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Challenges of Graduate Students at
Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In this paper, the challenges faced by graduate students in Malaysia are discussed. Structure of graduate programs, lack of research resources, limited research opportunities, lack of opportunity to involve in professional organizations, shortage of qualified academic staffs, and lack of financial aid are some of challenges faced by graduate students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. In discussing the challenges, the author makes some comparisons between graduate educations in the United States (U. S) and in Malaysia. Implications for student affairs professionals are discussed in the last section.

Challenges of Graduate Students at Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

The awareness of the importance of continuing education has driven many Malaysians to further their studies beyond undergraduate degrees. Prior to 1990, most Malaysians went to western countries especially Great Britain and the United States to pursue their graduate degrees. As cost of higher education continues to rise in those countries, more and more Malaysians are applying to study at local universities. In response to the increasing demand for graduate education, all eleven public universities and five private universities began offering graduate degree programs in addition to undergraduate degrees. Major providers of graduate training were University of Malaya (UM), the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The universities not only accepted local students but also accepted international students from neighboring countries. In 2000, there were more than ten thousand graduate students in these universities (Yaakob & Ayob, 2003). In this paper, I will discuss some of challenges faced by graduate students at public universities in Malaysia. The role of student affairs professionals in assisting graduate students is also discussed.

Challenges

Malaysia was a British colony for more than 100 years. The influence of British colonization can be seen in many areas, such as politics, education, and legislation. In general, the Malaysian education system from the primary (elementary) level to secondary and subsequently tertiary level is greatly influenced by the British model. Even though many changes have been brought to the system, graduate education was excluded and retained most of its British heritage. It remained less structured and encouraged students to be self-learners. Inadequate educational and research resources, graduate studies in Malaysia very challenging. In

order to better understand this situation, a comparison between being graduate students in the US and Malaysia will be made whenever it is necessary.

Structure of Graduate Programs

Master's degrees in Malaysian higher education institutions are offered in three different models - by coursework, coursework and research, and research only. Students admitted under the first model are required to take a number of courses related to their fields. If students choose the second model, they have to complete a number of credit hours of coursework and conduct researches on specific topics. Dissertations written will be marked internally. The third model requires a student to do research only without any exposure to research methodologies or having research experience. A research proposal has to be submitted and defended before the student can start his research. Dissertations are graded by both internal and external examiners.

Doctoral programs in Malaysia are similar to most doctoral programs in Britain, which are less structured and focus on research only. A prospective student is required to submit a research proposal, which is evaluated by at least two experts in the area. The proposal may show that the student is qualified or not qualified to conduct a research at the doctoral level. Some successful candidates may need to take some advanced courses in order to help them write their theses later. Each doctoral student spends the entire duration of his studies conducting only research which is then graded by two internal examiners and one external examiner, sometime even external to Malaysia.

Having to do research without taking research courses is a challenge faced by many students. Many of them find that the preparation and writing of their research work are intricate experiences especially for Masters' students admitted under the third model (Yaacob and Ayob, 2003). They will face the same problem if they pursue their studies at the doctoral level. Based

on their experience in helping students, Yaacob and Ayob found that these students were not matured enough to conduct researches but nevertheless had to do so to fulfill their degree requirements.

Lack of research resources

To ensure that students' academic needs are taken care of, a university that offers graduate programs should have enough learning facilities for studies and researches. A library that provides a variety of support services is one of the important facilities needed by a university. Most books, journals, on-line resources, and other reference materials in Malaysian libraries were ordered from foreign publishers, mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom. As foreign exchange rate continues to rise, many libraries have to stop subscribing certain journals and on-line resources. Old text books are not replaced with latest ones due to insufficient budgets. Students and academic staffs are most disadvantaged due to very limited journals and materials available. Scorzelli (1987) an associate professor from Northeastern University, Boston reported that lack of textbooks was one of the problems in Malaysian higher education institutions. According to him, students rely on lecturers and reading materials provided. Some students photocopy complete textbooks obtained from the library. Although Scorzelli's report was based on his research done in 1987, the same problem still exists today. When I did my master's degree in 1997, I had to go to other universities to find resources because some materials cannot be obtained through inter library loan.

