

# Exploring Service and Support Needs in Postgraduate Education towards the Higher Education Quality

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## Abstract

Students' support is needed in postgraduate education embracing many service areas towards quality education. In achieving excellent graduates for national transformation reality, it needs to be addressed at all levels including departmental and institutional. It is vital to create suitable environment for students' studies to ensure the sustainable development and execution of outstanding research outcome. The paper identifies that one of the important factors in students' development is to create proper support and services. Thus, a qualitative analysis has been conducted to postgraduate student to discover the main concern of the support and services offered in a Malaysian public university. This study involved semi-structured interviews and the sample was self-selecting. The study disclosed the most important needs and deprived services that should be improved.

**Keywords:** student support, service, postgraduate, quality education, human capital development, higher education

## 1. Introduction

Higher education is no longer a stable domain. The only constant in this area is that of change. It is the change that higher institution must be prepared to deal with in current times. Expectation of what the academics can contribute underpins the demands made on academics in these present times (Abiddin & Ismail, 2012). Students are the seed of the future. They need change and improvement in their performance (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). It is vital to complement their demands in order to enhance human capital (Akinyemi & Abiddin, 2013a; Akinyemi & Abiddin, 2013b). The most critical element in this aim is to create quality education.

In terms of service and support to the students, their needs are differ from one to another. However, as the provider, every report or comment should be taken care of. The students come from varied background. Postgraduate education usually enrolled by older people starting from age 25 and above after their bachelor degree. Thus, they are more particular to the services offered and tend to tell their unsatisfactory. At certain point, service offered must be accessible and reliable all the time especially internet connection. Foreign students often encounter big challenges to adapt with new environment (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). The aim of this study is to address the question whether the support and services offered by the institution are to their expectation and to find a solution for student support needs.

Many institutions of higher learning are now trying to understand and achieve an effective resource. There is a prevailing belief that education has entered a new environment in which quality plays an increasingly important role. HedPERF Model by Abdullah (2006) proposed 6 factors to determine Higher Education Quality which are: (1) Non-academic aspects; (2) Academic aspects; (3) Reputation; (4) Access; (5) Program issues; and (6) Understanding. Firdaus (2006) indicated that the six dimensions, namely, non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access, program issues and understanding were distinct and conceptually clear in managing service quality in higher education. Hence, it can be hypothesized that students' perception of service quality should be considered based on these dimensions. Evaluating service quality levels and understanding how various dimensions impact on overall service quality would ultimately enable tertiary institutions to efficiently design the service delivery processes (Firdaus, 2006).

Jusoh et al. (2004) proposed a model for Service Quality in Higher Education (SQHE) namely tangibles, competence, attitude, content, delivery and reliability. According to Firdaus (2006), service quality has attracted considerable attention within the tertiary education sector, but despite this, little work has been concentrated on identifying its determinants from the standpoint of students being the primary customers. Lagrosen et al. (2004) highlighted some weaknesses in the issue of quality in higher education whereby the adoption of quality control has been superficial and diluted by the exercise of academic freedom, as well as being hampered by lack of shared vision and lack of a match between quality management and educational processes (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003). Previous study by Chong (2002) on service quality in institutions of higher learning had focused on examining the institution's strategic positions by evaluating existing services, and adapting to customers' perceptions and to enhance their leadership positions. The researcher seeks to understand the real complaints regarding services in the institutions.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

15 respondents were selected to be included in the study. All respondents were interviewed by the researcher for 15 to 30 minutes. Respondents were asked to give permission for the interview to be recorded. All of the data was transcribed and coded in the style of a content analysis approach for data analysis. Two category headings were generated from the data.

## 3. The Findings

There were two category headings generated which are: (1) accessibility of support and services; and (2) research needs in postgraduate studies.

### 3.1 Accessibility of Support and Services

There are many reports from the respondents regarding accessibility of support and services. One respondent stated that:

*We need more accessible electronic journal or article (05).*

Limitation access to electronic journals and articles need to improve. This is normal to research student in preparing their literature review and referring to other scholars. There are a few respondents comment about Graduate Office/School service. A respondent suggest that:

*Graduate Office needs transformation (07).*

And also reports regarding attitude of Graduate Office (GO) staff while interacting with students.

*Make sure they treat the postgraduate students in a well manner so that we will feel warm and happy to study in here (03).*

*Please ask the administration staff at International Office (IO) & GS to be friendlier to us (04).*

*Staffs at the front counter in GS need to learn how to treat people properly in term of facial expression and body language (08).*

*Make sure all supporting staffs in GS know what the current issues in campus are (10).*

This is a complex issue. Students should be happy after dealing with GO. There are also some issue regarding unsynchronized information between research center and graduate office.

A few respondents need proper services in residential college.

*Hopefully they can provide good facilities in terms of accessibilities at residential college (01).*

From what has been interviewed, they also need a specific library in their faculty as main library is far from their access.

*We need a Library in engineering faculty (03).*

The study fee and cost always become an issue to students. They spoke their unsatisfactory with the system.

*Please provide us with brief information about the component of our semester fees (08).*

*The information about student fees is not clear (confused) and transparent. The Graduate Research Assistance's allowance is not suitable with living cost in here (09).*

There are always procedures in every process but it need to be shorten for customer's satisfaction. A few respondents stated their opinion about the slow process.

