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INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

The twin forces of globalisation and internationalisation witnessed the global democratisation of higher education leading to the mushrooming of institutions of higher learning alongside with the rapid increase in student enrolments at all levels including postgraduate study. Despite the rapid developments in higher education, postgraduate study has been plagued with high attrition and low completion rates. Consequently, there is a need to look into delivery systems to ensure students are not short-changed and quality education and delivery systems are maintained at all times. This paper aims to investigate institutional support provided for postgraduate study in Malaysia. This descriptive study involved a total of 121 supervisors and 209 postgraduate students from two public universities in Malaysia. Data for the study were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that students and supervisors were moderately satisfied with the information support provided by their respective institutions with regards to postgraduate study and courses. Nevertheless, students felt that institutional support was lacking in terms of facilities, professional development and opportunities for setting up learning communities. Supervisors too expressed the need for better postgraduate facilities, professional development and sought for more transparency in terms of grant and fellowship applications. Both groups also voiced concern regarding the knowledge, skills and attitude of administrators and clerical staff. These findings have implications for the need of quality delivery systems, especially institutional support for postgraduate study.

Keywords: *Institutional Support, Postgraduates, Postgraduate Study.*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Information Age witnessed the global wave for democratisation and massification of education at all levels including higher education. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) pointed out that this expansion resulted in a “remarkable increase in student enrolment in tertiary institutions around the globe” (OECD 2008, p. 41). This increase was also seen in Malaysian institutions of higher learning (IHL hereafter) where participation rates in postgraduate study reached a gross enrolment rate of 48% in 2012. According to the Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2012-2025 (Ministry of Education, Malaysia 2015), this represented a 70% increase in the last decade showing a six fold increase at the undergraduate level and a tenfold increase in postgraduate study. This dramatic increase in postgraduate enrolment brought together with its myriad issues of concern such as a rise in attrition rates, low completion rates for postgraduate study and unemployment. According to Crosling *et al.* (2015), these issues have significant implications for higher education providers. Besides impacting on an institution’s reputation and income, there are also financial repercussions, loss of opportunities for students and loss of potential for the community and workforce at large.

Sidhu (2013) and Ssegawa and Rwelamila (2009) highlighted that there are numerous reasons for the high attrition and low completion rates among postgraduate students. Besides student deficiencies, aspects such as poor supervision processes and inappropriate research facilities are often cited as contributory factors. Adding to this discourse, Carroll *et al.* (2009) classified student non-completion within a framework which -highlighted three main factors i.e. situational, dispositional and institutional. Situational factors include situations and circumstances within a student’s life whilst dispositional or attitudinal factors include an individual’s or community’s beliefs, values and attitudes that may inhibit a student’s participation. Finally, institutional factors include factors such as the processes, the procedures, the structures and the politics within an IHL.

Researchers like Donald *et al.* (1995) and Spear (2000) emphasize that institutional support is of prime importance to both students and supervisors alike. Although establishing support systems may be a daunting task for all institutions, Hallett (2010) claimed that they are as important as the

delivery of the courses. Effective postgraduate study requires IHL to provide adequate institutional support that can satisfy the needs of both instructors and students as it will not only enhance the teaching and learning process but will also assist in student achievement and student retention while portraying a positive image of the institution (Carroll *et al.* 2009). A study conducted by Norhasni Zainal Abiddin (2007) revealed that postgraduate students need excellent facilities that enable them to study in a conducive environment. Hence, providing a high quality environment becomes another crucial factor that students look for when they choose an institution to study besides high quality supervisors. This view is supported by previous researchers (i.e. Philips & Pugh, 2000; Spear, 2000) who highlighted that if good facilities are provided to the students, they will be able to speed up their work.

Therefore, there is a need for institutions to provide up-to-date information on the latest processes and procedures to both students and supervisors for effective postgraduate study (Burton & Brueckner, 1995). This should include information and guidelines on aspects such as course-specific information that is accurate, up-to-date and accessible via a range of mediums. In addition, IHLs should also provide information on finance and available funding because understanding costs and where students can go for help are very beneficial to students. Providing clear information on admission processes including timeline and communication mechanisms and decision making processes must be made transparent to all parties. IHLs are also required to provide information on academic procedures and policies including the amount of coursework and types of research study that must be taken by the students (Frischer & Larsson, 2000).

Institutional support also includes providing students and instructors appropriate learning environments that can enhance the establishment of learning communities. Philips and Pugh (2000) stated that by providing better facilities and appropriate learning environments, students can make better progress in their studies. Spear (2000) concurred that the provision of good facilities can help IHLs establish a good research reputation for the university as well as develop learning communities among postgraduate students. They elaborated that such a move can help attract students to choose the university to pursue their studies. IHLs need to provide facilities such as well-equipped library facilities, photocopying facilities and laboratory

equipment. Postgraduate rooms should also be equipped with desks, computers, printers and good internet connectivity (Haksever & Manisali, 2000). With the presence of well-equipped and conducive postgraduate rooms, students will be encouraged to form learning communities that can further motivate them to complete their postgraduate studies successfully.

