

## Postgraduate Supervision: Supervisors versus Students

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**Abstract**— Previous studies show that there are conflicts between supervisors and postgraduate students in different areas of concern. This paper focuses on Graduate on Time (GOT) and Impact Factor (IF) journal publication among postgraduate students. A workshop was organised by the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) to determine some resolutions to increase the number of students who will GOT and the number of high IF journal publications among postgraduate students. The workshop was participated by 15 experienced supervisors and 18 postgraduate students from engineering, science & technology and social sciences. They were divided into three groups among the supervisors and three groups among the students based on the fields of study mentioned earlier. They were asked to discuss in their own group to brainstorm on how to increase GOT and IF publication. Later, each group presented their ideas in front of all the students and supervisors. The audience were encourage to question the ideas while being facilitated by the researchers in order for all of the participants to come to a common agreement. The workshop was video recorded and the data from the video recording, discussion and presentation was analysed using thematic analysis. The results show that both the supervisors and students play important roles in achieving GOT and IF publication. There should be a balance between these two areas because by focusing on GOT, there will not be enough time for IF publication; and by focusing on IF publication, the students need more time to complete the thesis. However, consistent monitoring from the supervisors and the commitment of the students can help to strike a balance between these two.

**Keywords**- Postgraduate Education

### I. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is heading towards Vision 2020 in becoming one of the developed countries by year 2020. In achieving the vision, quality human capital is important and this is highlighted also in the New Malaysian Economic Model (NEAC, 2010). The quality human capital can be produced through tertiary education and more specifically graduate or postgraduate education. In this paper, the term

“postgraduate” education will be used to refer to education at the Master and Doctoral levels.

The Ministry of Education, formerly under the Ministry of Higher Education, has prepared a strategic plan – National Higher Education Action Plan (*Pelan Strategik Pendidikan Tinggi Negara*, PSPTN) for a period between 2007 and 2020 to accelerate the quality of higher education in Malaysia (MOHE, 2007). Under this strategic plan, a funding scheme for postgraduate study was introduced - MyBrain 15 (MOHE, 2014a). This funding scheme provides scholarships for Malaysian under the age of 40 to pursue postgraduate studies in recognised Malaysian universities. The target is to produce 60,000 PhD holders from among the Malaysian by year 2023. This has greatly increase the number of postgraduate students in Malaysia.

The increasing number of postgraduate students in Malaysia is also affected by the Malaysian Plans to focus on Research & Development (R&D). R&D is very important to sustain the nation’s economy. The 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysian Plan has allocated 1% of its GDP to R&D (Hansen, 2013). Universities are among the avenues for R&D to blossom. In order to increase R&D activities, postgraduate students play a major role in carrying out research together with their supervisors.

Moreover, the Research University (RU) status awarded by the Ministry of Education to Malaysian universities which contribute to R&D activities and publications has also imposed a high demand of postgraduate students. By receiving the RU status, the universities are granted with a big amount of research funding to further improve the related R&D and publication activities (MOHE, 2014b). Besides research and publication, the RU status is also supported by the number of Graduate-On-Time (GOT) among postgraduate students.

The above trend has drastically increased the number of postgraduate students in Malaysian universities. In 2002, there were only 4,000 postgraduate students in Malaysia. By 2012, it soared to 40,000 (Hansen, 2013). In Universiti Teknologi Malaysia alone, it was reported to have 10,888

postgraduate students enrolment (Mahaizura, 2012). The pressure to enrol more postgraduate students to conduct research and publication, as well as to graduate on time, has greatly affected the pattern of postgraduate supervision. This paper will focus on the conflicts between postgraduate students and supervisors in GOT and publication, especially in high impact factor (IF) journals.

## II. PROBLEM OF RESEARCH

There are a lot of expectations for postgraduate students, especially Doctoral students (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). They are expected to develop a range of good research skills and produce an original and creative piece of work but at the same time to complete the study rapidly or in another word GOT. They are also required to publish and become well-rounded researchers (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007), as if they are assumed to “know” how to write and publish without given the appropriate supports (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008).

The success of completion of study depends a lot on the supervision (Petersen, 2007). Students who have good relationships with their supervisors experience low stress, less problems and higher postgraduate learning experience (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). The good supervision quality and completion of study also produce postgraduate students with positive outcomes in the development of personal and professional capabilities such as problem-solving, the ability to write, the ability to analyse, and the ability to plan and develop work (Drennan & Clarke, 2009). However, there are reports that a majority of postgraduate students are not satisfied with the supervision that they received especially in the social sciences (Walford, 1981).

