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## Information I Wish I Had Known Early in My Postgraduate Journey: Exploring Insights from The Perspective of Former Graduate Students

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### Abstract

Embarking on a postgraduate program, especially one that involves research, can be a solitary journey for many students, who must seek knowledge independently to conduct their research. Some students face greater challenges during their studies due to limited access to information that could have facilitated their journey. Due to these obstacles, many students found themselves having to extend their studies, and unfortunately, some were unable to complete their postgraduate programs. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the information that graduate students desire to acquire during the initial phase of their postgraduate journey, which has been under-researched in prior studies. Using a purposive sampling technique, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with five Ph.D. graduates, with each interview session lasting approximately two hours. Interviews were conducted both in-person and through virtual platforms. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings suggested that in the initial phase of their studies, graduate students primarily desire information related to thesis and study preparation, accessibility of information, as well as interpersonal and social readiness. By highlighting these findings, this research may assist institutions in offering valuable information to their postgraduate students and help future students understand the crucial information necessary for their success prior to enrolling in a postgraduate program. Future research may examine this study from the viewpoints of foreign graduate students, aiming to gain insights from their unique perspectives. Additionally, conducting quantitative studies would contribute to a holistic understanding of this issue. Therefore, improvements can be made to address future students' needs, who are these institutions' primary stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Early Information, Research, Postgraduate, Doctorate, Higher Education

## Introduction

*"I am not ... from a rich family... My mother just sells kuih...and my father is just an ordinary worker. That is one of the big motivations why I want to further my study." (D1)*

The quote above is the response captured from one participant in this study when the authors were investigating their motivation for choosing to pursue their doctoral studies. Different individuals have different motives for pursuing education. However, examining how furthering their studies at a higher level may help students to fulfill their objectives revealed a recent trend of increased postgraduate enrolment. According to the Global Demand for Graduate Management Education: Application Trends Survey 2021 (2021), enrolment for graduate programs increased in 2020 in all regions, despite the worldwide outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that the demand to undertake postgraduate studies remains prevalent, albeit in an uncertain environment. In parallel with the increasing global postgraduate enrolment, the Malaysian context shows a similar pattern, with higher education statistics from 2019 indicating a slight increase in total postgraduate enrolment, especially for Ph.D. programs at public universities in the country (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2019).

Having highly educated people is an asset to Malaysia as they play a significant research and development role, thus performing one of the strategies needed for Malaysia to become a high-income country. Responding to the need for a highly educated population, the means to help achieve this goal have been provided through several initiatives, such as Mybrain scholarships and various research grants. Meanwhile, from the perspective of higher education institutions in Malaysia, most aim to increase their postgraduate enrollment rate to achieve one of their significant performance indicators (Isa & Ahmad, 2018). However, while enrollment levels are important, the ability of postgraduates to complete their studies has also become a key indicator that can further enhance a university's ranking. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that postgraduate students complete their studies. This is complicated by the fact that postgraduates face significant challenges during their studies that potentially lead to study period extensions, deferment, and dropping out (Bekova, 2021; McCormack, 2005). Financial Wei & Chou (2020), academic writing Onainor (2019), and supervisory issues Abiddin & Ismail (2011) may affect students, possibly making them unable to complete their studies on time or, in the worst case, causing them to quit. If these issues are not mitigated properly, it will be disadvantageous to both the nation and the institutions due to the consequences: higher costs Smallwood (2004), a lack of think tanks that aim to solve social problems, and a lack of expertise in research skills. These factors may then impair the country's capacity to participate in high-quality research, development, and commercialization. As this issue is critical in higher education institutions, many studies have been conducted to understand the issues faced by postgraduate students. While most prior studies have focused more on issues and challenges Bakhou & Bouhania (2020); Wisker & Robinson (2016), as well as initiatives conducted by institutions Olvido (2021); Mutula (2011), this study aimed to investigate this issue from a different viewpoint. The objective was to explore the perspective of former graduate students on the information they wished they had known early in their postgraduate studies and which may have facilitated their journey from the beginning. This research may provide various useful insights. The first is that acquiring input from former students will enable potential postgraduate students to be well-prepared with all the necessary knowledge before venturing on their own postgraduate journey. Secondly, this study will give input to current students facing similar challenges, enabling

