# A Qualitative Study of Postgraduate Students' Learning Experiences

# in Malaysia

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**Abstract**

In Malaysia, postgraduate coursework and research training have expanded significantly in attracting both domestic and international students from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. The task of evaluating the student learning experience in postgraduate education can point out to researchers and university educators various mismatches that would not be immediately known otherwise. In this study, 83 MA and MEd students in two public universities in Malaysia submitted written narratives to discuss their postgraduate learning experiences. Of this total, 10% of the respondents (12 postgraduate students) also volunteered to be interviewed. The findings of this qualitative study showed that the following dimensions impacted on students' learning experiences: knowledge, values and contacts acquired, professional and personal values acquired and specific learning problems encountered. The implications of the results of this study suggest that public universities in Malaysia can take proactive steps to celebrate learner diversity when addressing students' difficulties in their continuous effort to further enhance support and facilities for their postgraduate students.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate students, Learning experiences, Qualitative study, Higher education, Professionalism

## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, educational systems in many countries in the Asia Pacific region have undergone significant changes in so far as programmes of reform and restructuring of higher education (both in the provision of undergraduate and postgraduate education) are concerned. In contemporary higher education systems, there is always a conscious effort to align these innovations to respond to the ever changing economic, social and political contexts within which higher education takes place. The push for change is a result of continuous pressure on educational systems to change and this has come from stakeholders such as students, parents and employers alike. Notwithstanding this, there has also been a rapid growth in demand for access to education at all levels, with demand for postgraduate education escalating in some developing countries. In Malaysia, for instance, there has been a marked increase in postgraduate numbers in many public universities since 2002 and as such, postgraduate education in Malaysia has undergone tremendous changes and a variety of trends and factors continue to affect higher education institutions offering a range of postgraduate programmes to diverse students. Kaur & Abdul Manan (2008, p. 14) account for this change as stemming from the "continued demands from students, university administrators and policy makers for access to a greater share of the population to meet the needs of new economies that require trained and qualified employees in today's increasingly globalised workplaces". Since 2005, the Graduate School in Universiti Sains Malaysia reported a three fold increase since the 1990s to the present enrolment of over 5,000 postgraduate students who are enrolled in 39 schools and four centres of excellence in the areas of Medicine, Science and Technology, Engineering and Arts (Handbook, Institute of Graduate Studies, 2008).

The provision of postgraduate education in many countries often takes the form of graduate studies either by mixed mode or research modes. University educators have engaged in active discourses on 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. Indeed, while these discourses continue to

contribute significantly towards improving postgraduate education, issues such as student diversity among postgraduate enrolments in some contexts, Malaysia is a good example in point, give rise to concern about 'performance chasms' in academic success among students as the realities often pose other complexities concerning current pedagogic practices. With increasing participation of Middle East students in the landscape of postgraduate education in Malaysian public universities, the diversity of students' prior learning is more complex in its realization than in the past, when university teachers only had to deal with fairly homogenous graduate student populations. The participation of international students in Malaysian higher education stood at 30,397 students in 2002 but at the end of 2007, the number increased to 47, 849 (Wan, Kaur & Jantan, 2008). The international mobility of the student is currently an important concern for most higher education institutions in the Asia Pacific region as the concept of higher education as a 'market' has a long history in some countries, such as the Phillipines, Indonesia and Korea (Yonezawa, 2007). With transnational higher education now becoming popular, student diversity is now more commonplace and as Scott (2005, p. 298) points out, 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".

Arguably, the provision of postgraduate education in many developed and developing countries has been in response to increasing demands of students (both traditional and non-traditional students who either follow courses on a full-time or part-time basis) who realize the value of postgraduate education in enhancing their career prospects. This trend is in response to the now greater mobility of capital, information and ideologies and of people and this has significantly enhanced the nature of economic activity, creating new forms of global markets, global competition and global management for today's global economy is characterized as "informational, knowledge-based, post-industrial and service-oriented" (Rizvi, Engel, Nandyala, Rutkowski & Sparks, 2005, p. 3). Following this trend, there is a pronounced need for new post-Fordist regimes of labour management and a new kind of worker that education must now produce. Hence, the proliferation of postgraduate courses has been evolving in the past two decades. Knight (1997, p. 149) observes that "coursework master's courses have proliferated in old industrialized countries and the signs are that the same is happening in industrializing countries". While this trend has been observed in some Asia Pacific countries, in Malaysia too similar patters of postgraduate coursework and research training have expanded proportionately more than undergraduate work and postgraduate student intakes too have seen significant increases in numbers largely due to initiatives taken by public universities to aggressively market graduate programmes in ASEAN and Middle Eastern countries as well as within Malaysia. Notwithstanding these trends, there is much to be learned from postgraduate teaching and learning especially in relation to the increasing social, economic and political pressures placed on providing quality education as institutions now have to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness through performance indicators, teaching assessments and quality audits intended to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Penny, 2003; Akerlind, 2004).