*Please shorten the bureaucracy path (07).*

*IO is not on time in their service especially for foreign students who want to make multiple entries. I want IO to give more attention in their service for foreign students especially about continuing passport (11).*

Some of the students need more parking since most of them are off-campus.

*Parking facilities for students are very limited although the campus has a very large ground (02).*

From the survey asked, postgraduate students' access to computers and the Internet within the faculty may also need some consideration. Only half of the respondents found access to computers very accessible, while 2 respondents indicated that the use of computer facilities did not apply to them. This might indicate that these students have access to their own computers and therefore do not need computers on campus, which makes sense as many of the postgraduate students are non-residential students. The same general trend applies to the respondents' perception of Internet access.

The majority of respondents found the general library services very accessible, while only half of the respondents perceived the electronic journals as very accessible. This is worrisome as many students are non-residential and therefore do not have direct easy access to the library services and may find electronic resources useful. The perceived accessibility of the inter-loan services at the library was perceived as accessible. Off-campus access to libraries and various library services may need to be expanded, or the information in this regards needs to be made more accessible.

Support services such Student Support Services and Agriculture Park seem underutilized at present. Not all postgraduate students may have a need for these types of support, but consideration needs to be given to the different needs of postgraduate and off-campus users (in comparison to the mass needs of undergraduate residential students). Part-time and non-residential students may find it difficult to access these services, as they are mainly offered on campus.

### *3.2 Research Needs in Postgraduate Studies*

In terms of research support, the students from science and engineering always complained regarding equipment for their research.

*Equipment or apparatus for research should be available within campus (03).*

The institution should give more attention to research. This involved each level and departments.

*The department and supervisor should help the students to enhance their knowledge and guide the student in research quality (09).*

Research center need to play its role in promoting research outcome.

*Research Center must be clear in providing guidelines for research outcome such as planning and organizing; and must be specific on goals (12).*

There are reports regarding their supervisor. Issue of supervision needs to be handled effectively.

*Lecturers/ supervisors should help students more instead of letting them on their own. Guide students from the first step especially out campus students and those who had to travel from places. They took the effort to come and at the end of the day they become so frustrated with the facility/advices provides (13).*

*Supervisor must have track about his students. Supervisor should play vital role in students' research (15).*

What is interesting in this study is that several respondents discussed on how they changed over the time. It is less dependent when it comes to easy tasks and becomes more dependent especially in data analysis stage. In the early stage, the supervisor seems to involve more in the research process, for example in deciding research topic, title and preparing the proposal. However, the involvement of supervisor depends on the difficulty of research stage afterwards. As time goes, the supervisor may be less directly involved and more to guide the students; check the progress and give advice on related issue.

In terms of research support such as research grant management should be improved.

*Fund's Grant can be transferred to allocate grant holder by phase but make sure it is transferred on time so that the research assistance gets paid on time (06).*

In terms of student support, a respondent stated that:

*Provide online forum for every courses/ subjects so that student can share their knowledge/ problems with other students (02).*

The most noticeable findings indicate that selecting a research topic, preparing a title, planning the research schedule/milestone and writing skills is not deemed as difficult research-related tasks by a major part of the respondents. However, gathering all related sources/conducting literature review, writing a research proposal, using appropriate computer program and technical aspects are seen as more difficult tasks the respondents have to complete.

Difficulties or problematic experienced aspects reported by the respondents included a lack of time management skills, including balancing their various responsibilities as adult learners. Other work responsibilities would often take precedence over studies, especially if there were not financial gain to be had from continuing studies. Feelings of isolation and a lack of motivation were also noted as hindrances to success by some respondents. One respondent noted that the continuous work load postgraduate studies demands can be problematic, in that it differs from the focus on summative assessment usually done at the undergraduate level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results obtained in this study are indicative of postgraduate students' needs during their progress through a postgraduate program. It is not easy for them to overcome all these problems as they have other commitment such as family, job and self-management in terms of emotional, finance, etc. Students' experience and perception of their studies have become essential in producing student-oriented environment. Students' perception of quality in institutions of higher learning should be considered as the most valuable information in providing world class education. This will be the foundation of developing a learner-centered resource for postgraduate students in order to provide quality education with enhancement in information and services and also supervisory practices.

Higher education is becoming more competitive and continuously improving their services. There are a few suggestions regarding this issue that could be considered such as website development and online application, academic-based seminar series, more academic feedback, invite specific people or expert to seminars, more social gatherings, input from re visiting scholars, orientation/ welcome meeting/induction pack/needs analysis, sharing of resources/ online information about everyone's research, students being seen as colleagues, online modules from other supervisors and buddy system for international students extended to all students (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). These suggestions hopefully can enhance the students' quality and amplify university's reputation.

#### **5. Limitation of Study**

The study in this paper was conducted in a public university in Malaysia. Thus, it is limited only to graduate students in that university. However, the generalization of the outcome can be propagated to other institutions with similar environment. This study was only focusing on the general aspect of service and supervision. Further study in philosophy of student-supervisor relationship needs to be addressed for every stage of supervision. The outcome of this study should be practiced and examined to see how far the implementation of the outcome as a success.

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