supervision communication.

5.2 Supervisor Turnaround Time

The students were asked to give their personal opinion on the statement "The **turn-around time** for feedback was acceptable". The results of their responses are displayed in Figure 5.2.
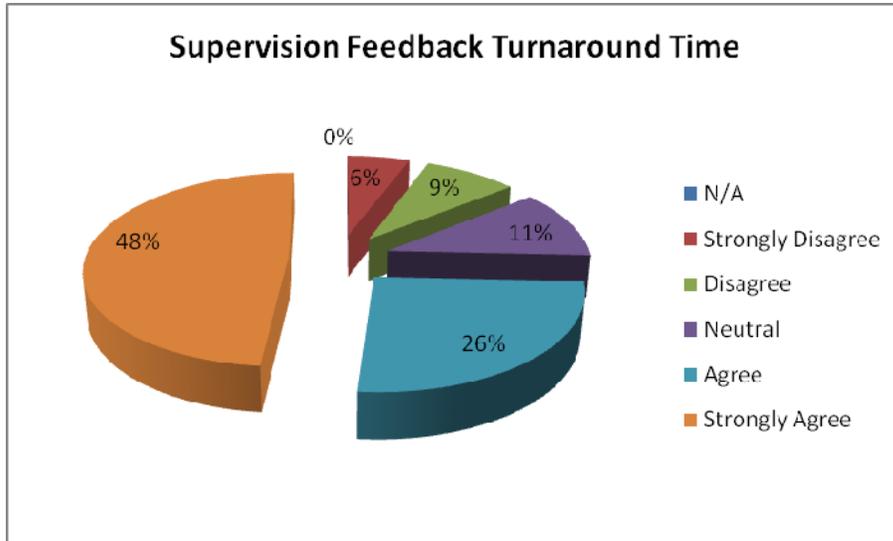
Figure 5.2: **Turn-around time** for feedback was acceptable

The results of Figure 5.2, indicate that only 48% of the students were able to strongly agree that their supervisors turnaround time was acceptable, while the lest 62% had reservations with their supervisors turnaround time. Of particular concern 16% who did not agree at all with the supervision feedback turnaround time.

5.3 Project supervision quality

Although the project supervision quality measurement is both complex and comprehensive using the variables proposed in the article in Figure 1, the task was simplified by asking the students to rate their opinions on the supervision process quality. The results of student's opinions to the statement "The **quality** of the EMOD project supervision was excellent" are presented in Figure 5.3.
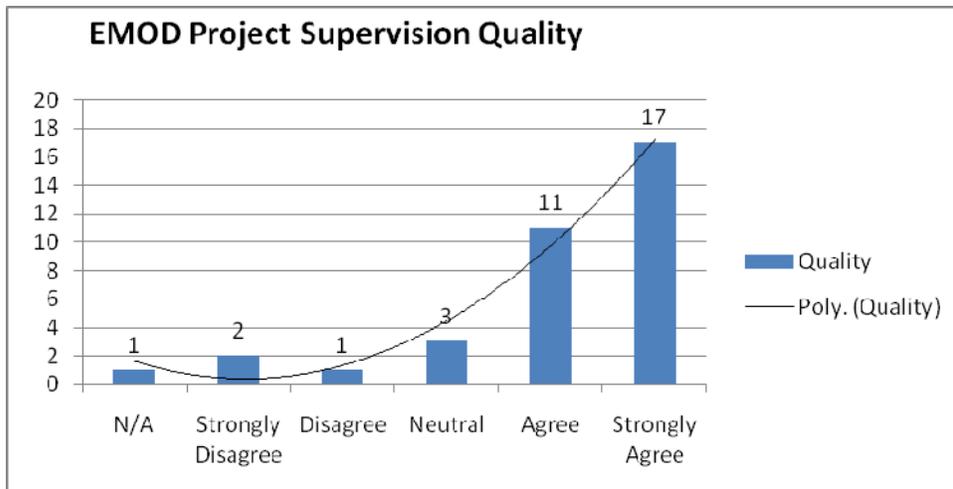

Figure 5.3: The **quality** of the EMOD project supervision was excellent.