them to understand the proper approaches to deal with such difficulties. Last but not least, the input will also be advantageous to institutions, encouraging them to conduct the programs necessary to help their postgraduate students early in their postgraduate journey. Ultimately, it is hoped this study helps students to experience a smooth postgraduate journey, which will have a positive impact on various stakeholders.

### **Literature Review**

Universities and other higher education institutions in Malaysia are intended to prioritize research, development, publication, and commercialization as their main initiatives, regardless of their status as research, focused, or even comprehensive universities. Although many approaches and strategies have been implemented to improve research in the country's universities, the focus on registering and acquiring graduate students is acknowledged to be an initiative that encourages more research output and, as a result, assists universities in improving their position on the QS World Universities Rankings. As a result, the significance of postgraduate-level research to the university cannot be understated since research is a vital element at this level.

Students seek postgraduate courses for various reasons, as Ho et al (2012) discovered: students pursued postgraduate education for many purposes, including better credentials, present employment, anticipated career growth, desires, and lifelong learning, as well as social and professional alliances. Comparable investigations Bekova (2021); Teowkul et al (2009) revealed that a number of factors were identified by the research participants, such as enhanced employment opportunities, self-growth, and personal relevance to their profession. Postgraduate students come from diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, culture, experience, ability, geographical origins, and whether or not they have received scholarships or other financial assistance. This diverse background certainly will have some impacts towards their postgraduate journey. According to numerous researchers, comparable challenges are faced by postgraduate students in different countries. Challenges in academic writing are typical academic issues encountered by postgraduate students. According to Komba (2015), many postgraduate students continuing their studies at Tanzanian institutions experienced several challenges when preparing theses and dissertations. Ezebilo (2012) argued that postgraduate students' major concerns included problems with devising data-gathering techniques, data analysis, producing publishable research articles, and oral presentation abilities. Writing a thesis is a challenging and intimidating intellectual endeavor that is both difficult and daunting for postgraduates, owing initially to societal problems and subsequently to linguistic difficulties (Onainor, 2019). Respondents stated that they struggled with presenting writing, restructuring phrases, establishing research ideas, and a deficiency of writing abilities (Isa & Ahmad, 2018). Recent research on thesis writing challenges Bakhou & Bouhania (2020); Idri (2015); Singh (2015); Strauss (2012) has mainly neglected the process aspect of this academic activity, focusing on the writing-up stage of the research thesis. Moreover, using electronic information creates challenges for many postgraduate students, such as the problem that search engines return too many results. Respondents generally agreed that issues like vast amounts of useless material and the necessity to filter search results were some of the most common challenges experienced while accessing electronic resources (Ozoemelem, 2009). The most prevalent concerns with e-resources were identified as poor connections; inadequate information regarding the legal requirements for institutions when accessing e-resources; operational

problems, including hardware and software difficulties; questions about permanence; as well as lack of personal protection (Akporhonor & Lucky, 2016; Bhatt & Rana, 2011).

Due to these challenges, numerous studies have discovered that a significant number of postgraduate students do not complete their studies within the allotted time frame. There are several reasons for this, one of which is the supervisory contribution. A lack of student-supervisor interaction tends to force students to broaden their study scope, and they struggle to complete their research (Abiddin & Ismail, 2011). Some students being criticized, asked for unrealistic work demands as well as faced anger and rage from their supervisors (Morris, 2011). Postgraduate students in South Africa were asked about their perceptions of their research supervisors, and it was determined that several students were pleased with their supervisors. However, they still confronted problems such as limited supervisory assistance, the supervisor's unconnected workload, and poor feedback on their research work (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011). Wisker and Robinson (2016) studied the causes of both supervisor and student loss and absence, determining that a balance of formality and informality in monitoring was required, as was building national and institutional trust. In addressing this issue, good supervisory practices need to be implemented by the supervisory team Cotterall, S. (2011).