## 2. Professionalism in Teaching

In general, education can be viewed as either a public good (benefiting the general public) or a private good (providing benefits to the individual consumer). Under the conditions of globalisation, internationalization and marketisation, this distinction might not always hold as education has increasingly become linked to the logic of the market (Rizvi et al., 2005). Labaree (1997) observed that education has traditionally been thought to have three distinct but sometimes, competing purposes: democratic equality, social mobility and social efficiency. While these three purposes of education are not mutually exclusive, educational ideologies have often involved giving precedence to one over others. The scholarship of teaching is indeed a key concern for teachers at any level for the general aim of teaching is to make student learning possible. As any educator will realize, while this aim seems simple in nature, it is often plagued by many complexities, uncertainties and dilemmas because teaching as a professional activity is not value-free for it is undertaken within one or more possible paradigms or world views (Magennis & Farrell, 2005). While this suggests that teaching is a process that deals with new input when one already has certain acquired knowledge, the process of learning is necessarily a complex one, involving putting together an array of understandings and knowledge that a person already possesses, with new incoming information (Abdul Rahim & Abdul Manan, 2008). In a sense, it makes reference to the need to support learning in higher education contexts by viewing it widely in that it can have a wide range of goals, disciplines and contexts of any professional activity. Devising academic frameworks that support and validate support for learners in the higher education sector has therefore been viewed by many as being an ambiguous task.

Within the realm of postgraduate teaching, there have been calls to professionalize teaching practices as this will enhance the scholarship of teaching for underlying this premise is the notion that teaching is all about learning (Boyer, 1990). In Boyer's terms (1990, p. 24), good teaching "means that faculty, as scholars, are also learners" as they continually need to reflect on their teaching activities as they learn from their teaching and apply the learning to further teaching. Essentially, cultivating the practice of being professional in our teaching endeavours necessitates that teachers actively engage in reflecting on and evaluating their own teaching as well as consciously looking for creative ways to apply new ideas and new understandings about how students learn. This essentially propagates the notion that good

teaching is all about examining and rethinking pedagogical procedures because it involves more than just transmitting knowledge to our students; it is also about transforming and extending knowledge.

Current discourses on university teaching continue to question the term 'professionalism' in university contexts. In a recent review in the Times Higher Education (16 April 2009), Elton poses the question "are academics professional"? He suggests that courses in university teaching should be based on up-to-date research in teaching and examining and cautions that current judgements on the "quality of university assessment and of the assessment of university teaching are equally suspect". Indeed, for many educational contexts, it has often been assumed that education systems have for far too long been inefficient and ineffective in ways that prevent them from meeting its functional goals as pointed out by popular media and corporations. Increasingly, there have been calls for university educators to pursue reforms that are not only more socially and economically efficient but are also cognizant of the new 'realities' of the knowledge economy in producing graduates or future employees in an increasingly globalized world. What this means for professionalizing teaching is to make our teaching more instrumentally defined, in terms of its capacity to produce students who have good knowledge of new information and communication technologies and are able to work in culturally diverse environments. To further elaborate on this, the scholarship of teaching, especially at postgraduate level, will also help to develop and strengthen the "synergies between professional development for teaching and for research" (King, 2004). In a similar vein, Walker (2001) argues for a view of professionalism that acknowledges and celebrates the complexity of professional judgments in which outcomes may, but cannot always be determined in advance and where reflection and improvement is integral to professional work in higher education.