Research in postgraduate supervision has been an area of research that concerns many in the recent years especially in higher education and research (Petersen, 2007). Yet, this area is still under-resourced (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). Most of the research focused on the so-called effective supervision and postgraduate students’ perceptions on their learning experience (Petersen, 2007). There are little efforts in identifying the needs of both supervisors and postgraduate students as postgraduate research and supervisory practice are both isolated activities (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007). A platform should be set up for these two parties to voice their concerns and reconcile them in order to achieve a mutual agreement which is agreed as one of the important ingredient for a successful postgraduate completion (Walford, 1981).

Supervision at postgraduate level can be seen as a relationship of two different persons with different goal and expectation (Walford, 1981). If their respective goals and expectations were not discussed prior to the supervision or before the end of the study, it is likely that they will work in different directions. This can be one of the factors that contribute to the conflict between supervisor and postgraduate students (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). Hence, successful supervision does not depend on

good supervisors or good postgraduate students, but on the agreement of expectations between the two parties throughout the research process (Walford, 1981). A supervisor may be the best supervisor for a student but the worst for another student. Therefore, the aim of this research is to bring together a group of supervisors and a group of postgraduate students from various fields of study to discuss on how they can agree on the mechanism in achieving the university’s expectations on GOT and publication in IF journals.

## III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Before social constructionism as the underlying theoretical perspective of this study is introduced, it is important to clarify the contrast between constructivism and constructionism. These two terms have been used interchangeably by many researchers (Rodwell, 1998). While both emphasise on the construction of knowledge, according to Gergen and Gergen (1991) constructivism is concerned with the cognitive basis of language (cognitive scheme) but constructionism is concerned with language and social interchange (linguistic negotiation). Constructivists restructure cognitive meaning through their experience while constructionists socially construct meaning upon negotiation and agreement between individuals who judge and correct (Franklin, 1995).

Raskin (2002) divided constructivism into three main streams: personal construct psychology or constructive alternativism (Kelly, 1991); radical constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1995); and social constructionism (Gergen, 1985). In social constructionism knowledge is a product of the linguistic activity of a community of observers while in constructive alternativism and radical constructivism knowledge is a compilation of internalised human-made constructions through their experience with the external world. This research is looking at how the students and supervisors negotiate and come to an agreement on how to achieve GOT and publication in IF journals.

## IV. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

In order to collect the data on the supervisors’ and postgraduate students’ perception and expectations on achieving GOT and IF publication, focus group discussion (FGD) was employed. The data collection was divided into two phases. In the first phase, 15 experienced supervisors and 18 postgraduate students were divided into three groups based on the fields of study – engineering, science & technology and social sciences. In total, six focus groups were formed and each group was facilitated by two researchers. Dual Moderator Focus Group was used where one researcher facilitate the discussion while the other remind the researcher if there he/she has covered all the necessary topics (Krueger, 1988). A list of questions prepared by the researchers prior to the FGD were distributed to all the participants which were centred around

GOT and IF publication. They were asked to brainstorm on the questions while the researcher probed for more clarifications.

In the second phase, each of the focus group presented their answers on the following questions:

- a. What are the problems in achieving GOT?
- b. What are the problems in achieving IF publication?
- c. What can we do to achieve GOT?
- d. What can we do to achieve IF publication?

In this Two-Way Focus Group discussion, as a group presented their ideas, the other groups are asked to observed the answers. The facilitators / researchers of the discussion provoked the other groups on their agreement of the ideas. Another facilitator / researcher wrote the points for supervisors and postgraduate students on a white board and the points were further reviewed and discussed at the end of the presentation from all the groups. An observer from the School of Graduate Studies was present to learn the conflict through the discussion. The sessions were video-recorded. The data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

This kind of communication where the researchers act as the third party is important in diagnose and improve the relationship between supervisors and postgraduate students (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). This is also important in finding creative solutions and resolutions to the conflicts between the supervisors and postgraduate students. For ethical consideration, the names of the university and the respondents are not reported in this paper, instead indexes are used. The researchers acquired the permission to conduct the research from the university prior to the data collection. Formal letters were issued to the respondents involved.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The major problems faced by supervisors concerning the postgraduate students are listed in Table 1. The themes emerged from the analysis are the major problems faced by the supervisors.