Limited research opportunities

At the graduate level, students who plan on pursuing academic careers are strongly advised to seek research and writing opportunities independent of their dissertation experience (WMU, 2002). Since U. S graduate education programs do not focus on final examinations and

theses only, students gain professional experience through involvements in research and paper presentations. Graduate students may involve in research works by assisting their professors. Those students usually are appointed as graduate assistants or doctoral associates. They can also apply for a number of external grants including graduate fellowships (WMU, 2003). Higher education institutions in Malaysia do not provide such opportunities to students because the education system stresses more on final works or final examinations. Despite the lack of exposure on research and professional development, they are expected to conduct researches for their dissertations and do well in graduate studies.

Professional development

Involvement in professional organization is a method to build a network for the exchange of ideas, skills, and employment opportunities. In most American universities, students can expect to become actively involved in professional organizations related to their fields. Attending conferences is one way to address professional development needs, in which they have the opportunities to present papers, interact with and learn from well-known scholars and researchers in various areas. According to Lafon (2003), involvement in professional organization is an inexpensive way to focus on current field of study. Skillman, (2003) a graduate student from Layola College, Baltimore states,

By attending the state association meetings I gained an idea of where the profession is. By attending the national convention, I developed an idea of where I was in relation to the profession. But most importantly, only through a combination of my experiences with both organizations, did I begin to formulate an idea of where the profession is in relation to where I would like it to go (p.1).

Involvement in professional association can be a rewarding experience for graduate students. Professional organizations in Malaysia are mainly for working professionals. Thus, graduate students have limited opportunities to get involved in the organizations. In some schools, they are only required to attend weekly graduate seminars, which are usually conducted by their professors. Involvement in professional organizations also cannot help students in finding jobs. Because most jobs in Malaysia require only undergraduate degrees, advanced degrees will not be counted. Therefore, most graduate students have full time jobs, and the advanced degrees that they pursuing are just for self-fulfillment and enhancing their job skills.

Shortage of qualified academic staffs

Academic standards of graduate programs are often evaluated by its faculty. In the United States, graduate degree courses must be taught by experienced faculty, who must hold the highest degree in the discipline. An adequate number of qualified and full-time graduate faculty members must be provided in the subject field and related discipline in accordance with the accreditation standards (Northwest Association of School and College, 2003). Besides having a doctoral degree, a faculty member is also assessed by his research competency.

The minimum qualification to be a university lecturer in Malaysia is the master's degree (Public Service Department, 2003). Before the 1998 economic recession, Malaysian government spent a large amount of money on education by sending students to foreign universities (Pope, Musa, Singaravelu, Bringaze, and Russell, 2002). Graduate students, mostly government officers were sent to do their advanced degrees overseas and upon returning home, to teach in local universities. Some of them were only required to do master's degree programs because the priority of the universities was undergraduate education. Due to economic recession, the number of staff being sent overseas is reduced. At the same time, more students applied to further their

studies. Consequently, many lecturers with minimum qualification are expected to teach graduate students as well as undergraduate students. These lecturers are not only required to teach, but they also have to supervise master's students in dissertation writings. Heavy teaching loads limit consultation times allocated for graduate students because the lecturers are not easily accessible. Some students do not even know their supervisors and depend mostly on peers for academic advice. If consultations are not done effectively by appropriate professionals, students' studies may be affected (Dungy, 2003).

Financial aid

The idea behind financial aid is to assist needy students pay the cost of their studies. Financial aids will help them reduce unnecessary burdens so that they can realize their goals of attending college. The aid may be available in many forms such as scholarships, fellowships, grants, and assistantships, depending on the degrees they are pursuing and their fields of interest (McWade, 1995). Students also may apply for federal and private loans with variable repayment rates and conditions.