Globally, universities have and are changing rapidly – there are more students, more universities and of different types, reduced funding allocations and increasing emphasis on defining 'standards' and 'effectiveness' (Walker, 2001). Notwithstanding global forces and intentions facing 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 outside the constraints of the university classroom or setting. Without a doubt, studies that take on the task of evaluating student learning experiences are research activities that will make significant inroads in pointing out various mismatches that would not be immediately known otherwise. Hence, the present study on enhancing postgraduate learning in today's emerging global market will help shed more light and go a long way in challenging established assumptions of teaching and learning at the postgraduate level, especially in a rapidly developing country like Malaysia. Indeed, adopting a realistic stance in the evaluation of postgraduate students' learning experiences is crucial in any academic setting which is striving to provide and maintain high quality education for its consumers. To address various complex issues assailing postgraduate education in Malaysia, the researchers used a qualitative approach in analyzing postgraduate students' learning experiences in a Masters of Arts and a Masters of Education programme over the past year in two public universities.

## 3. Methodology

This study aims to evaluate postgraduate students' learning experiences in their MA and M.Ed degree programmes with an aim of analyzing students' perceptions about their postgraduate learning experiences. The researchers, who are faculty staff at two public universities, sought the opinions of postgraduate students at their respective institutions of higher learning over the past one year (two semesters in the academic year 2008). The sample size comprised 48 students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM, Penang) and 35 students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM, Shah Alam). Both the programmes have a mixed mode structure in which students take courses which they have to pass before they embark on writing their dissertation (partial fulfilment towards the degree programme). The postgraduate students at USM were enrolled in the MA in English Language and Linguistics degree programme at the School of Humanities while the students at UiTM were enrolled in the M.Ed course. 10% of the respondents (12 students) volunteered to be interviewed and the researchers used the qualitative interview method in an effort to get close to the students' individual perspectives in relation to their postgraduate learning experiences. A pilot interview was conducted with 2 postgraduate M.Ed students in USM and minor modifications were made to ensure that the interview questions were clear and easily understood by the prospective interviewees. Upon receiving the student consent forms from the 12 interviewees (4 international students and 8 Malaysian students), the respondents were interviewed by individual researchers in their respective universities for approximately 40-60 minutes (Refer to Appendix II). The researchers took notes as it was earlier determined that the respondents did not wish to have their interviews tape recorded. Student interviews were coded by numbers (Interviewee 1-12).

The 83 respondents also completed a fact file and checklist for narrative writing (Refer to Appendix I) which aimed to obtain accurate information on students' personal details and reasons for embarking on the MA programme. As the researchers were keen to explore various kinds of concerns experienced by the postgraduate students, they also asked all students to hand in written narratives (two to three pages) detailing their postgraduate learning experiences at the end of their academic year of study. Student consent forms were collected from students who expressed their willingness to participate in this qualitative study. The researchers gave freedom to the students to discuss both positive and negative

aspects of their postgraduate learning experiences that they wished to highlight as the researchers did not wish to limit students' views by providing guidelines of topical areas. From time to time, a few students made appointments with the researchers in each of the universities to seek clarification about the content of their narrative writings and these matters were explained and clarified to the students concerned. The researchers read students' narratives several times and highlighted emergent themes that were discussed by the postgraduate students. For ease of referencing, each student's narrative was coded by numbers (S1-S48 were students from USM and S49-S83 were students from UiTM). The data analysis for the interviews and student narratives made use of several indicators relevant for this study and data were sorted by emergent themes that were mentioned by the respondents. After preliminary categories were formed, the researchers compared summaries through each category/theme before refining them to capture all perspectives.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

In this qualitative study, the respondents comprise Malaysian students and international students enrolled in postgraduate (Masters) courses in two public universities in Malaysia. UiTM (based in Selangor) is categorised as a teaching/comprehensive university while USM (based in the island state of Penang) is categorised as a research university. In 2008, USM was selected as an APEX (Accelerated Program for Excellence) university in Malaysia; this is a fast track development programme for institutions of higher education to achieve and to be recognised as world-class institutions.

Table 1 below shows the profile of the respondents in this study at a glance:

*INSERT TABLE 1 HERE*

Of this sample group of respondents, 67.4% of them (56 students) were Malaysian secondary school teachers who were undertaking their postgraduate studies on a part-time basis while 32.6% of them were full-time students. A majority of the respondents were Malaysians (73.5%) while 26.5% were international students from other countries. A large majority of the postgraduate students (89.1%) were between the ages of 23-32 years.

