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EXPLORING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN DOING MASTER RESEARCH

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Abstract

Research activity involves investigation which gives impact to intellectuality, creativity and discipline among postgraduate students. The purpose of this study is to explore postgraduate students' challenges while completing their Master Research in one of the public universities in Malaysia. The subjects of this study were 25 postgraduate students undergoing their dissertation which is a requirement to graduate. This study used open ended interview approach to explore the challenges on doing master research. For the analysis of the data, thematic approach was used to get information from the students. The study found that there are four main challenges that the postgraduate students face in doing dissertation which are different field, time management, lack of research knowledge and supervision. Most of the students reported that the field of research that they are doing is different from their previous knowledge. Students also found that it was difficult for them to balance their time between their job and studies. Another challenge is they have never explored the research when they are doing their degree. Students also said that they have to wait for a long time for the appointment of their supervisor. These four challenges are contributing factors for postgraduate students in completing their dissertation and therefore universities need to come up with a more effective strategy to help these students overcome the challenges in order to produce intellectual and skilled researchers.

Keyword: Master students, challenges in doing research, time management, knowledge, supervision.

1. Introduction

Research is a problem-solving tool which comes with empirical facts that strengthen the answers for every question asked. It is known to expand knowledge, theories and concepts. It is also an effort to look for formulas to solve arising problems, to look at a phenomenon from a different point of view or to look at human activities to objectively come up with solutions for problems. Challenges refer to obstacles that test a researcher's ability to obtain accurate research finding and they are basically opportunities for researchers to identify their full potential in carrying out research. Hence, research activities do not benefit only individuals who carry out research but, in a long run, will

contribute to the development of a nation.

There are several problems faced by postgraduate students in completing their Ph.D or Master's thesis. A few factors seemed to be central in students' failure to complete the theses in the given time (Arcaro, 1995) and for some, even if they manage to complete their thesis, they do not produce a thesis with a good quality. These factors include supervision and supervisors, student's lack of self-discipline and low motivation, and inadequate knowledge and skills in carrying out a research (Wisker 2005). Anderson, Day and McLaughlin (2006) and Hockey (1994) have found that supervisors plays important roles to influence their students to complete their theses. Furthermore, according to McCallin and Naylor (2012), supervisors who do not have enough experiences in the field of research will impede students' progress. This is because they are unable to provide enough information for their students to carry out their research.

Students' attitude has also been identified as a deciding factor in producing a high quality research. Studies done by Hockey (1994) and Buckley et al. (2008), the findings suggested that many students are having time management issue when carrying out their research. Many students thought that if they were given more time to complete their theses, they would have been able to produce high quality research (Samson and Comer, 2010). In general, students' negative attitudes have adverse effects on the completion of their theses as the whole process requires focus and discipline on the candidates.

In terms of research knowledge and skills, there are still many postgraduate students who do not have the basic skills in carrying out research. Another factor that slows down theses completion is the fact that these postgraduate students are doing a research in a different field than their degree. For those who try to venture into a new field for their research, the scarcity of past studies sources proves to be a problem. This is because they need to widen the scopes of their research. All the problems mentioned above impede the process of theses completion among postgraduate students. Hence, this study is carried out to examine the problems they have in competing their theses and identify ways to solve them.

2. Literature review

There have been much research done about problems faced by postgraduate students in carrying out their research such as studies by Yarwood-Ross, 2004; Mutula, 2011; McCallin and Naylor, 2012; and Mohammad, 2014. These studies examined in detail the problems faced by postgraduate students in completing their theses. These past studies identified three major challenges in research completion namely time management, supervision and students' attitude.

Many students think that if they have certain research experience at the degree level, they will be able to overcome the obstacles of doing research at master's level (Lopatto, 2004). In addition, students with research experience have the tendency to pursue postgraduate studies as the good relationship with their lecturers or supervisors would pave an easier way for them to carry out research (Hathaway, Nagda and Gregerman, 2002). According to Bauer and Bennet (2008), 92% of the postgraduate alumni who

undertook research agreed that their experience in carrying out research was important and influenced their future careers and life. As critical thinking is central in doing research, candidates with experience and have an early exposure at the degree level would be able to use their critical thinking skill effectively to expand their research skills at the master's and Phd's level (Lopatto, 2004).