5.4 Supervisor Recommended to other Students

The students responses to the statement "On balance, I would recommend other students to be supervised by my supervisor" are presented in Figure 5.4.
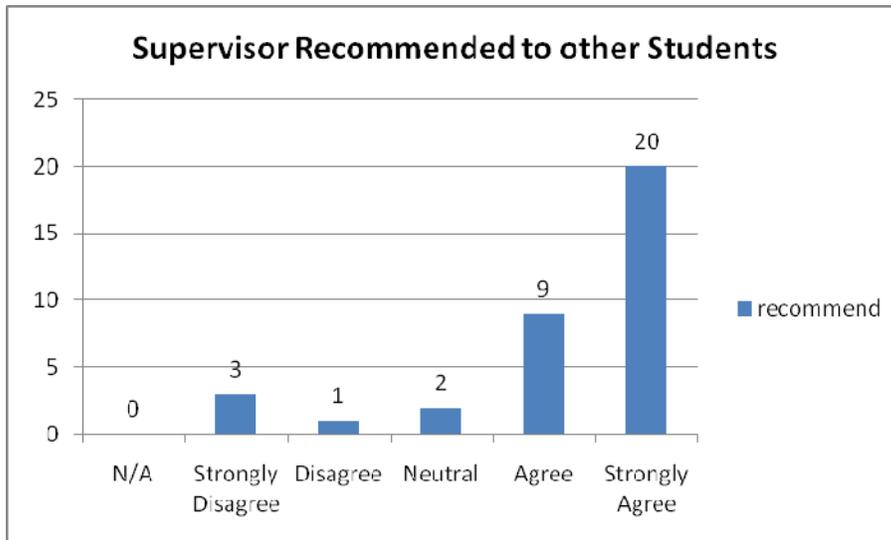

Figure 5.4 Supervisors Recommend to Other Students

The results of Figure 5.4 indicate that only 20 out of the sample of 25 students were able to strongly agree that their supervisor can be recommended to supervise other projects. The lest 15 had reservations with their supervisors being recommended to supervise other students.

6.   Discussion conclusion

The results of figure 5.1 to 5.4 illustrate the poor supervisor resulting to dissatisfied students. To improve the satisfaction and hence the quality of the supervision process, this article agrees with (Ellington, 1999; Zuber-Skerritt & Val, 2004) that there is need for training postgraduate supervisors. From figure 5.1, the skill of interpersonal communication is required in such training. This will reverse the levels of dissatisfaction so that we shall have 64% or more strongly agreeing that their supervisors communicated clearly during the supervision process. The question of what makes a good supervisor has been the focus of many researchers. Buttery, Richter, and Filho, (2005), identified four charcateristices to answer this question. Like in this paper, supervisory style reflected in level of direction; regular meetings; making time for student; allowing students to develop original ideas; flexibility in project choice; and encouraging ideas and individuality were among the first category of attribute. These were operationalized in our instrument by the first five questions.

The results of figure 5.2 indicate that over 50% of the students were not satisfied with the turnaround time. This is certainly frustrating to the students waiting for unknown time. In the contact there was a requirement of a meeting between the supervisor and student every week. However, the results indicate that this did not happen, and most likely the students could not report for fear of severing the relation and grade fro the project. This will require a change of culture for faculty to take prompt feedback to students as their responsibility. We propose to change this culture, we need to introduce a two weeks or less for undergraduate assignment and exams turnaround time.

The fact from Figure 5.3 and 5.4 indicate that over 50% of the students were not satisfied with the quality of the supervision. Some of the major reasons for this will include, unacceptable turnaround time, unstructured feedback-some on SMS, others on Email, reports , spoken words while others were comments on the physical document. In addition the lack of clarity or missing helps on the student research handbook. In our view supervisors who had poor turnaround time and unstructured feedback were unlikely to be recommended to supervise other students.

This study was an attempt to link supervision quality to supervisor interpersonal communication ability, feedback turnaround time, and student's judgment on whether the supervision process was quality, as well as if they could recommend their supervisors to others students. Nevertheless, the results indicate the need for more immediate measures of supervision effectiveness. Further, for the entire rage of supervision outcomes to be achieved, wider range of input variables have been identified. These variables should be studied and monitored, to enable a better understanding of what institutional, supervisor, and student characteristics contribute to quality graduate supervision and achievement of the process outcomes.

Works Cited

Calma, A. (2004). Postgraduate Supervision in the Philippines: Setting the Research Agenda. *THE ASIA PACIFIC-EDUCATION RESEARCHER , 16* (1), 92-100.

Denicolo, P. (2003). Assessing the PhD: a constructive view of criteria. *Quality Assurance in Education , 11* (2), 84-91.

Ellington, H. (1999). Reconciling conflicting demands in the training of HE teachers – the experience at The Robert Gordon University. *Education + Training , 41* (1), 27-32.

Glasner, A. (1997). Quality assessment and quality enhancement: eliminating unsatisfactory provision. *Quality Assurance in Education , 5* (4), 190-200.

Morley, L., Leonard, D., & David, M. (2003). Quality and equality in British PhD assessment. *Quality Assurance in Education , 11* (2), 64-72.

Shaw, M., & Green, D. H. (2002). Benchmarking the PhD- a tentative beginning. *Quality Assurance in Education , 10* (2), 116-124.

Vilkinas, T. (2002). The PhD process: the supervisor as manager. *Education + Training , 44* (3), 129-137.

Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Val, R. (2004). A constructivist model for evaluating postgraduate supervision: a case study. *Quality Assurance in Education , 12* (2), 82-93.