

POST GRADUATE STUDENTS' NARRATIVES ON GRADUATE ON TIME (GOT)

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted based on a focus group interview of postgraduate students from Faculty of Education of International Islamic University College Selangor (IIUCS) and Faculty of Information Communication Technology, Faculty of Technology Management and Entrepreneurship and Centre for Languages and Human Development of UTeM. The study wish to address the successful factors of their study. Firstly it determined to draw students who had completed their post graduate studies and graduated on time. Secondly, it sought to identify the factors that contributed in the overall success of the graduate students. The study focused on ten postgraduate students (N=10) from five supervisors. The focus group interview was conducted in two sessions. The interviews elicited the respondents' profile and successful contributing factors. Using the data obtained, a thematic analysis was done and the study has significant implications in determining the quality of post graduate programme strategies which can be designed to enhance the overall success of the students.

Keywords: post graduate student, GOT, faculty support system, connectedness.

1. Introduction/Background

Numerous research have pointed out that there are high proportions of post graduate student who fail to complete their studies within the time given Ref: (NorHasni ZAinal Abidin, 2007). Post graduate students are designed in either the three main modes of study which are student with research, student with coursework and student with research and coursework. Apparently, students undertaking graduate study at universities are under increasing pressure to complete their candidature within a particular timeframes. However there are some narratives' from successful PhD students who graduated on their candidature time – graduate on time (GOT). In order to provide further insight into this issue, the authors determined to study a number of postgraduate students responses via focus group interview designed to identify the related success factors.

This study has important implication as it aims to understand on some of the contributing factors for success which lead to constructive ways the university can provide a more successful environment pertaining to postgraduate success. Understanding and identifying the contributing factors for success are timely important to students, supervisors and the universities. What are some implications of the study could provide in review of post graduate student success on GOT?

Firstly, the present study may provide a platform on which to measure the relevancy of the postgraduate programme. Secondly, it provides an awareness of some required elements for a successful completion of postgraduate studies. It also implied that, this study provide an opportunity for each student to enhance and hone their personal and professional skills to increase the successful number of post graduate students GOT. Finally, by understanding and identifying the success factors are equally important for supervisors who determined to motivate and encourage their supervisee to attain success. On this note this study aims at addressing the question on what are the contributing success factors that have made them graduating on time (GOT)?

Following this, will be a review on some related studies on the overall the impact of the supervisors' influence on the postgraduate student's success is.

2. Literature Review

There are also pressures on research students to: (1) Complete within candidature time – (reduced learning entitlement); (2) Publish / present conference papers; (3) Support families / jobs; and (4) Develop a broader range of skills that will enhance their marketability. These exclude creating new knowledge, producing ground-breaking work, keeping up with the literature, and writing a thesis et cetera. Most of postgraduate students are in dilemma because they have a lot of challenges to overcome. This is harder to them who are working and married. Most of them either funding their study by themselves or receive a scholarship, so it is important for them to complete their study as soon as possible, and certainly within the time frame given (Norhasni Zainal Abiddin, Affero Ismail Azahari Ismail, 2007).

Earl-Novell (cited in Steve Bain, LaVonne Fedynich and Melody Knight, no date) who studied the program structure features, integration mechanisms as they relate to type of financial support, teaching opportunities, and advisor advisee relationships. The findings favoured student advisor relationships as the primary reason for doctoral persistence.

Apart from those factors mentioned, motivation then becomes a key factor for success. McCollum and Kajs (2007) asserted without motivation, very little learning or performance occurs. Motivation may need to be seen as both a pre-existing trait and as one that is fostered in the atmosphere of a nurturing academic environment. In essence, can a student be effectively motivated if the academic environment is lacking?

This study has also revealed that an effective supervisor should supervise students according to their ability and individual requirements. This result is supported by the literature, in which Welch (cited in Steve Bain, LaVonne Fedynich and Melody Knight, no date) identifies three styles of supervision. The first is a highly directive approach, which is very structured with the student being given a lot of advice in the early stages. When the student gains confidence

and ability, this level of control is diminished. The second approach is highly directive at the beginning and at the end of the project, with a highly non-directive period in between. The third approach is described as highly directive with close monitoring of the student throughout the whole project. The reason why there are three approaches is that students are not homogenous in terms of academic ability, personality attributes, motivation or attitude

Research students have to take responsibility for managing their own learning and getting a Ph.D. They are also responsible for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out, and must always keep in touch in regular meetings with the supervisors. Moses (1985) argued that supervisors expect students to be diligent, conscientious, hardworking, energetic, keen, tenacious and conscientious and to have a sense of urgency. They also expect students to be enthusiastic and motivated towards research work, to be pleasant at work and to contribute to a good working environment. Also, student should give continual feedback, so that the supervisor can give informed instruction.