According to Buckley (2008), many students are having time management issue in completing their research projects. For instance, many part-time students put their focus more on the commitment to their family and career. Hence, they need more time to complete their theses (Evans, 2010). Mohammad (2014) suggested that supervisors should provide more space and time for their supervisees to master the knowledge and confidence of managing time for research so students will feel motivated to not just complete their theses within the prescribed time but also produce high quality research.

A high quality research is dependent on a lecturer-student relationship which is based on trust (Jordan and Gray, 2012). This is because a key factor in student's achievement is the effectiveness of his relationship with his supervisor as previous studies reported that inexperienced supervisors would negatively affect the process of completing research (McCallin and Naylor, 2012; Mutula, 2011). According to Bierman and Jordaan (2008), having inexperienced lecturers as supervisors may cause students to produce theses of substandard quality and may reduce students' motivation in completing their research. Other than that, weaknesses in the supervision which are impeding theses completion are busy supervisors, supervisors' failure to schedule meeting time with supervisees and supervisors' failure to record discussions that take place between them (Mutula, 2009). In another study by Yarwood-Ross and Haigh (2004), it was found that communication issues, academic repressions, lack of trust and supervisors' negligence are the main problems faced by students in the process of completing their theses.

Findings from previous studies indicated that students are worried about having lack of research knowledge and skills when they are undertaking research projects. Some of them face confidence crises which cause them to lose interest and motivation to complete their research (Tareq Tawfik Amin et al 2010). If students only possess average knowledge on how to carry out research, it will cause them to have negative attitude towards research and could influence their future research activities.

3. Methodology

The participants in this study were 25 fulltime female postgraduates students undertaking their master's study in various courses at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The age range of the participant was 21 – 29 years old. All these participants were interviewed by lecturers of the School of Education and Modern Languages, UUM. The interview was carried out to identify the challenges faced by these students in the course of carrying out their master's research. This study involved the collection of qualitative data where structured interviews were done on the respondents. The interview questions revolved around the problems these students faced when carrying out their master's research which include questions about attitude, knowledge, research skills and supervision.

To illicit clear responses from the participants, the researchers gave a briefing on the study before conducting the interview sessions with the participants. This was done so that the participants would be clear on what the researcher wanted from them and they would answer the questions sincerely. All the data from the interviews were then analysed using N-Vivo and grouped into different themes and categories.

4. Findings

The qualitative data collected based on the interview of this study were analysed to look for patterns and finally the researcher identified four challenges faced by students in completing their theses: different field, time management, lack of research knowledge and supervision.

4.1. Different field (respondents' feedback)

Different field of study at the degree and master level is identified as one of the problems faced by postgraduate students in completing their research. The respondents were reported as saying,

“Before this, my research field was Chemistry. Now my research is on the field of psychology and this has been very challenging for me because I don't really have adequate experience in this field” – Respondent 1

Based on this statement from the respondent, the issues of different field of study is a big challenge for students in carrying out their research because students may not have enough knowledge in the area of research they are doing.

4.2. Time management (respondents' feedback)

Many of the respondents reported that they were having problem in managing their time while doing their research project. Responses from respondents are as follows:

“ I failed to balance my time between my academic assignments and research activity”- Respondent 2

“ As I'm already married, I'm little bit busy with my own family- Respondent 8 “For me, this is about self-discipline. I do not manage my time well” – Respondent 17

This finding concurred with the finding of a study done by Buckley (2008) who found that many postgraduate students faced the problems of time management when completing their research projects.

4.3. Lack of research knowledge (respondents' feedback)

The issues of inadequate skills and knowledge were reported by the respondents in the interview. In particular, four aspects of research were identified to be very challenging in completing their research projects namely the stage of data collection, the writing of

literature review, the lack of statistical knowledge and the lack of skills for academic writing. In the interview, the respondents mentioned:

“I’m still not clear what academic writing is all about”- Respondent 3 “I find it a real challenge to get access to journals on the latest research done in Malaysia”- Respondent 4 “ I’m not well versed in statistics” – Respondent 7

“I don’t have the right skills in qualitative interview, therefore I don’t have the confidence to start my research” – Respondent 20

The above statements show that students are facing the problem of information crisis as they have not mastered the basic skill of research. The inability or lack of basic skills such as how to get access to academic journals or how to collect data would impede students progress in their research projects.