Meanwhile, some postgraduate students encounter financial issues, which may disrupt their study and research efforts (Huang, 2016; Wei & Chou, 2020; Wisker & Robinson, 2016). A study undertaken by Jenei et al (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic placed many postgraduate students in difficult financial conditions since they could not afford to manage unforeseen costs, forcing them to manage their money properly. Furthermore, foreign postgraduate students meet language hurdles when pursuing their studies, according to a study by Ezebilo (2012), which explored the ability to study Swedish while accompanied by international students and when given a limited time to learn the language. Students required to write a dissertation in English as a foreign or second language may face more obvious linguistic obstacles, such as spelling and grammatical problems, as well as a lack of vocabulary with which to communicate thoughts and opinions effectively.

While various researchers have pointed out the issues and difficulties experienced by postgraduate research students, much of the literature has shifted toward exploring the best strategies, procedures, and initiatives undertaken to support research students. Examples of initiatives taken by universities and faculties are the creation of a peer support group to assist students with academic writing, as well as a system of monitoring and evaluating research outputs (Olvido, 2021); the implementation of a variety of workshops and seminars (Isa & Ahmad, 2018); access to external funds, such as scholarships (Abiddin & Ismail, 2011); and workshops covering such areas as thesis writing, responsible ways to conduct research, formatting research essays, citing and referencing techniques, using quantitative or qualitative research, literature reviews, as well as basic and applied research (Mutula, 2011). Universities have taken various initiatives to encourage research and create a research culture. Policies, advice, communication, training, and associated activities that promote the success of researchers at all levels are critical in ensuring postgraduate students can complete their studies. Such assistance would provide considerably greater support for postgraduate students with thesis composition, research progress, and research completion.

Success in graduate school, like success in other worthwhile activities, cannot be assured, and it frequently depends on the collaborative efforts of supervisors and students. It is commonly accepted in the literature that the quality of supervision, as well as the interaction and relationship between supervisors and students, is critical to the successful



completion of a postgraduate course (Bui, 2014). For example, Alam et al (2013) found that demands and expectations can negatively impact a postgraduate student's road to completion if essential support, supervision, and research environment are not provided. Moreover, mutual expectations between supervisors and students are necessary for successful supervisor-student partnerships (Mapasela & Wilkinson, 2010). In line with that, Baydarova et al (2021) discovered that when expectations between individuals are ambiguous or misunderstood, student-supervisor relationships can become difficult. Bui (2014) investigated the Ph.D. study process from the perspectives of both supervisors and students, focusing on intellectual capability, resources, and emotional expectations. The findings showed that both parties' expectations remained disparate. Students anticipated that their research would be supervised and guided by their supervisors. Students also wanted their supervisors to understand and acknowledge that they came from different backgrounds and cultures. Adrian-Taylor et al (2007) suggested that supervisors recognize the diverse backgrounds and cultures of their students. The former should also have more face-to-face engagement with their postgraduate students, creating a mutual understanding between each party. On the other hand, supervisors wanted students to be self-sufficient from the start and to be able to collaborate with their supervisees as co-authors and/or colleagues (Bui, 2014). Supervisors also wanted students to advance in their research with little assistance (Masek, 2017), as well as accept constructive criticism and feedback while being dedicated to the study process (Friedrich-Nel & MacKinnon, 2016). The findings clearly demonstrate that postgraduate students and supervisors have differing expectations of one another. Each party in this relationship must commit to conveying their expectations immediately and continually to create a harmonious atmosphere in which critical thinkers and problem solvers are both developed and respected. Supervisors could consider lowering their expectations and assisting postgraduate students to adapt their research proposals to meet the allotted time while still assisting students to achieve substantial scientific outputs with competent direction (Le et al., 2021). Attending conferences, seminars, and workshops; preparing papers for publication; giving presentations; networking with other academics; and working as a research assistant are examples and demonstrations of an excellent postgraduate student's professional growth (Abiddin & West, 2007). In terms of the student-supervisor relationship, it must be emphasized that two distinct postgraduate supervision cultures exist, those of the supervisors and those of the supervisees. More in-depth investigations must be undertaken to understand how to bridge the gap between students and academics. This might enable the establishment of more effective processes, as well as the development of a more comprehensive model for guiding postgraduate students into professional research groups.