Adding to this discussion, Lues and Lategan (2006) hold the view that IHLs are responsible for conducting various workshops and seminars for both students and supervisors to support the teaching and learning process. Such postgraduate activities help provide useful opportunities for both students and supervisors to develop their research skills and knowledge. Besides that, such workshops can enhance and expand students and supervisors' academic network. Additionally, Conrad (2006) explained that it is important for the institution to give support and train their staff, especially inexperienced staff. Staff should join various seminars and workshops, for a better exposure - to research skills. This would enable them to improve their competence and confidence in completing their postgraduate studies. In addition, Jancye and Burns (2013) noted that there are few studies that have looked into the satisfaction levels of postgraduate students with regards to institutional support. Although this area is beginning to gain prominence in the west, there is little empirical evidence of institutional support studies in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper hopes to close the research gap by investigating institutional support for postgraduate study in Malaysia.

METHOD

This descriptive study employed a mixed methods approach which involved both quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures. Using a mixed methods approach in understanding research is supported by researchers such as Creswell and Clark (2006) and Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2012). For this reason, data were collected using two questionnaires (Supervisor & Student questionnaires) and semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in two public universities, which will be referred to as "University A" and "University B" in this study. The population sample comprised two main groups referred to as Sample A and Sample B. Sample A consisted of postgraduate supervisors and students who responded to the questionnaires whilst Sample B consisted of respondents who were involved

in the semi-structured interviews. Respondents were randomly selected from two faculties (Social Science and Pure Science) in each university and comprised 121 postgraduate supervisors and 209 postgraduate students. To maintain respondents' confidentiality, all the respondents were coded as R1 to R209 for the students and L1 to L121 for the lecturers cum postgraduate supervisors. For the interview sessions, two supervisors and five students were selected from each faculty resulting in a total of 8 interviews with supervisors and 20 interviews with students. Supervisors and students who were available and volunteered were interviewed. They were required to give their views, opinions, comments, suggestions, and recommendations on institutional support based on their experience either as postgraduate supervisors or students. Keeping in line with research ethics, these three supervisors were given pseudonyms such as S1, S2 and S3 while student respondents were coded as RA, RB and RC.

The questionnaire used in this study was adapted from a study conducted by Sidhu, Chan and Farhana (2013). Apart from that, the researcher also adapted some items from the questionnaire developed by the AKEPT Centre for Teaching and Learning, Ministry of Education Malaysia. The questionnaire developed in this study was referred to as the Postgraduate Supervision Questionnaire (PGSQ, hereafter). The PGSQ was divided into two sections. Section A explored the demographic profile of the respondents. Section B comprised 14 items which looked into the satisfaction levels among supervisors and students towards institutional support in postgraduate education. Respondents were required to read and respond to the items based on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 to 5. A rating of '1' indicated 'very dissatisfied' whilst a rating of 5 indicated 'Very Satisfied'. The reliability of the respondents' responses to the questionnaire was tested using the Cronbach's coefficient alpha on a group of 30 students from University A who were not involved in the pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha reliability for the questionnaire was .904 ($\alpha=.904$) indicating it was very highly reliable (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

RESULTS

The first aspect explored in this study was respondents' level of satisfaction with regards to information on procedures, processes and guidelines

to postgraduate study. The findings presented in Table I -show that postgraduate supervisors were moderately satisfied (M=3.15) with the information provided with regards to process and procedures (M=3.34, SD=.563) including supervisors’ and students’ roles and responsibilities in postgraduate study. They however felt that information regarding facilities for postgraduate students (M=2.53), resources available (M=2.50) and information on obtaining financial grants and fellowship applications (M=2.28, SD=.733) left much to be desired.