TABLE I. MAJOR PROBLEMS FACED BY SUPERVISORS

Theme	Example of quotes from the data
a. Low academic literacy	<p>“Students are weak in providing argument and critical discussion” (Supervisor S)</p> <p>“The students need to be trained on how to conduct research. They behave just like undergraduate students” (Supervisor E)</p>
b. Poor English competency	<p>“Ok what I found from my research is, this is my own PhD students who did this research many years ago, we found that Malaysia students, Master and PhD, many of them have language problem” (Supervisor T)</p> <p>“When I ask them (Malaysian students), what is your MUET (Malaysian University English Test), they answered, Band 3, Band 4, that is so low! You cannot write for impact factor (journal)” (Supervisor T)</p>

	<p>“How can they (students) write if their English is poor?” (Supervisor U)</p> <p>“Students have low standard of English” (Supervisor E)</p> <p>“We need to increase the English requirement for admission” (Supervisor D)</p>
c. Reluctant to take extra classes / courses	<p>“Negative attitude of students, refusing to take extra classes that can improve their research skills” (Supervisor S)</p> <p>“Make it compulsory for students to attend courses” (Supervisor E)</p>
d. Prefer to work in air-conditioned workspace	<p>“The Graduate Workspace, G08, G09 have a lot of empty rooms, not many students take the keys. Why? Because no air-con, only fans.” (Supervisor C)</p> <p>“We don’t have enough workspace, I mean for the students” (Supervisor B)</p> <p>“So, I scarified the space.eer...I have a room..erm I have the space in my room.. the students is not many than 5..so u know..cramped a bit but..aarh..what my student face at the most time is..i created that room...I created the opportunity for meeting with other students. .like working at the same place” (Supervisor T)</p>
e. Wasting time by idling on social media	<p>“If the Wifi is good, they (students) waste their time on Facebook, Youtube” (Supervisor U)</p> <p>“I think it is good that the Wifi is poor, or, or else, they (students) just waste their time watching videos” (Supervisor D)</p>

The low academic literacy may result in low quality of research, GOT and poor IF publication while poor English competency is a big obstacle towards IF publication. The reluctance to take extra classes or courses may produce poor quality of research, GOT and poor IF publication. The preference to work in air-conditioned workspace means that the students choose to work at home and reluctant to work at the centralized workspace may contribute to low rate of GOT.

The above problems were partly agreed by the students. For the low academic literacy (refere point (a) above), the students blamed that there were not enough workshops and courses, especially on Research Methodology for the students to participate. When this was countered by some supervisors blaming the students for their reluctance to take extra classes / courses (refer point (c) above), the students complained that they faced financial difficulty in paying for the course fees. In return, they expect their supervisors to use research grant to pay for the course fees. In response to this, the supervisors defended that securing research grant is a competitive efforts and it is not an easy task. Moreover, some research grant scheme from governmental agencies cannot be used to support research activities of international postgraduate students. This also applies to students attending and presenting papers at conferences.

As a solution, the School of Graduate Studies recommended a grant scheme that has already been prepared for postgraduate students who wish to attend courses or conferences but do not have the sufficient financial support. The grant scheme is called the Doctoral Research Grant to support postgraduate students.

Point (b) was a major issue in IF publication. This is because most IF publications are in English. Poor English may contribute to the low publication in IF journals. Some students admitted that this is a problem and suggested that

this can be overcome through courses or using proofreading services. Again, the issue of financial support to attend English courses or subscribe the proofreading services is raised.

As a solution, the facilitators suggested that the proofreading services can be paid using the publication incentives offered by the university upon the publication of the IF papers. In order to encourage more IF publication, the university has prepared some budget to be given as incentive for lecturers who manage to publish their papers in IF journals. The supervisors can use the incentive to pay for the proofreading services which means that the supervisors should pay in advanced before they receive the incentive.

Concerning point (b), the supervisors suggested that the students should write papers in English more often. As practice makes perfect, they can gradually improve their English as well as publication by writing more papers related to their research. When it was recommended the postgraduate students to produce at least a paper a year or a draft paper a semester, the students agreed that it is feasible.

Point (d) was raised among the supervisors because the students are reluctant to use the centralized Graduate Workspace prepared by the School of Graduate Studies which are mostly not occupied. Instead, the students complained about the lack of workspace. The students defended that it was not due to their preference for air-conditioned workspace but the need to have a workspace near the faculty instead of a centralized workspace that is far from the faculty. For now, it is difficult for some faculties to offer graduate workspace at the faculties because of the limited spaces. When some new buildings are completed, there will be more spaces at the faculties for the students.