### **Methodology**

This study was performed using a qualitative phenomenological research design. A phenomenology study is an in-depth exploration of participants' authentic experiences of a specific phenomenon. This study sought to understand postgraduates' lived experiences during their studies. Phenomenology focuses on analyzing conscious and immediate lived experience and is sensitive to the uniqueness of each person (Delgado & Arellano, 2021). To capture the reality of the participants' narratives of their experiences and feelings, primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews, which were conducted face-to-face during the researcher's visits as well as through the Zoom meetings platform for informants who were staying far away. The participant selection criteria limited participation to recent

graduates (within five years or less). The interviewees were all former graduate students who had received a Ph.D., which ensured that the descriptions of the phenomenon would comprise data accumulated from participants with a comprehensive outlook on postgraduate studies. The interview sample was obtained through convenience and purposive sampling. Regarding ethical concerns, approval for this study was obtained from the UiTM Research Ethics Committee. The in-depth interviews with the five informants were conducted using semi-structured questions, which were opinion-based and related to the respondents' own experience and knowledge. The data collection stopped once the data were deemed to have reached saturation and the researchers were satisfied that the responses had met the research objectives. The in-depth interviews were then transcribed and interpreted using thematic analysis.

### Results & Discussion

Five informants participated in this study, of whom three were female and two were male, while the age range of the informants was between 34 and 38 years old. All five had graduated from local public universities and each shared their lived experience regarding the information they wished they had known early in their postgraduate journey. At the time of writing, all five informants were working as academicians in local higher education institutions, with one running her own bakery business while teaching undergraduate students as a part-time job. After analyzing the data, three main themes emerged: thesis and study preparation, accessibility of information, as well as interpersonal and social preparation. The findings are further discussed under the respective themes, and a summary of the themes and subthemes is shown in figure 1 below:

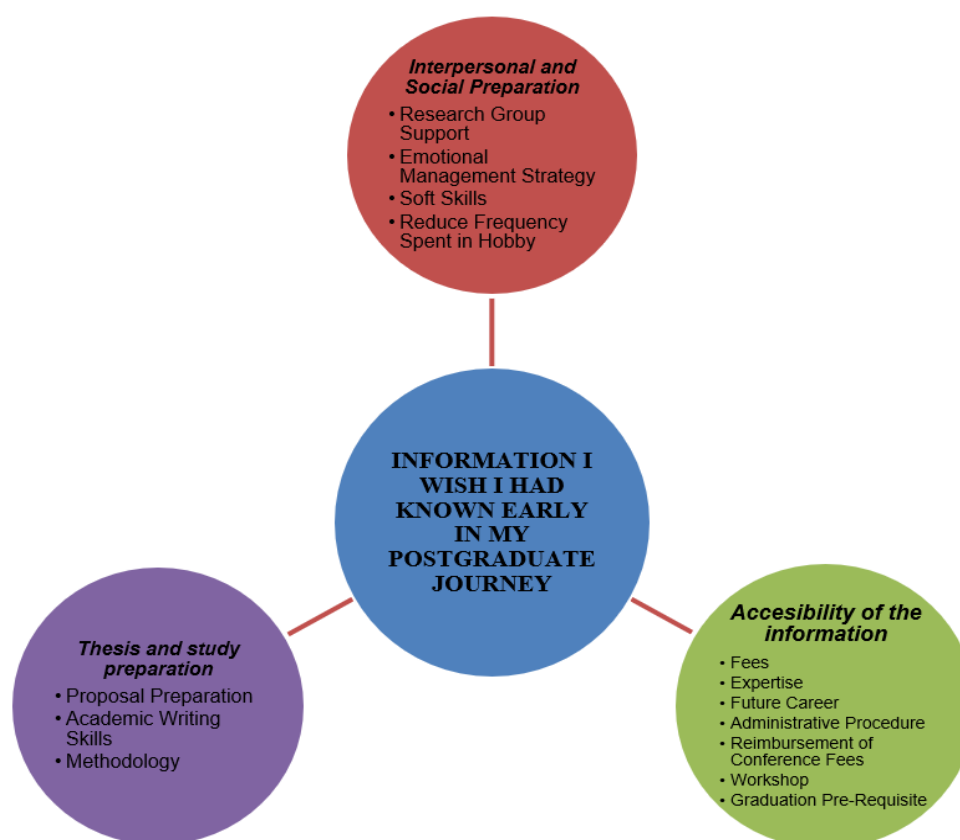


Figure.1 Framework on Information I Wish I Had Known Early In My Postgraduate Journey

### **Thesis and Study Preparation**

Those enrolling as graduate students, or even those intending to become graduate students in the future, need to be prepared in relation to their thesis and study skills. Having a good level of knowledge early in their postgraduate journey would surely facilitate their progress throughout their course.

One important type of preparation that postgraduate students need to be aware of relates to their proposal. Early in the postgraduate journey, students should prepare their proposal and plan to write their thesis according to a timeline. Therefore, students ought to adhere to the timeline, which should also ensure their progress will not lag due to insufficient planning when preparing the proposal. D4 mentioned that if she could return to the proposal stage, she would prepare a solid proposal before enrolling as a postgraduate student. She also mentioned the importance of preparing the proposal according to a timeline, so that by an early semester she could already attempt a proposal defense. As D4 stated

*The other thing is that if I could return to my old days, I would want to make a really good plan. I mean, I'm going to make a solid proposal before I enroll as a student. Before I start, I'll find out what to do to finish my study in three years. Yes, a solid proposal would mean that in a semester, I can go for a defense proposal... (D4)*

Next, students should also ensure that they polish their academic writing skills, ideally before embarking on their postgraduate journey. For instance, Bakhou and Bouhania (2020); Idri (2015); Singh (2015) noted that thesis writing is a critical issue that students face. Having these skills will both facilitate students' understanding of their reading materials and improve their writing skills, which may smoothen the delivery of the ideas being conveyed to the reader. This would make it easier for readers, specifically the examiners, to understand the thesis content. Furthermore, D1 stated that having good writing skills - such as knowing how to write literature effectively - would help readers to understand the ideas that students are trying to deliver through their writing. Besides, postgraduate students should also polish their English language as the ability to read and write well in English can help them to fully grasp their reading materials and thus deliver their ideas to readers effectively (D2).

Another important element that must be known by postgraduate students early in their postgraduate journey is mastering their methodology. This affects the data collection process and, consequently, the reliability, validity, and dependability of the results, so students should pay attention to this element. Therefore, having a good knowledge of which methodology to use is a key focus area for postgraduate students. Based on the interviews with the informants, studying the method and understanding its applicability before their postgraduate journey would have greatly helped them to progress through their study journey. Interestingly, D1 also even emphasized the importance of knowing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This type of knowledge is critical for postgraduates since they will be involved in research-related tasks, including supervising students, which is one of the responsibilities of an academician.

Meanwhile, in relation to data analysis, D4 mentioned that she wished she had known how to make an appropriate choice of data analysis. This was because she knew that it would have been much better if she has chosen a different data analysis than the one she actually



used during her studies. The other choice would have been far easier to run in order to identify direct effects between variables.

### ***Accessibility of Information***

Institutions must ensure that students have easy access to the necessary information about postgraduate programs, such as the expertise available in each faculty and the graduation requirements. Having this preliminary information before embarking on a postgraduate program would greatly help students, and even potential students, to properly plan their postgraduate student journey.