3. Methodology, Findings, Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Methodology

The study seeks to understand the phenomena which contributed to the overall success of the participants. The participants were selected from Faculty of Education of IIUCS and Faculty of Information Communication Technology, Faculty of Technology Management and Entrepreneurship and Centre for Languages and Human Development of UTeM. The study sets to select post graduate students who had completed their post graduate studies during their candidature time.

This study recruited ten successful PhD students (henceforth participants). They were selected based on purposeful sampling and also they were chosen chiefly because the researchers had an easy access to them. Patton (2002) states that qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth. Researchers sent out 15 emails to prospective respondent however only ten participants agreed to participate. When each of the participants agreed to be interviewed, a convenient location was chosen. The ten participants were from five supervisors.

The main purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human life experience (Lichtman, 2006). The focus group interview was adopted to gather qualitative data from these groups of participants. The focus group interview was scheduled for two days at two different locations and lasted about two to three hours depending on the response from the respondents and also 'saturation point' regarding the information.

Having the participants' permission, the interviews were recorded. Transcripts of recordings were prepared, and the information was kept confidential. The interview process was similar for all respondents. All interviews were held at mutually agreed appointment time. On average, each interview session lasted about an hour,

Thematic analysis is adopted to analyse the data obtained. Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and themes within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. The data have been analysed manually and there were five themes emerged from the interviews which could answered the research questions. The results have been successfully explored the experiences and participants overall success; completing and graduating on time.

3.2 Findings and Analysis

The demographics of the participants were as follows: 7 out of 10 participants were females whilst another 3 were males. 8 out of 10 participants were married and the remaining 2 were single. The youngest participants being 30 years of age whilst the oldest 43 years of age. 7 out of ten participants were financial aided by governmental bodies whilst other 3 participants were self-sponsored. These participants were from diverse background.

The data disclosed revealed some dominant recurring themes in the study results. The summary of the findings is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

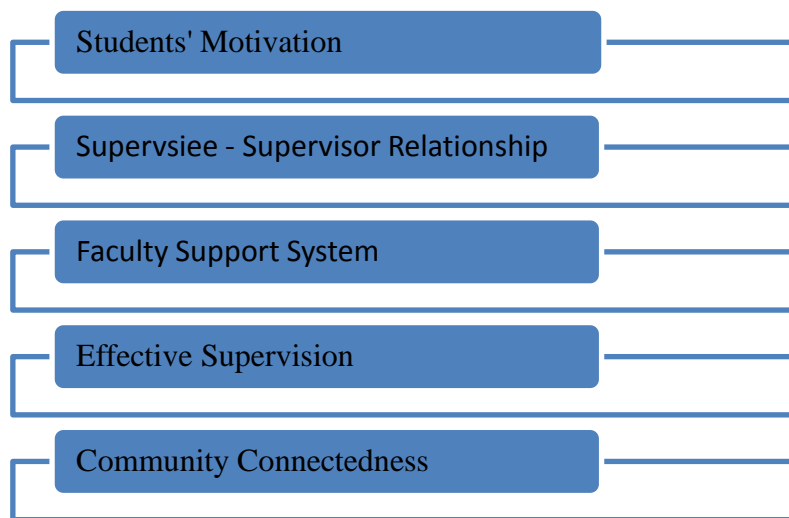


Figure 1: Summary of Themes

The five main themes identified were further broken down into sub themes on what participants believed that had contributed to their overall success. These main and sub themes are interconnected especially for supervisee-supervisor relationship and effective supervision. The other three themes; students' motivations, faculty support system and community connectedness contributed great influence in contributing the overall success.

3.3 Discussions

This section addresses the discussions that emerge from the analysis. It is structured according to the themes identified. The factors will likely vary in degrees of importance and priority from institution to institution and department to department. In this current study, there was much positive feedback from the students in the department who participated in the study. Their comments were indicative of their belief that the department and faculty were interested in connecting.

Students' Motivation

Motivation then becomes a key factor for success. McCollum and Kajs (2007) asserted “without motivation, very little learning or performance occurs” (p. 45). Motivation may need to be seen as both a pre-existing trait and as one that is fostered in the atmosphere of a nurturing academic environment. Excerpts fellow indicate the motivation held.

“ ...from the first day I registered my PhD programme I was determined to complete my studies on time. I began to draw up my study plan and as I go along I follow the plan...My aunty who is a lecturer reminded me that...she said...ypu must manage your own learning. You are on scholarship, you are using the citizen money...so your PhD degree shall be return to them because you owe them ”

(Participant 4)

“...ever since I completed my studies in school, I always dream to go for higher degree and wish to be known as Dr...I was a diligent students...I continuously further my studies from degree to masters and PhD. By answering this question I must admit that there's an inner drive that drives me to be persistent and achieve my goals...”