The following discussion is based on the researchers' analysis of the postgraduate students' checklist of personal details, interviews and narrative writings. Of the 83 students, there were more female postgraduate students (49 students) than males (34 students). Additionally, 26.5% (22 students) of the sample comprised international students from the Middle East (19 students), Thailand (1 student) and Indonesia (2 students). Table 2 below shows the main reasons cited by the respondents for pursuing postgraduate education:

*INSERT TABLE 2 HERE*

The findings showed that affordability in pursuing postgraduate education in Malaysia was cited as the most common reason by 93.9% of the respondents in this study. The motivation for students to pursue postgraduate education in Malaysia clearly indicates that this is a "push" factor (Mazzard, Sootar, Smart, & Choo, 2001, p. 3) as a majority of students feel that this can help them procure better employment. Even among working professionals, the prospect of upgrading academic qualifications was seen as a compelling reason to pursue affordable postgraduate education. Other reasons to pursue postgraduate education included the intention to pursue further knowledge (85.5%) and personal fulfilment (83.1%). From the students' interviews and narrative writings, the following categories of emergent themes were detected:

### 4.1 Knowledge, values and contacts acquired by students

The data from the interviews (n=12) and student narratives (n=83) were coded by allocating numbers as explained in the earlier section. In most student narratives, the international postgraduate students (n=22) wrote extensively about the knowledge, values and contacts they acquired in the process of their studies. Most international students felt welcomed by their Malaysian coursemates and professed that they learned a lot from their course lecturers but felt inhibited during some discussions in class by their English language proficiency. The following are some excerpts from a few international students' narrative writing:

"*Initially, I was held back by my English proficiency when I first enrolled in the MA course as I didn't communicate much in English in Yemen. However, having more practice in class discussions and presentations, thanks to the friendly nature of my Malaysian coursemates, I believe my level of English has improved and I am definitely more confident now in using academic English to express my views on education issues*" (S15)

"*Coming to Malaysia to study my MA was a new experience for me. It wasn't all easy going for me I can say. I had so many new and difficult experiences; such as housing matters, making friends with Malaysians and coping with my studies and learning how to use the library*" (S 19)

"*I thought coming here from Iraq wouldn't cause me much stress. I did face the stress but thanks to God Almighty, I have learned to overcome many problems. I have made good friends in my MA course – they help me to find my way around the campus and some of them invite me and my family to their homes – that's very nice as it's the same like home. I'm continuing to make more friends on campus and am happy with my experience here*" (S 30)

"*I'm the only Thai student in class but so far, all my friends are so nice to me and I don't think it's hard for me. Even my lecturers are understanding towards me and I'm enjoying my time here. Of course, I only worry about my English proficiency but I am truly working hard to improve my writing skills*" (S 39)

During the interview sessions too, most Malaysian postgraduate students discussed with the researchers that they have learned valuable research skills and honed their academic writing ability. Some of the students spoke candidly about key values that the course helped bring out in them – values such as being more hardworking, managing their time well and being accountable for what they do and say in class discussions. The following are excerpts from three interviewees:

"*By following the MA course, I've become more disciplined. Now I consciously plan my work better and structure my study time better even though I'm a teacher during the day*" (Interviewee 8)

"*These days I plan my timetable better and it's all because I'm more knowledgeable about what I've set out to do for myself. It helps that many of us keep in touch regularly by phone and email and we're always able to share ideas and journal articles on relevant topics*" (Interviewee 11)

"*I particularly enjoy the experience of learning with friends from other countries, something I did not experience in my undergraduate course. I have learned so much cultural and world knowledge from my Middle Eastern friends and I've welcomed them to the Malaysian shore and I try to help them during preparations for presentations. It has been a good learning curve for me as I realize how lucky I am to have this valuable learning chance*" (Interviewee 2)

"*This course experience has helped me value my peers even more and I am eager to read up so I can share my knowledge and experience better. I'm also learning more from my coursemates and I like this information-sharing*" (Interviewee 7)

Other than the above three interviewees, the other postgraduate students who were interviewed spoke at length about the value of teamwork when group seminars or assignments were done and most of the postgraduate students enjoyed this learning experience. The emergent theme of making and keeping contact with one another was discussed and highlighted by almost all the postgraduate students. While the international postgraduate students (from mostly Middle Eastern and Gulf countries like Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman etc.) wrote lengthier accounts of this aspect, most Malaysian postgraduate students informed the researchers that this aspect was already present in their undergraduate degree course experience in various public universities in Malaysia.