The information that should be accessible includes the tuition fees that must be paid by the students. Usually, institutions only display general information such as the total fee for a whole semester. This practice is used by both private and public institutions. Having only this general information means students lack transparency about the detailed fees that they must pay according to the purpose. D1 informed the authors that during her course, such information was unavailable on the website, which only showed general tuition fees. The informants also stated that it would be far better if the fees information displayed was more specific and included, for example, details about the fees for services provided (such as library services).

Not only should the information available about specific fees be laid out clearly, but also institutions must ensure that information related to expertise is displayed on faculty websites. This is especially vital for prospective students, making it easier for them to identify potential supervisors who can help them once their postgraduate journey has begun. It would also benefit registered students, who could more easily identify the relevant expert to consult on either academic or non-academic matters. D1 mentioned that having information about the available expertise was very important; during her studies, such information was not available on the institution's website. She also indirectly encouraged institutions to provide this information to enable students to refer to it when needed for various reasons, including finding a potential supervisor.

Next, future career-related information should also be offered to postgraduate students. Many students who enroll in a postgraduate program follow a full-time mode and some do not have work experience. Some even continue their studies directly after completing their bachelor's and master's degrees to become academicians. This situation means most graduate students tend to regard academia as the only potential career option after studying for the highest academic qualification, despite the availability of other career prospects. While this perception is not wrong, students should be exposed to the other job prospects available, which they should explore because they generally know that the demand for academicians is insufficient to accommodate the supply of graduates. Therefore, they might regard the industry as an alternative if they have no opportunity to become an academician. As a result, the issue of rising unemployment among graduates could be alleviated. In her interview, D1 said that she also saw becoming an academician as the only job opportunity available to her during her studies. Therefore, she encouraged institutions to conduct programs within each course that made students aware of the availability of job opportunities. Such courses could be held during the appropriate program with the students. As indicated by D1

*I used to see taking a Ph.D. as to just a way to become a lecturer. I don't see anything else ... Maybe, later the*

*postgraduate department can explain to students [that if they] take a Ph.D., it is alright if they do not end up becoming] a lecturer ... They can be involved in other occupations such as administrators ... The postgraduate department can explain this to the students whenever they meet the students. (D1)*

Another subtheme captured in this study was students' access to and awareness of administrative procedures. One factor that affects the journey as a postgraduate student is the postgraduate department administration. The study duration might also be affected, based on how slowly or quickly the administration department handles student matters. This applies especially to a student's presentation phase, whether this is a proposal defense or a viva voce. Therefore, knowing the process might help students to acquire pre-determined thoughts and thus help them to plan or refine their timeline. D5 mentioned that he thought the post-submission process would take about one to two months. However, contrary to his expectations, the actual presentation of the proposal defense after his thesis submission took around six months. The informant also stated that only if he had known about the timeline, he would have expected this and made the necessary plans.

Next, other important information was related to conference fee reimbursement. Some graduate students, especially those enrolled full-time, might rely on a scholarship, their family, or even part-time work to support their studies. Therefore, for institutions to provide the benefit of covering conference fees would reduce students' financial burdens while at the same time assisting them to fulfill a prerequisite for graduation. While this benefit is a useful initiative to implement, postgraduate departments should issue regular reminders about the availability of these initiatives so that students are fully aware of them and thus able to maximize the advantage being offered. One informant in this study related how he wished he had known about the initiative introduced by his institution. In the interview session, he commented that he had had to use his own money to pay his conference fees. Even though he stated that the details of this benefit could be found in the institution's circular or students' manual, the institution should have reminded students regularly about this. Therefore, the students might have remained aware of the relevant benefits. As D5 reported:

*Another thing is it would have been better if they had told me earlier about the coverage of conference fees. They said that it was stated in the circular and manual book, but the thing is, you have to give consistent reminders ... (D5)*

