

The Learning Experience of Postgraduate Students: Emergent Themes

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Introduction

In recent years, postgraduate education in Malaysian public universities has undergone tremendous changes. A variety of trends and factors continue to affect higher education institutions that offer postgraduate programmes to a large number of local and foreign postgraduate students. The transformation of higher education from a selected elite clientele to a wider deserving target is not only restricted to the undergraduate level but also applies to postgraduate education. In Universiti Sains Malaysia, the number of postgraduate student enrolments has increased three folds. The present enrolment of 5,289 students is distributed in 39 schools and four Centres of Excellence in the fields of Medicine, Science and Technology, Engineering and Arts. Currently there are 892 foreign postgraduate students, mainly from the Middle East (Handbook, Institute of Graduate Studies, USM, 2005).

The “performance chasm” in academic success among postgraduate students is a topic which concerns numerous interested parties involved in offering graduate studies programmes either by mixed mode or research modes. University educators have engaged in important discussions and dialogue about the need for postgraduate education to develop broad repertoires of literacy practice that will build on students’ specific academic disciplines, cultural and linguistic diversity and expand their knowledge base and skills in an effective manner so that they can be assured of a high quality education at their respective higher education institutions. However, for teachers facing issues of student diversity among current postgraduate enrolments in public universities in Malaysia, the realities can pose other complexities particularly pertaining to current pedagogic realities. The diversity in students’ prior learning is more complex now than in the past. Then university teachers only had to deal with fairly homogenous graduate student populations. Our students now represent “multifarious histories, expectations and responses and these are continually being shaped and reshaped in an interaction of student agency with socioculturally and politically formed pedagogic imperatives” (Scott, 2005: 298).

Notwithstanding these global forces and intentions affecting the offering of postgraduate education, some educators point to a potential dissonance between the kinds of actual student learning experience and the expected learning outcomes that employers want exhibited at the workplace. Consequently, the task of evaluating student learning experience in postgraduate education is a research activity worth carrying out as the outcomes of such an evaluative endeavour can point out to researchers and university educators the

various mismatches that would not be immediately known otherwise. This is especially so in a rapidly developing country such as Malaysia, which is experiencing waves of globalisation and internationalisation in her effort to steer healthy economic growth in all sectors. Arguably, adopting a realistic stance in evaluating learner experience is crucial in any academic setting. Students and university teachers continue to display the tendency to define postgraduate experience in terms of only ‘transmitting and accumulating knowledge’ during the course of their postgraduate teaching and learning.

The Context of Previous Research

Student perceptions about their learning experience have a long history in educational research in terms of its legitimacy and importance. In these spheres of inquiry, most researchers employ quantitative methodology to gather large volumes of data on students’ perceptions of education quality. Although quantitative research is still highly valued, qualitative enquiry, which gives a deeper impression of the experience of an educational programme has enabled researchers to have greater appreciation of the unintended outcomes as well as the achievement of specific objectives (Light and Cox, 2001).

Postgraduate students and postgraduate courses are a rapidly growing element of many higher education systems worldwide. Master’s students frequently seek taught courses that meet specialised professional and personal concerns, and they are “discerning and frequently demanding students” (Knight, 1997; cited in Lindsay, Breen and Jenkins, 2002: 324). Postgraduate students often pay for their education themselves, and arguably as a result, their perceptions of what they receive have added force, both for themselves, and for departments and institutions seeking to attract them and meet their needs. Jenkins et al. (2002) note that one clear policy implication for researching postgraduate students is that it introduces a new element into the equation of student evaluation research – that of the ‘salience’ factor, which individual staff, course teams and departments should take into account. This, to some extent, necessitates that higher education providers devise formal and informational strategies to show that such course structures are ‘salient’ to student concerns, including in part the induction of a belief that choosing the course was an economically sound decision (Lindsay, Breen and Jenkins, 2002). Although most of these strategies may necessarily be course-specific, it may also be useful for departments to continuously promote research activities on the

ongoing evaluation of the postgraduate courses it offers so that the needs of the students are always given central importance.

Method

In semester II of the 2005/06 academic session, a qualitative study of 30 postgraduate students studying for their MA in English Language and Linguistics at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was carried out. The researchers team taught the MA course together. The overall aim of the project was to identify what the postgraduate students consider to be important issues related to their student experience in the MA course. By adopting a qualitative approach, the researchers used both student narratives and a combination of individual and select focus group interviews in their data collection stage. Focus group interviews (in groups of 4 students at a time) were held with a significant number of the postgraduate students. As the researchers were keen to explore various kinds of concerns experienced by the postgraduate students, they also asked students to hand in written narratives (2-3 pages) at the end of the semester. The researchers provided input (by means of a guided worksheet) on the types of information they wanted the students to discuss or write about in their narrative writing. The information sought included students' personal details (age, gender, marital status, country of origin and work experience), the knowledge, values and skills they have learned from the MA course, professional and personal values to which they put their knowledge to use and specific learning problems they encountered in the MA course as well as any other issues or suggestions deemed relevant by the respondents.