*4.2 Professional and personal values acquired by students*

Another emergent theme that was evident from data gleaned from the interviews and student narratives concerned the aspects of how their postgraduate MA studies helped the students in their professional and personal lives. A majority of the students in the study (76%) expressed the view that much of what they learned from the course really helped them to become better teachers as the theoretical and practical underpinnings of various models of learning provided them with opportunities to apply their knowledge-base to their working lives. In terms of learning experiences, some of the postgraduate students expressed positive benefits they had gained from the various presentations and seminars they participated in during their MA course. This seemed to provide an opportunity for a broader outlook and greater maturity, which outweighed the academic course itself. The following excerpts from the student narratives highlight this:

"*I feel I'm really seeing the benefit of the theories that actually have authentic implications in teaching…before I did not see this relationship so clearly. Now I feel I can make better professional decisions because of this understanding and feel I can improve my own students' learning in the language classroom and I'm beginning to use authentic examples and my students like it*" (S43)

"*While I've become more hardworking in carrying out my academic responsibilities, I also see how this has changed me personally and professionally. At least this two-way relationship and change in me will directly benefit the way I approach other problems in teaching English. I must admit prior to this, I wasn't that keen to engage in reflective thinking*" (S22)

"*I especially like it when my friends tell me that I'm now giving more mature answers to situation-based issues in the class. This has come about because I've been reading so much more and it has helped broaden my horizon in many ways; now I can link practical strategies to language theories more adequately*" (S12)

In general, the data revealed that many students were conscious of a new 'experience curve' and despite some frustrations along the way, most of them were beginning to experience feelings of confidence that they were eager to share with each other. In highlighting how the postgraduate programme affected their personal values, almost all the respondents from both public universities mentioned the following benefits:

a.      made them more hardworking

b.          disciplined to read more journal articles on related academic issues

c.          learned to set realistic goals

d.          became more focused in their studies

e.          became more adept at managing time

f.          learned to handle stress more effectively

*4.3 Specific learning problems encountered*

Language difficulties were cited by many of the students as being the main obstacle to academic adjustment of postgraduate students in this study. While more international postgraduate students in USM spoke at length on this aspect, many ethnic Malay students at UiTM and USM similarly aired their concerns to the researchers about their inability to write research papers effectively in English. Many postgraduate students, while initially reluctant to speak on this aspect in the beginning of the interview sessions, stated that insufficient knowledge of discourse patterns in academic articles hindered their meaning-making process and some of the students openly said they usually take about 3 hours to read and understand one journal article. Other postgraduate students reported that the vocabulary and terminologies in some academic articles created difficulties for them to comprehend key arguments posited by the author(s) of the article. Among the international postgraduate students, the prospect of having to speak and write well in English is even more daunting as many of them come from educational systems where English is relegated the status of a foreign language. Some of the comments cited in their narrative writing include the following: shy to speak as they have a strong Arabic accent when they speak English, having to pronounce English words and expressions carefully so that their coursemates can understand what they are trying to say, realizing that the way they speak English is markedly different from their Malaysian coursemates.

Similarly, writing in English seems to be a frustrating experience for many postgraduate students. While only about 25% of the postgraduate students stated that they do not experience this problem, the rest of the students wrote extensively about their inability to express their ideas eloquently in English stating that they attributed this to their lower English proficiency level, weak argumentation skills, inability to think in English while writing essays and coming from a background where reading in English was not done frequently. Some of the mature postgraduate students (those aged 38 – 42 years) also wrote about their experiences in having to learn with much younger students. Although only 10.9% (9 students) of the total sample comprised mature learners, because of their extensive teaching experience in secondary schools, these students wrote about their inability to absorb information at a faster rate compared to the younger learners and they observed that their younger coursemates were more energetic and seemed to know a lot more about borrowing books from the library and doing effective powerpoint presentations during class presentations while they acknowledged that they needed to enhance their ICT skills to keep up with their younger coursemates, with one mature student in her early 40s (S44)saying that it was daunting for her to "*see the flurry of excitement among the younger students as they go about actively searching for new information from search engines on various databases on the internet*".