Organizing workshops for postgraduates is a common practice among institutions since students need to gain knowledge that can facilitate their studies. The important workshops that must be conducted by institutions include those related to research methodology, literature reviews, and even tips for publishing work in high-quality and reputable journals since these issues are the major concerns facing postgraduate students (Ezebilo, 2012). By attending such workshops, students can obtain the necessary knowledge and use it while conducting their research. Institutions should regularly inform their students via similar platforms to those used by students, such as social media applications like WhatsApp so that students remain updated on the workshops available. D5 mentioned that he wished he could have attended such workshops earlier. He did not know about the workshops available during

his first semester as he was unaware of the WhatsApp group used to disseminate information that had been created by the postgraduate department in his faculty. As a result, he missed many beneficial workshops, such as how to write a proper problem statement, undertake a literature review, and choose a methodology.

The last subtheme identified under this theme is information about graduation prerequisites. In contrast to previous postgraduate programs that did not stipulate graduation requirements - apart from the thesis submission - institutions today have established requirements for students to graduate. Although such prerequisites may vary, a common requirement shared by most institutions is for students to produce a number of journal publications or proceedings based on their research. Failing to comply with this requirement affects their ability to graduate. Thus, knowing this in the early phase of their postgraduate studies would likely help students to fulfill these criteria on time. D4 mentioned that if she could return to the time of her studies, she would want to know the requirements a Ph.D. student had to fulfill, including the number of publications needed and which compulsory methodology course to attend.

### ***Interpersonal and Social Preparation***

Becoming a postgraduate student is a very lonely journey, and it poses particular interpersonal and social challenges. In some cases, students have an emotional breakdown that subsequently affects their mental health. Meanwhile, many other students face major difficulties while conducting their research, including during data collection, due to a lack of appropriate research knowledge and skills

Students today are very fortunate because the many research support groups available on social media platforms provide students with advice and assistance related to their academic journey. This view was supported by Olvido (2021), who argued that peer support groups are essential to assist postgraduate students in enhancing their academic writing skills, apart from being platforms they can use to monitor and evaluate their research output. Otherwise, if no supportive environment received by the students, it will negatively influence their performance in completing their studies (Alam et al., 2013). These research support groups are not limited to a student's circle inside their institution but extend to external institutions, whereby these groups consist of diverse local and international students and experts from various backgrounds. One example is the Doctorate Support Group available on Facebook, where students may ask questions on any topic, be they related to emotional support, job opportunities, or thesis-related inquiries, such as tips on writing a good thesis, methodology choices, and a suitable data analysis to use. Having this kind of supportive environment virtually means that students can seek knowledge and information easily, potentially improving the way they conduct their research and write up their thesis. D5 mentioned that nowadays, we can refer to the many experts available, some of whom are even active in the research groups on social media.

Next, information about emotional management strategies was also mentioned as being important, and the informants wished they had known about this during their postgraduate journey. Most students struggle with their emotional well-being because being a postgraduate student is often a lonesome journey. The respondents also commented on how they had prepared themselves mentally to adapt to the grueling life of a postgraduate student. For institutions to offer to establish mental readiness before the postgraduate journey would help students to acclimate to their surroundings, rather than being left in a state of panic or culture shock (D2). Feeling anxious, feeling left out, and experiencing

imposter syndrome are some of the mental health issues faced by postgraduate students. Some even push themselves to do their research to the point where it affects their mental health. D1 mentioned that during her studies, she did not know how to manage her emotions. She always saw the progress of her friends and compared this with her own performance. She also mentioned that she always used to think she needed to achieve every daily objective she had set. This kind of behavior eventually made her feel stressed. If she had known how to overcome this mindset during her studies, as she managed to after starting work, it would have been much better for her previously.