(Participant 5)

Supervisee-Supervisor Relationship

The supervisee – supervisor relationship is between the continuum of personal and professional relationship. This relationship much depends upon characteristics of the persons involved. The relationship between the student and supervisor involves selecting a research topic, planning the research, identifying and acquiring the necessary resources, managing the project, actively conducting the research, carrying out the literature review, analysis and interpretation of the data, writing the thesis, defending it and possibly publication (Piccinin, 2000). All ten participants concur to this however below are some excerpts.

“when I first meet my supervisor, he told what I want to research on and why. After a few questioning and answer my supervisor told me to read, read, read. Come back to see me thee months from now with your proposal. ...huhu...I almost cried but my inner voice told me, ok cry out but think positive...He is very discipline and a bit stern. So after three months I went back to him with a proposal...He studied the proposal and I will be called for proposal defence. As time went on, my supervisor was not like I thought before. He became nice to me and he explained that I must be independent and diligent. We work collaboratively and he is now friendlier”

(Participant 8)

“ my supervisor is very strict all along...strictly business...I don't feel comfortable to talk other matters except thesis....Upon reflection, I appreciate that now coz it has helped me to focus upon meeting him!! ”

(Participant 6)

It has, in particular, been found that post graduate students are very dependent on their supervisor which they need more support and motivation from their supervisor. Furthermore, the person who is closest to them in a professional relationship is their supervisor. A good

relationship with their supervisor is very important element as his will lead to them getting many benefits in their study.

Faculty Support System

The following responses speak to belief systems that characterize the participants' relationships with faculty members who advised or supported their doctoral student development. These responses suggest that making frequent connections with faculty is meaningful and valuable in the student/faculty relationship-building phase. This relationship development is relevant to the first stage of Tinto's model of doctoral student persistence; Transition and Adjustment (Fedler, 2010)

These quotes illustrate belief systems regarding the value of talking about one's research interest and the involvement in research collaboration initiated by a faculty member. Significant to making these connections was the accessibility of faculty members. Two respondents provide different views about the accessibility of faculty advisement: The following are excerpts from those responses.

"...I felt at home when I was able to talk to someone about my research. The type of support I did receive from my advisor and faculty when they try to involve me in various research projects. Via this they are actually connecting me to people who had similar research interests"

(Participant 1)

Faculty support is deemed appropriate as it will increase post graduate students persistency and success.

Effective Supervision

Between effective supervision and supervisee-supervisor relationship, it leads to some kind of symbiotic in nature. Effective supervision was expressed as vital in their completion of their thesis. The main responsibility of a supervisor is to guide and advice a student's research. This guidance and advice relates to the direction, completeness, clarity, methodology, topic selection and data collection and also involves giving feedback on the progress of written work.

An effective supervisor should supervise students based on their ability and individual requirements, since postgraduate students are not homogenous, but highly diverse in their academic ability, personality attributes, motivation and attitude. A good supervisor should give personal support to students if they have problems because, if these are not attended to, they may affect the student's progress (Steve Bain, LaVonne Fedynich and Melody Knight (no date).

"..at first I dislike the way I was treated by my supervisor. I wanted to terminate my study. She is so sarcastic...But eventually, I decided to follow her tempo and finally I began to appreciate her cynical sarcastic. On top of that she supported me and guided me through. If it has not been her, I don't know whether I achieve my PhD..."

(Participant 2)

Community Connectedness

Community connectedness refers to the connection established between the students and their academic circle of peers, spouse and other family members. Students want to feel connected because of the inherent loneliness that seems to be part of the graduate school experience. Excerpts from participants below explain.

“...undergoing my study as PhD candidate was indeed very lonely. Gosh...I am reflecting the experience ... very lonely indeed but sometimes I needed a friend to talk to so I reached for friends in the faculty...we talk about the issues encircling the research....I was fortunate to have friends that actively engaged in research discussion...It sort of like an eye opener for me to research on some suggestions...This was a great help”

(Participant 3)

“ I recalled I went back home up north to after not seeing them for three months...That point of time I had settled some of the things that I want to do before seeing my family. I have three kids and all of them aged 3, 5 and 9 years. My wife is working in Kedah. Amazingly after seeing my wife and children, my spirit to get my research work done grew

(Participant 2)

Hoskins & Goldberg (2005) focused on the students' need to be connected. Their findings suggested that connection was the establishment of a relationship or the failure to do so, with faculty or fellow students and a judgment of the quality of that relationship.

4. Conclusion, Limitations and Recommendations

One of the limitations of this study had to do with the small number of participants. However, it was exciting to find the results were similar to larger and more inclusive studies. This research has explored the experience, practices and challengers of post graduate students across two universities. In doing their post graduate studies students face varieties of challengers. They had overcome all these challengers with enthusiasm, commitment, and support from supervisors and people in the community. The implications of this study can be useful in determining the strategies which can be designed to create community connectedness for students, the role of supervisors in the overall success of their students in helping to sustain graduate student success.

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