In many of the student narratives, the theme of experiencing 'study shock' (Burns, 2000) was experienced by several international postgraduate students who were mostly enrolled in USM. Burns (2000) aptly points out that this phenomenon can be experienced by students who shift between different cultures of learning. Among many international postgraduate students, the expectation imposed upon them by their MA course lecturers to develop or hone their independent, critical thought is met with much trepidation as many of them come from cultures of learning that dealt mainly with more traditional modes of learning i.e. where knowledge is basically transmitted from the lecturer to the students. As such, many of their narrative writings contain interesting anecdotal accounts which outline some of the specific academic difficulties:

*"Back home in Yemen, our lecturers conduct classes very differently, so I feel it's a very new experience for me here and I have to make many learning style adjustments. It surely will take time to get used to this"* (S19)

*"In particular, I find seminar presentations very difficult –I'm always nervous when I have to do them because I'm not used to them"* (S33)

*"What's really new for me here in USM is having to learn also new stuff with technology, like how to use the overhead projector OHP and also how to prepare powerpoint presentations. Well…….that's not easy for me!"* (S35)

*"I didn't use good English when I was in school in Jordan; now I have to write good essays and assignments in English because my lecturers expect us to write well; I'm also not so good at taking notes because we didn't do much of this in uni back home. These are new for me and I know I have to improve on my own so I'm doing a lot of practice in my own spare time"* (S40)

*"I embarrassed myself by asking my lecturer to change my assignment grade, which we can do in Jordan. Here, this is not appreciated and I understand the system here now as my lecturer did explain where in the assignment I went wrong*

*and the feedback she gave me was good. In my undergraduate experience, we can consult our lecturer for grade improvement if we feel our work deserves a better grade"* (S48)

*"I've been used to 100% exam-based undergraduate courses but now I see that this is not the case here in Malaysia. I'm adjusting to this different assessment method here. I also feel the lecturers here are more approachable than my university lecturers back home"* (S28)

Although many Malaysian postgraduate students understand that the educational system in the country is exam-oriented, there are clear differences with regard to the slant towards more independent learning in undergraduate degree programmes in public universities with greater degrees of independence and critical thought practices expected in postgraduate education. Arguably, some Malaysian postgraduates still experience difficulty in adjusting to this mindset as they seem reluctant to accept the fact that they now have more opportunities to argue out various standpoints as long as they can provide evidence to justify their thought orientations on various educational or academic concepts and theories.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts

Paradigms of teaching and learning at the postgraduate level have indeed shifted with the push towards greater democratization and globalization of education (Abdul Rahim & Abdul Manan, 2008). The learning process within any postgraduate environment is often dominated by the dissonance which arises when students from diverse backgrounds learn together. In Malaysian higher education contexts, diversity in student learning is now a common phenomenon for many university educators handling postgraduate education. However, this reality has numerous complexities and concerns which need to be addressed if quality education is to be provided to all postgraduate students. Of significance is the fact that while such diverse student cohorts bring with them an array of cultural and linguistic knowledge and learning experiences which can greatly enhance the student learning experience, they also require university teachers to make careful considerations when they revisit academic learning.

This qualitative study was limited to the perspectives of the 83 postgraduate students from two public universities in Malaysia and generalisations cannot be made for other postgraduate students' learning experiences in other Malaysian universities. More significant results can be achieved if the sampling size were bigger and covered more public universities in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the findings of this study have shown that there are several dimensions to postgraduate students' learning experiences in higher education contexts. Despite the limitations, this study is significant as it examines students' strategic responses towards their learning experience and helps researchers, policy makers and administrators to be aware of the tensions and complexities that are at play in higher education environments which cater to increasingly diverse student populations in today's emerging global higher education contexts. While expectations are imposed on postgraduate students to be academically self-sufficient, the findings of this study suggest that it is pertinent for both students and university teachers to take cognisance of learning domains that have to be realized before effective learning can take place, a form of learning where strategies used can be more interactive and socially oriented. The new millennium forces internal and external pressures on educational institutions to re-examine teaching and learning practices from new paradigms. Thus, having a thorough working knowledge of postgraduate students' actual learning experiences can have a tremendous impact on a university's curriculum, discipline, cultures and work practices that charter the direction with multiple changes and innovations. Arguably, recognizing the various multifaceted issues and challenges confronting postgraduate students can help move the debate from putting blame on the students towards a more democratized view of education which tries to get university educators to look objectively at the learning environment and this includes looking at the problems, if any, faced by the postgraduate students in some of these domains: identifying specific academic problems or difficulties, appropriate use of technology and know-how, the need for changed work practices, a willingness to work differently with different groups of students in different ways after taking into consideration their prior knowledge.