The importance of having the appropriate soft skills was another subtheme explored in this study. Soft skills are highly important as they are required everywhere. Having these skills helps an individual to communicate with people effectively and thus potentially persuade people to fulfill requests without feeling overwhelmed and pressured. Even though it has been highlighted that undergraduates need these skills to enhance their employment marketability, postgraduate students are also expected to have these kinds of skills as they have to deal with many different people, such as key industrial players, customers, or other potential respondents. Hence, applying these skills assists them in obtaining the help of these stakeholders during their research, for example, in gaining an overview of their research topic or access to appropriate people for data collection. D1 mentioned that during her studies, she did not have the skills needed to communicate properly with the relevant industry, specifically the government sector. This limitation led her to encourage institutions to prepare students by polishing their communication skills.

As enrolling in a postgraduate journey is exhausting, students often safeguard their well-being and relieve stress by leaving their thesis aside temporarily and indulging in their hobbies. Some students travel, some cook, some go shopping, and not a few play games as a means to briefly escape from their studies. However, it is notable that some students are excessively involved in their hobbies, which therefore take up too much of their research time. Therefore, one subtheme captured in this study is the need to reduce the time spent on hobbies. D5 mentioned that he wished that he could reduce the frequency with which he indulged in his hobby, which was playing computer games. This led him to spend too much money purchasing the games he desired, but if he could have reduced his game-playing frequency at that time, he would have used the time to do his Ph.D. Therefore, having prior knowledge about how to avoid spending excessive time on his hobby would have been useful and could have helped him to finish his studies more quickly. As D5 stated

*I have been a gamer since high school ... I am a hardcore gamer. I do not listen to songs or movies, and sometimes when I am too obsessed, I will play games from morning to dawn. I wish I could spend less time on the games because I think if I reduce my gaming activity, I can save six months already ... (D5)*

Thus, it can be seen that three main themes which are thesis and study preparation, accessibility of information, as well as interpersonal and social preparation are the factors that need to be taken into the account both by the institution and the students themselves. Having good accessibility to these factors will surely enhance the postgraduate students' experience which then may help them to complete their studies easily.

## Conclusion

A transition from undergraduate to postgraduate degree level is highly challenging as it demands that the students are independent in seeking knowledge and completing their research. Some students were able to finish their studies with ease but not a few faced major obstacles to finishing their studies. Some students even discontinued their studies halfway due to the various constraints they were facing. As this research seeks to identify objectively the information that would have been vital early in their postgraduate journey, the findings may improve postgraduate program outcomes by providing postgraduate students with appropriate information and practices to follow. This study ascertained three main themes of vital information which the informants wished they had known early in their postgraduate journey: thesis and study preparation, accessibility of information, as well as interpersonal and social preparation. The informants highlighted how important having knowledge was to success in proposal presentations, academic writing skills, and methodology selection. This important information falls under the thesis and study preparation theme as the information they wished they had known early in their postgraduate journey, as the findings indicated. Having a good grasp of this information would determine whether the path to completing a research program is easier or more difficult. This study also found that the accessibility of information - on topics such as fees, faculty expertise, future careers, administrative procedures, conference fee reimbursement, workshops, and graduation prerequisites - was also among the information that the informants wished they had known. Lacking access to this vital information will significantly affect the progress of students in their research journey. Lastly, the informants also mentioned the need for interpersonal and social preparation, such as through research support groups, emotional management strategies, soft skills training, and knowing how to reduce the time spent on hobbies while studying. On their lonely postgraduate journey, students need to be well prepared in terms of support systems, be it their own mental preparation and strategy or support from research communities who share similar interests. Hence, through these research outputs, the inputs from the informants could be further analyzed and transformed into resourceful guideline tools, whether in the form of program improvements, guideline books, or digital/online guideline platforms. These guidelines could help the researcher to gain a better understanding of the program, the proper research methodology to use, research planning, and time management for resources. To produce effective guidelines, the research scope could be expanded in future studies by obtaining quantitative research data to provide concrete empirical evidence. Besides, the data obtained in this study only reflect the perspectives of local former graduate students, not those of former postgraduate students from other countries. Therefore, it would be fruitful for future research on this topic to examine the views of graduate students in other countries as the input obtained might provide different perspectives that would eventually contribute to this body of knowledge in the field of higher education studies.

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