A Qualitative Analysis of Factors Affecting the Successful Completion of Postgraduate Studies

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Abstract: Purpose: The study aims to highlight the current learning approaches used by postgraduate students to complete their postgraduate studies on time, as studies have shown many students have failed to finish their studies as planned. In particular, this study focuses on factors and methods that are perceived to be most effective by students to help them complete their studies on time.

Methodology: This study was based on a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews. The study sample consisted of 14 postgraduate students and one lecturer as respondents. The research instrument was based on interview questions to elicit relevant information on their demographics and learning practices. Data were collected and organized into four themes and were subsequently analyzed descriptively.

Findings: The findings showed that face-to-face discussions were the most popular practice adopted by the respondents. The findings also showed several factors had significant impacts on student learning, such as interpersonal relationships between students and supervisors, commitment, financial commitment, and moral support, which needs to be taken into account in helping students to complete on time.

Significance: The research findings can inform all the stakeholders, notably students, supervisors, and administrative officers, factors that have profound impacts on postgraduate students’ efforts to graduate on time.

Keywords: Best practices, face-to-face discussions, graduate on time, postgraduate studies, supervision

1. Introduction

Every year, the number of candidates applying to enroll in master’s degrees and doctoral programs at the public universities has increased drastically. Such an increase is hardly surprising as many public universities are offering a diversity of courses and programs that are tailored to meet students’ needs for their career advancements. According to Ahmad Thamrini (2020), postgraduate students do not have to rush to seek employment but rather to continue their studies at the doctoral level. Being relatively young, they are in their prime age to pursue doctoral studies with more rigor and determination. As such, the departments of postgraduate studies of various universities must provide prospective doctoral students the essential assistance and support to help them enroll in various doctoral programs. In general, most universities have a strict policy regarding the time for doctoral students to graduate, which may take several semesters. Hence, the researchers are concerned with several issues or questions that may arise from the requirement to graduate on time, such as “What will be the approach used by doctoral students to graduate on time?” and “Will they be influenced by their seniors into thinking that learning at the doctoral level will be easy?”

In general, all universities provide several guidelines to help prospective students to plan their choices of study. For example, the School of Postgraduate Studies of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (2018) provides the essential academic guidelines both in printed and digital form to help administrators and students manage their roles efficiently. With increasing demands for a highly-skilled, competent workforce, every public university in Malaysia must provide better services in every aspect of higher learning to prospective students to ensure they can learn in friendly, conducive learning environments that lead to the successful completion of their studies.

The above assertion is in line with the principles of National Education Philosophy, which was initiated through Malaysia’s Education Act 1996, emphasizing a holistic development of postgraduate students to become individuals with strong accountability, knowledge, and resourcefulness who can make significant contributions to the society and the nation. Clearly, it shows that to be a well-developed nation that is strong in all fields, including education, its student population need to diligently work hard in pursuing their studies to the higher levels, such as masters’ degrees and doctoral degrees (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2015). To pursue studies at these levels entails students having strong academic credentials based on Malaysia’s Quality Agency, which stipulates that undergraduates wishing to pursue higher studies must have at least a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of 2.75 (School of Postgraduate Studies). However, those with lower CGPAs can still apply for CGPA master’s degree and doctoral degree programs whose applications will be subjected to the senates of respective universities.
Specifically, the university’s directive Surat Pekeliling MQA Bil. 1/2013 dated December 19, 2013, which took effect January 1, 2014, stipulates that the applications of students with CGPAs lower than 2.75 but have a working experience of at least five (5) years in the field of their interest will be considered accordingly. Clearly, this directive enables Malaysian public universities to increase their capacity in taking more postgraduates by giving them more opportunities to apply various academic programs offered by relevant faculties. Studies have shown this leeway has helped many public universities in Malaysia to increase their PhD students by as much as 60% annually. The mainstream daily newspaper Akhbar Sinar Harian reported on December 8, 2018 that the Malaysian government aimed to increase the number of students with a PhD by 2023 as highlighted in Malaysia’s Education Plan2015-2023.

To help realize such an aim, the Malaysian government has taken several proactive measures, such as the provision of research grants for qualified postgraduates. To date, all Malaysian public universities have launched various campaigns to attract prospective students using various media, one of which is ‘Jommasuk U’, literally meaning ‘let’s join the university’. Such campaigns aim to inform the public of the various courses of more than 60,000 offered by the universities. Based on the Postgraduate Tracing Study 2018, the numbers of undergraduates and master’s students enrolling in Master’s degree programs and doctoral degree programs have increased by 67.5% and 81.5%. The statistics released by the Department of Higher Learning of Malaysia’s Ministry of Education (MOE) also show similar numbers of enrollments of postgraduate students as summarized in Table 1.