4.4. Supervision (respondents’ feedback)

Issues related to supervision are another challenge faced by students in completing their master’s thesis. Among the issues identified from the interview were the inability to be on the same page with the supervisor, the issue of getting a supervisor who is an expert in the field of research and the issue of respondents had to wait for a long time before a supervisor is assigned to them. The respondents commented:

“My supervisor and I always disagree on many things we discussed”- Respondent 5

“The supervisor always thought that I was clear about everything, when the reality is I was not” – Respondent 9

“ In my opinion, my supervisor does not show her concern because she seldom gives motivation or asks me about my research progress’ – Respondent 12

Communication skills are key in student-supervisor relationship. If both parties, especially students, fail to address the issue, it would bring adverse effect on the completion of the thesis as any disagreement between students and supervisors would put the students in a difficult situation and this in turn would affect the continuity of their research projects (Mutula, 2009).

Another issue mentioned by respondents during the interview was the problem of getting a supervisor who is an expert in the field of students’ thesis and the long time they had to wait before being assigned a supervisor by the university. The respondents said:

“I just don’t get it why I still have not been assigned to any supervisors. This proves to be a difficult stage in the completion of my thesis” - Respondent 6 “I found that my supervisor is not the right person for the area of my research” – Respondent 7

Without a supervisor, a student will not be able to start the research project. Similarly, if

students get a supervisor who is not an expert in the area of research, the students will have difficulties in their research.

5. Results and discussions

A factor that slows down the process of theses completion faced by these master's candidates is the fact that they are doing a research in a different field than their degree. There are students who were moving from pure science major in their degree level to psychology field for their master's research. Therefore, they lack the knowledge in the research which will impede the progress of their research.

Based on a study done by Lopatto (2004), it was concluded that students with research experience at degree level are able to overcome the obstacles of carrying out research compared to those who do not have any experience in doing research. Students need to be fully prepared to learn new knowledge if they know that they lack the experience in carrying out research activities because completing research requires patience and mental strengths. Data collected in this study indicated that many students are still having problems in writing paperwork. It could be suggested that universities should take more practical steps by organizing more writing workshops for postgraduate students. Apart from that, students reported that they were having trouble trying to access recent academic journals. To overcome this, students need to be more creative by not focusing on sources from academic journals but also sources in the forms of books or encyclopedias to have a more extensive literature review.

Data from the present study indicated that students did not possess good time management in doing their theses. This finding is similar to the finding of a study done by Buckley (2008) where he reported that many postgraduate students were facing time management issues when doing their research. For instance, many part-time students would give more commitment to their families and careers which caused them to take more time to complete their theses (Evans, 2010). This concurred with the findings of a research done by Green and Usher (2003) that the most critical situation faced by students is the time given to complete their theses. It could be said that proper and adequate training regarding research activities could increase postgraduate students' mental strengths in the whole process of completing their theses. If research is carried out only to fulfil graduation requirements, the objective to produce quality graduates would never be achieved (Mutula, 2009). University authorities must work to promote positive attitudes towards research among students.

According to McCallin and Naylor (2012), supervision is pivotal in the process of completing a thesis for students. This is because students reported that when they had disagreement with their supervisors, it affects the whole process of carrying out research. According to Mutula (2008), having a disagreement with supervisors would put students at an awkward juncture and eventually would impede their research progress. Some participants in the study also reported that they were left without any supervisors for a long time. This is a problem which should be looked into by the university as it is their responsibility to assign supervisors to students once these students register for the research course. Mutula (2009), argued that this problem is rooted in lack of commitment

from lecturers who are burdened with many academic-related tasks such as grading exam papers and research activities.

6. Conclusion

Major challenges in carrying out research faced by postgraduate students in Universiti Utara Malaysia are caused by students' attitudes, lack of research knowledge and skills, and supervision. Previous studies have also shown that there are other factors that affect the development of research including financial problems, lack of motivation and ineffective research courses. Future studies should put the focus on how financial issues affect students in completing their theses. If the root of the problem can be identified, the university authority can design a more effective strategy in helping students to produce research with standard quality and complete their theses within the stipulated time.

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