Interview sessions with supervisors further corroborated these findings. The supervisors in general expressed satisfaction with information on processes and procedures including their roles and responsibilities. They further elaborated that each supervisor was provided with a handbook by their respective postgraduate departments. When this aspect was probed further, Respondent S3 from University A highlighted that all *“looks fine on paper but implementation of certain procedures such as the defense of the research proposal (DRP) needs to further fine-tuned”* as he felt that *“some examiners were just too strict and demanding at this early stage of the candidate’s candidature.”* He was also supported by Respondent S1 from the same university who also felt that certain guidelines regarding the DRP needed to be relooked. She highlighted that *“some examiners who sat on the DRP panel, were not active researchers and lacked the experience to sit on the panel.”*

Table I: Supervisors’ Satisfaction with Regards to Procedures and Guidelines (n=121)

Items	Mean	SD
Processes and procedures on postgraduate study	3.34	.563
Course-specific information at the faculty/school	3.76	.775
Information on the facilities available (e.g. postgraduate room)	2.53	.196
Resources available (e.g. databases, journals, books etc.)	2.50	.828
Guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of supervisors	3.49	.838
Guidelines for submission of final theses	3.48	.877
Guidelines and procedures for viva	3.43	.845

Guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of postgraduate candidates	3.42	.864
Guidelines and procedures on preparation for research proposal	3.29	.899
Information on grant/fellowship applications for professional dev.	2.28	.733
Overall:	3.15	.742

(Scale: 1= Very Dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Almost Satisfied, 4= Satisfied, 5= Very Satisfied)

Besides that, interview sessions also revealed that a majority of the supervisors felt that IHLs took student development seriously but the professional development of supervisors took a backseat. They highlighted that “*more money needs to be put into the training of supervisors*” (Respondent S5) and supervisors must be provided with “*more detailed guidelines and opportunities for fellowship and grant applications*” (Respondents S1, S6 & S7). Respondents S2 and S4 questioned the transparency of IHLs in disseminating information on grant and fellowship applications.

Findings displayed in Table II further show that students also expressed satisfaction towards institutional support in disseminating the required information. They were satisfied with information and guidelines on the student registration (M=3.85, SD=.862), the roles and responsibility of students (M=4.01, SD=.849) and supervisors (M=3.82, SD=.053) in postgraduate study. They were also happy with information on the preparation of their research proposal (M=3.92, SD=.865) and submission of final theses. They however expressed disappointment with regards to the dissemination of information regarding grant/fellowship applications (M=2.38, SD=.041).

The findings in Table II were further verified by respondents during the interview sessions. Majority of the students felt that their respective institutions had things in place with regards to student registration and they understood the processes and procedures for the preparation of research proposal, their defense of the proposal and submission guidelines. For instance, student respondent RK stressed that he “*had no problems with guidelines and procedures for university and postgraduate study but I would like to see and get more information on how I can get financial help to present*

papers and attend conferences.” This was also echoed by respondents RF and RP who voiced appreciation of the rules and regulations in place for study but felt that they could do with more help and support in helping them attend seminar and conferences.

Table II: Students’ Satisfaction with regards to Procedures and Guidelines (n=209)

Items	Mean	SD
Guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of postgraduate candidates	4.01	.849
Guidelines and procedures on preparation for research proposal	3.92	.865
Guidelines and procedures for viva	3.88	.953
Guidelines on university registration procedures	3.85	.862
Guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of supervisors	3.82	.053
Guidelines for submission of final theses	3.67	.957
Information regarding grant/fellowship applications	2.38	.041
Overall:	3.85	0.94

(Scale: 1= Very Dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Almost Satisfied, 4= Satisfied, 5= Very Satisfied)

The results in Table III show the satisfaction level of supervisors and students’ on various other aspects of institutional support. The findings showed that both groups -were moderately satisfied with information on postgraduate programmes and courses offered in their respective institutions. Both groups -were also satisfied with information provided on resources available. Interview sessions with supervisors further revealed that University A conducts guided tours of the library and workshops at the beginning of each semester for all registered postgraduates. Students also confirmed that the tours and workshops provided were beneficial and gave them an insight into all the available resources and databases found in the library. Student respondent RB from University A further reiterated that she was very *“thankful that the postgraduate department conducts courses and tours of the library because these workshops inform us of the latest resources available and I find it very helpful for my study.”*

Table III: Level of Satisfaction on Overall Institutional Support

Items	Supervisors		Students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Information about PG programme & courses	3.76	.775	3.54	.065
Information on the facilities available (PG room, etc.)	3.53	.078	2.75	.096
Information on the resources available (e.g. databases, journals, books etc.)	4.32	.828	3.92	.981
Institutional support for building a PG learning community	2.44	.836	2.80	.993
Professional development activities for PG students (e.g. workshops/ graduate research seminars/ talks)	3.41	.712	2.81	.974
Opportunities for postgraduate students to interact with one another	3.12	.053	2.89	.921
Helpful, skilled and knowledgeable administrators	2.12	.098	1.39	.975
Overall:	2.99	.483	2.86	.715

Scale: 1= Very Dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Almost Satisfied, 4= Satisfied, 5= Very Satisfied