Point (e) was raised because some students complained that the Wireless Network (WiFi) is very poor in the campus especially at the student accommodations and the centralized graduate workspace. The Internet service is vital in research work such as information and literature search. The supervisors reported that some students wasted their time on social media if the WiFi is improved or upgraded. The supervisors suggest that the WiFi should be upgraded but restriction must be imposed to banned the access to social media.

The major problems faced by the postgraduate students concerning their supervisors are listed in Table 2.

TABLE II. MAJOR PROBLEMS FACED BY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Theme	Example of quotes from the data
a. Incompetent supervisors	"My supervisor doesn't have IF papers" (Student E)
	"My research area is not new and backdated" (Student C)
	"I think the problem is, in some faculty supervisor have many students, they cannot control" (Student F)
	"We need to provide supervisor course to them (new supervisors)" (Supervisor D)
b. Supervisors who do not understand	"...doesn't match the interest because of the lack of sufficient number of supervisors." (Student A)

the students' research interest	"I have to change 100% my proposal" (Student B)
c. Less frequent meeting with busy supervisors	"My supervisor has so many students. No time to meet. Difficult to see him" (Student A)
	"Some supervisors are very, very, very busy..." (Student B)
d. Supervisors who focus only on IF publication instead of GOT	"My supervisor only looks at my publication, the minimum is 4" (Student F)
	"She always asks me, write papers" (Student F)
	"Writing thesis versus writing journal? The period" (Student A)

Some students complained that their supervisors are not as competent as they expected. Some problems and enquiries from the students were not dealt by their supervisors. Instead, the students must sought their own solutions and answers through colleagues or other lecturers. This caused poor relationship between the students and lecturers. The supervisors suggested that issue (a) is not related to the competency of the supervisors, rather it is due to the mismatch between the supervisor and student in the research areas that they are working on.

This is related to problem (b) where the supervisors do not understand the research interest of the students. The mismatch happened because of the poorly written proposal during the application. Supervisors are matched to the students based on their research proposal when the students applied for the postgraduate program if the students did not state the name of the supervisors.

To solve this problem, the students can apply to change their supervisors as early as possible during the study before the proposal defense. The representative of School of Graduate Studies also suggested that the supervisors can attend the Supervision Course organized by the School of Graduate Studies to learn the procedure to change supervisors and the etiquettes in dealing with their supervisees.

When students are working with a very busy supervisor, it is difficult to make appointment to meet their supervisor. Solving problems through emails are less effective compared to face-to-face discussions. Some supervisors suggested that weekly or monthly group meeting can be organized so that the students can be supported and helped by other students who may have faced similar problems. Other lecturers, especially junior lecturers who have obtained their PhD can also join the group meeting and help these students.

The last issue is very critical. Due to the pressure to publish, some supervisors push their students to publish more. Their focus is on IF publication, not on GOT. As more time is spent on paper publication, it is difficult to ensure graduation before the end of the normal semesters (which is six semesters for a full time PhD student).

Realizing this, the supervisors suggest that there should be a balance between IF publication and GOT as both are important targets for the university if the RU status is to be retained. The supervisors and students must work together. The representative of the School of Graduate Studies suggested that constant monitoring of the research progress

of the students should be practiced to ensure both GOT and IF publication. The School of Graduate Studies has prepared an online monitoring system called “Graduate Studies Management System” (GSMS) for students and supervisors. The students can fill in their meeting log book, progress reports and upload draft paper to the system where the supervisors can make verification and evaluation of the progress. By practicing systematic monitoring, the supervisors can keep track of the students’ progress through every semester and also look at the draft paper that the students have or will be published.

Upon this, some supervisors suggest that weekly meeting can be a good medium to monitor the progress of the students. The students can share their research as well as publications during the meeting. This can highly motivate other students to work towards GOT and publish more papers. When the students are asked to put more commitment in attending the weekly meeting to ensure GOT and IF publication, the students greatly welcome the idea and wish that their supervisors had organized the scheduled meetings. The representative of School of Graduate Studies explained that the school cannot impose all the supervisors to organized the meetings because this is the individuals’ efforts or some are the efforts of the Research Group. The students may suggest this to their supervisors and help the supervisors to organized the meetings.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the discussion, a few problems and resolutions emerged. Both GOT and IF publication are important to the university. Achieving GOT requires the students to complete their study in the shortest time possible while IF publication needs more time. A balance must be put on achieving both. Good monitoring from the supervisors and commitment from the students are two vital ingredients to make it possible.

Through the discussion, both the supervisors and students were able to voice their concerns and problems (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). Some practical resolutions were suggested and a few of them were welcome by the supervisors and students. This kind of discussion should be conducted more often to help iron out issues between the supervisors and students.

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