While this study has highlighted that there are a number of common themes that run parallel in the student narratives and the interview sessions, essentially the following are some of the key concerns plaguing postgraduate students' learning experiences:

1)      pressures of undertaking and coping with the requirements of postgraduate work

2)      the initial difficulties encountered when adjusting to a new environment and academic culture

3)      the problems of reading and comprehending academic texts in a critical manner

4)      writing using appropriate language

5)      lack of knowledge in research skills and

6)      different cultural expectations

Institutions of higher learning can take proactive steps to overcome such student difficulties and they can provide the much-needed support and facilities to their postgraduate students, considering that the current trend shows that the

number of postgraduate students is multiplying over time in many developing countries. Suggestions to set up a Reading and Writing Centre for postgraduate students, the creation of reading groups and the introduction of a properly structured Orientation Programme can easily be implemented as such schemes will enhance the quality of postgraduates and their research output.

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## Appendix I

**FACT FILE AND CHECKLIST FOR NARRATIVE WRITING BY MA/M.Ed STUDENTS**

**SEX**: MALE (     )     FEMALE (     )                **NATIONALITY**: _____

**AGE:** _____years old                **MARITAL STATUS:** _____

**ETHNICITY:** _____ _**FUNDING FOR STUDIES:** Scholarship (     ) Self financing (     )

**BACHELOR'S DEGREE: B.A.**_____

**UNIVERSITY/YEAR OF AWARD:** _____

**WORK EXPERIENCE:** _____

**CURRENT STATUS:** Employed as _____Full-time student (      )Part-time student (    )

**REASONS          FOR          PURSUING          MA/M.Ed          STUDIES:**

_____
_____

**ELABORATE ON <u>SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES</u> FACED WHEN STUDYING FOR THIS COURSE: (**e.g. language difficulties, inability to do effective seminar presentations, reading journal articles, getting library resources, understanding lecture content, making personal contacts, financial difficulties, adjusting to student life, adjusting to culturally different teaching and learning styles etc.),

_____
_____
_____
_____

**WHAT DID YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT THIS COURSE?**

_____
_____
_____

**HOW HAVE YOU BENEFITED FROM THIS COURSE?**

_____
_____
_____

**WHAT SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT DO YOU HAVE?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

**Appendix II**

**Interview Questions (Students)**

1. What are your main reasons for pursuing your MA/M.Ed studies in this university?

2. Are you pursuing your studies on a part-time or full-time basis? Does this mode cause you any difficulty?

3. What are some *specific* difficulties you have encountered in your postgraduate studies? What are your perceptions of your own ability to cope with reading and writing tasks for this course? Do you encounter any problems when doing oral presentations for your courses?

4. How do you cope with coursework demands? Do you work well with your peers in this course/programme? Have you made good friends in this course?

5. Do you have any financial difficulties? Are there any other obstacles that hinder your progress in your academic studies?

6. Have you encountered any problems adjusting to student life after your BA studies? How different is this course from your BA course?

7. What did you like most about this course?

8. In what way/s do you feel you have benefited from this course?

9. What are your suggestions, if any, for improving the way this MA/M.Ed course is taught?

Table 1. Profile of respondents

| | Number of Respondents (*N*=83) | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Male | 49 | 59.0 |
| Female | 34 | 41.0 |
| *Age* | | |
| 23-27 | 34 | 40.9 |
| 28-32 | 40 | 48.2 |
| 33-37 | 5 | 6.1 |
| 38-42 | 4 | 4.8 |
| *Nationality* | | |
| Malaysian | 61 | 73.5 |
| International students | 22 | 26.5 |
| *Respondents' University* | | |
| Universiti Sains Malaysia | 48 | 57.8 |
| UiTM | 35 | 42.2 |
| *Work Experience* | | |
| Secondary school teachers | 56 | 67.4 |
| Full-time students | 27 | 32.6 |

Table 2. Reasons for Pursuing Postgraduate Education

| Reasons for pursuing postgraduate studies | Number of Respondents (*N*=83) | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Personal fulfillment | 69 | 83.1 |
| A continuation of undergraduate degree in the same university | 32 | 38.6 |
| Pursuing further knowledge | 71 | 85.5 |
| Learn more about current trends in teaching English | 48 | 57.8 |
| Improve research skills | 29 | 34.9 |
| Motivated to learn in a foreign country | 22 | 26.5 |
| Affordable postgraduate education | 78 | 93.9 |
| A role model for my students and family | 25 | 30.1 |