Another aspect explored in the study was the facilities available in the two universities. The supervisors expressed moderate satisfaction ($M=3.53$, $SD=.078$), whereas the students felt otherwise ($M=2.75$, $SD=.096$). The main grouses for students and supervisors alike were the lack of conducive learning environments /spaces and poor internet connectivity. Overall interview data also revealed that students in University B expressed more satisfaction with regards to postgraduate facilities and internet connectivity when compared to their counterparts in University A. For instance, student respondent RF from University A felt that the postgraduate rooms in his institution were rather “*small and cramped places where it was impossible to have the privacy needed for study*”. She further elaborated that internet connectivity was poor. She explained that the postgraduate rooms were lacking in terms of social activities and working space. She said:

‘I find it difficult to work at home because I live with my in-laws and my children are still small... so I have to come to campus and work in the PG room... honestly I am rather disappointed as the

space is rather small and limited. If I am a little late I do not have a place to work as there are only a few work cubicles... I do not like working in open spaces as it is rather distracting... I hope we have better PG rooms around campus.'

Her sentiments were also shared by another student respondent (RC) also from University A who felt that the facilities for postgraduate students were “*very limited and poor*” and what was offered in the university were only tokenistic. He highlighted that the PG room in his faculty is ‘*so small and only 5 students can work there for any one moment in time... furthermore the printer is always out of ink... and what is most frustrating is that the PG facilitator in the room always watches over you like a hawk... it is most unwelcoming... hence I rather go to the library than the PG room.*’

Student dissatisfaction with facilities was also echoed when discussing their opportunities to interact with other students (M=2.89, SD=.921). They felt that their institutions were also not able to provide the necessary institutional support in building a postgraduate learning community (M=2.80, SD=.993) which is of utmost importance in postgraduate study. They were of the opinion that their institutions fell short of providing quality professional development activities such as workshops, graduate research seminars and talks (M=2.81, SD=.974). In the same vein, supervisors’ views concurred with the students as they felt that their institutions failed to provide the necessary support for building a postgraduate learning community (M=2.44, SD=.836). However, they expressed moderate satisfaction with regards to providing professional development programmes and opportunities for them to interact with themselves. Respondent S8 from University B felt that students will be motivated if they have conducive learning environment that can encourage peer discussion. This was further corroborated by Supervisor S1 from University A who claimed that facilities play a vital role to enhance learning communities among students because

“Students need each other. They need to socialize... peer discussion is very important. Sometimes they are afraid to share their ideas with their supervisor. But if we have adequate facilities such as conducive postgraduate rooms and learning spaces, they can meet and be engaged in intellectual discourses on research. This is what we want-- a learning culture among our postgraduate students.”

Nevertheless, both groups agreed that institutional administrators left much to be desired. The supervisors ($M=2.12$ $SD=.989$) and students ($M=1.39$, $SD=.975$) highlighted that the administrators, especially the clerical staff and librarians, were not very knowledgeable and skilled. Student interviews further revealed that clerical support staff was '*sometimes rude*', '*short tempered*', '*unkind*' and '*not willing to help*'. For example, student respondent RH from University B claimed that '*the clerks and librarians were not very helpful and often viewed students as ignorant fools... they treat lecturers better than us and often keep us waiting and sometimes even hang up when we are talking to them.*'

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that students and supervisors were moderately satisfied with the information provided by their respective institutions with regards to postgraduate study, courses and thesis writing. They felt that information on postgraduate facilities, educational resources such as databases and reference materials and information of professional development left much to be desired. On the other hand, students felt that institutional support was lacking in terms of facilities, professional development and opportunities for them to interact and engage in intellectual discourse. Supervisors concurred that postgraduate students needed better facilities that could encourage the establishment of learning communities. They also voiced concern over the lack of transparency in terms of grant and fellowship applications. Both groups also voiced concern regarding the knowledge, skills and attitude of administrators and clerical staff. These findings have implications for institutional support of postgraduate education in Malaysia.

It is important to note that effective postgraduate study requires good institutional support in aspects such as clear guidelines including specific policies and procedures in supervision and the writing of the research thesis. Philips and Pugh (2000) reiterated that by providing good facilities to students such as postgraduate rooms equipped with computers, printers and internet connectivity, students can make good use of the appropriate learning environment and progress to graduate on time. Brabazon (2009) in putting forward her ten-point ideas pointed out that we can doctor

the system by pooling a university's resources to establish a centralised graduate centre and improve the top-down organisational culture of doctoral education. She further stressed that it is only by grasping the PhD as a 'whole of-institution' qualification can we begin to create 'whole-of-institution' solutions. However, Smith (2000) noted that there is no one single factor that can contribute to a successful postgraduate study but quality is a common and integral theme that cuts across all factors. She further reiterated that in quality postgraduate education, there is a need to maintain and achieve quality in all factors, including the numerous facets of institutional support.

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