Results

Profile of Postgraduate Students

In this MA in Linguistics and English Studies (mixed mode) course, the respondents comprised 7 foreign postgraduate students (1 Iranian, 2 Jordanians, 2 Yemenis, 1 Egyptian and 1 Japanese) and 23 Malaysian postgraduate students. The Malaysian postgraduates are from the following ethnic groups: Malay (9), Chinese (4), Indian (9) and one Eurasian student. Almost three quarters of the postgraduate students are married (73.3 per cent) and are teachers (86.7 per cent). Only 2 Malaysian postgraduate students were currently not working. All the foreign postgraduate students were following the MA course on a full-time basis and were not in employment in Malaysia. However, 5 of them worked as teachers in their countries of origin before coming to Malaysia. In contrast, most of the Malaysian postgraduates were part-timers and most of them were currently teaching English in secondary schools (70.0 per cent).

Reasons for Embarking on MA Studies

Among the main reasons cited were: achieving personal fulfilment and advancement, continuing education after first degree, pursuing further knowledge, learning to do research in the field, inspiring their children and having

the chance to pursue high quality postgraduate education with affordable tuition fees. Additionally, most of the foreign postgraduate Muslim students said they felt safer studying in Malaysia than in other English-speaking countries because of the negative effects of the 9-11 terrorist attacks in 2001 worldwide.

Knowledge, Values and Contacts Acquired by Students

In most student narratives, the foreign postgraduate students wrote extensively about the knowledge, values and contacts they acquired in the process of their studies in USM. During the focus-group interview sessions, most Malaysian students discussed with the researchers that they have learned valuable research skills and honed their academic writing ability. Some of the students candidly spoke about key values that the course helped bring out in them. These values included being more hardworking, managing their time well and being accountable for what they say and do. Some spoke at length about the value of teamwork for group assignments and most of the postgraduate students enjoyed the related learning experience.

Professional and Personal Values Acquired by Students

With regard to learning experiences, some of the postgraduates expressed positive benefits that they gained from the various presentations and seminars they participated in their MA programme. This seemed to provide an opportunity for a broader outlook and greater maturity, which outweighed the academic course itself. In general, the focus group interviews revealed that many students were conscious of a new 'experience curve' and despite some frustrations along the way (for both the Malaysian and foreign students), most of them were beginning to experience feelings of confidence. In highlighting how the MA course affected their personal values, almost all the postgraduate students mentioned the following traits: hardworking, disciplined to read more journal articles, learned to set realistic goals, more focused and improved time management skills.

Specific Learning Problems Encountered

Language difficulties were cited by most of the students as being the main obstacle to academic adjustment to their programme. Most of the foreign postgraduate students spoke at length on this aspect. However, many of the Malay Malaysian students aired their concerns of their inability to write research papers effectively in English. Writing was an extremely frustrating experience for postgraduate students who although have a good knowledge of the subject matter struggled to express their points eloquently. For some of the postgraduate students, their limited English proficiency and poor argumentation skills were inextricably linked. It has been argued that 'study shock' (Burns, 1991: 61) can be experienced by students shifting between different cultures of learning. One of the biggest differences that foreign postgraduate students encounter is the emphasis on independent, critical thought that is often encouraged by the course lecturers in this MA course.

Implications and Recommendations

The emergent themes suggest that postgraduates who have enrolled in this MA programme have benefited greatly from the course as it has equipped them with the right knowledge, values and contacts to enable them to become competent researchers and effective teachers. However, it needs to be noted that language difficulties and socio-cultural adjustments were cited as the main obstacles to their learning process. The latter certainly has wider implications for USM as this means providing a range of facilities to postgraduates that can help to promote and support good practices in all aspects of learning and managing learning at this level. Since enrolment of postgraduate students have multiplied over the years, particularly among the international student cohorts who may have problems reading and writing in English Language, it is highly recommended that the university sets up a Reading and Writing Centre for Postgraduates. This centre should offer on-going workshops and seminars that could help develop the four basic skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking. At the school level, it is also recommended that reading groups be established with the aim of helping postgraduate students to read and understand the content or subject matter of the various courses. During these sessions, postgraduate students and lecturers meet on a regular basis to discuss issues raised in the articles from a critical perspective.

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Conclusion

In general, it is found that there are a number of common themes that run parallel in the personal narratives and the interview sessions. Essentially, these include the pressures of undertaking and coping with the requirements of postgraduate work, the initial difficulties encountered when adjusting to a new environment and academic culture, the problems of reading academic texts in a critical manner and writing using appropriate academic language, the lack of knowledge in research skills, and different cultural expectations, particularly when it involves the relationship between lecturers and students. It is crucial that the university take steps to provide the much-needed support and facilities to these postgraduates especially since the number of postgraduate enrolments have multiplied over time. The suggestions to set up a Reading and Writing Centre for Postgraduates, the creation of reading groups and the introduction of a properly structured "Orientation" programme are timely as these will certainly help to enhance the quality of our postgraduates and their research output. In addition, the university should also upgrade its facilities by improving the facilities offered by the library and to house more books and journals that are current and much-needed in the disciplines of Linguistics and Literature. The steps mentioned here are necessary and ought to be taken if the university aims to establish itself as a centre of academic excellence on par with universities of international repute.

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