Graduate students in Malaysia have limited resources for financial assistance. Only full time graduate students are qualified to apply for assistantships. The number of assistantships is very limited, and depends on government funding. The amount being paid is also low, which discourages married students to apply. Other graduate students may need to find their own financial resources. According to McWade (1995), ignorance for support may cause students to attend school part time. That may be one of the reasons why most graduate students in Malaysia enroll part-time. One issue that needs attention is whether graduate students prefer to attend school full time if their aid options are clearly identified or keeping their jobs is an important priority in their lives.

Discussion and Suggestion

The growth of graduate education in Malaysia was spurred by economic conditions that drove people to further their studies beyond the baccalaureate degrees (Yaacob & Ayob, 2003). According to Baird (1993), graduate education differs from undergraduate education in many aspects. For instance, graduate class is smaller and involves one-on-one interaction between professors and students, the cost is higher, and it needs necessary equipments and facilities that are often expensive. Thus, institutions that offer graduate studies should ensure that they have enough teaching staffs and learning facilities to ensure quality of their products. Shortage of qualified teaching staffs and lack of research resources can affect students' progress. These two problems can be considered as the main problems and need to be resolved quickly. Even though undergraduate degrees are still the core business of Malaysian higher education institutions, graduate education deserves better quality service because it has become a major part in higher education.

For graduate students, having to do research without enough exposure in research methodologies and knowledge related to the area can be the most challenging experience. Graduate schools may need to modify programs that are less structured to become more structured if they want to produce quality students. According to Fischer and Zigmond (1998), students will not be able to write good dissertations unless they find the issues they are studying to be compelling. They also should choose projects that will be interesting enough to merit a PhD whether their experiments work or not. It is difficult for graduate students to do researches and prepare good dissertations without enough knowledge and skills related to the area.

Providing qualified teaching staffs to teach graduate programs should become a priority by the government. More excellent students should be recruited by the universities and then sent

to do graduate studies. If a university has enough qualified academic staffs, advising and supervising works can be improved. Faculty should not consider advising and supervising graduate students as secondary. Lipshutz (1993) suggests that advising or mentoring means treating students as colleagues, not as apprentices. The success of graduate students is often associated with whom they work and get advice. In order to improve the success rate of graduate students, work with graduate students should be evaluated with other aspects of faculty member's performance, namely, research and undergraduate teaching.

Lack of research resources is another serious issue that needs to be resolved immediately because it may affect students' progress. The need to order foreign textbooks and journals from overseas and to pay the price in foreign currencies are the main problems faced by many institutions because funding is in Malaysian currency. It is suggested that institutions improve certain services such as inter-library loan and share on-line resources between them, so that they are able to provide their graduate students easy access to various resources.

Success in managing these two problems will help graduate students obtain more meaningful experience in their studies. Other challenges, such as lack of research opportunities, limited opportunities in professional development, and financial aid problems although needing attention, can be resolved gradually. Since these problems are mostly caused by limited funding, on-going discussion between university management and Malaysian Ministry of Education to increase the budget is needed. With enough budgets, universities can increase and offer more research grants and assistantships and sponsor students to attend conferences or seminar in the region so that they can develop professional experiences outside their classrooms.

Role of Student Affairs Professionals

A decision to do graduate study is a serious commitment. The experience of being in graduate school can be challenging, rewarding, and intellectually stimulating. Returning to college is likely to be stressful for mature adults, because of the conflict created by the demanding nature of students' role as well as other roles that they have to perform (Anderson & Mieztis, 1999). Furthermore, they usually have working experience and often have many adult responsibilities. Performing multiple roles can cause them to be depressed and under considerable stress. Attending university that does not have enough facilities for graduate students will add to the burden as these problems can affect and delay their progress. According to Caple (1995), graduate students who feel pressured, spending time with someone with empathy for their circumstances and trained to help them release their stress and find ways to adjust, is sufficient help. Although student affairs professionals have limited capacities to change certain things that cause academic stress to graduate students, they may help them manage their stress through advice and counseling. Student affairs professionals who work in advising offices and counseling centers must understand problems and stresses that graduate students face and help them integrate new experience into their lives.

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