### Table 1. The enrollment of postgraduate students in Malaysian universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Category of Institute of Higher Learning</th>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Enrolment</th>
<th>Graduating students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>6,855</td>
<td>35,362</td>
<td>4,121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>1,622</td>
<td>7,817</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>20,081</td>
<td>58,240</td>
<td>15,193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>8,094</td>
<td>31,574</td>
<td>5,439</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Planning and Policy, MOE-2019

To help increase student enrollments, scholarships and loans are provided by several financial institutions to students. This financial assistance helps the Malaysian government to realize its aims of making Malaysia one of the leading nations that offer high-quality education. As such, Malaysia needs a highly-skilled, knowledgeable workforce to achieve the status of a developed nation (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2015). In this regard, more postgraduate students are needed to help the government to bring significant changes to the nation’s social and economic models (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2018). Admittedly, there will be many challenges that lie ahead that need to be addressed by all the stakeholders.

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic has made many nations to introduce new norms to contain the disease, which virtually involve all walks of life including students. Hence, postgraduate students must seek effective learning techniques or strategies to help them complete their dissertations on time. According to Malaysia’s Quality Agency (2015), master’s and doctoral dissertations should at least have 150 and 250 pages, respectively. The same agency also emphasizes that postgraduate students need to impart their knowledge in various disciplines of social and pure sciences to society. Certainly, to be good postgraduate students, they must have the ability to conduct research, communicate effectively, and write high-impact scientific papers that can be published in indexed journals, such as Scopus. Thus, postgraduate students must work hard to perform the above tasks to ensure they can become future scientists, technologists, educationists, and psychologists, among others (Marilyn Simon & Jim Goes, 2013). From the religious and social perspective, they must also have strong professionalism, personality, leadership, and noble characters (J. Helmi, 2015).

### 2. Research Problem

It is common knowledge that postgraduate learning is more challenging than undergraduate learning. For example, the former entails students to learn on their own, as there are no classes involved, except for certain courses. In particular, students need to meet their respective supervisors to discuss aspects relating to their studies, such as fieldwork, laboratory experiments, and the publication of their research. However, some postgraduates have to struggle to meet all these requirements, invariably forcing them to apply for study extensions by a few semesters (Ismail, AM, 2019). Their failures to complete their theses stem from several factors, notably negative attitudes, difficulties in meeting with supervisors, and supervisors’ indifferences. Other
issues relating to their poor studies may be attributed to the incompatibility between students and supervisors, health problems, financial problems, the lack of moral support, and their failures to publish academic papers (Julita, 2015). By working in the private sector, many postgraduates have to rely on their incomes to support their studies, and they usually do not have enough time to see their supervisors and to seek relevant references for their dissertations (Yasmin H. A. & Anuar Ahmad, 2017), which collectively forces the students to extend their studies or the universities to terminate their studies. Also, some students do not have sufficient opportunities to meet their supervisors to discuss the writing of their theses (Wolf, D. M., & Phung, L., 2019). Surely, without proper guidance, students will have little chance to complete their studies on-time, which may, in extreme circumstances, lead to the termination of their studies.

3. Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the practices and approaches used by postgraduate students in completing their studies in public universities in Malaysia.

4. Literature Review

Scholars have used various definitions to explain the meaning of face-to-face learning, which may take a new perspective on postgraduate studies. According to Mohd Azli Yeop et al. (2016), despite being labeled as traditional, such a learning method is still relevant. Likewise, Gagné (1970) asserts that face-to-face learning is an effective method with which students and supervisors can discuss all aspects of students’ studies with greater intimacy (Gagné, 1970). Admittedly, blended learning has been widely used in many institutions that primarily rely on online learning (Nursyazwani Zainul Abidin, 2015). Of late, this learning approach has become a popular method to establish communication between students and lecturers. Of late, blended learning, which combines face-to-face learning with online learning, has become a popular learning approach to supervise their students, as the latter can support a range of capabilities, such as mobile communication, video recording, and instant messaging, to enhance communication between the two parties (Halimah, 2017). For better supervision, students are encouraged to record important aspects of discussions raised in their meetings with supervisors on a record book or audio files (Linda, 2005).

Based on the culture practiced by today’s students, many scholars, including the researchers, believe that the face-to-face learning method is still highly relevant and effective. Such a notion is hardly unexpected as Sternberg (1981) asserts that the traditional method has several advantages in supervising postgraduate students. For example, students who are unsure about their choices of research topics can discuss with their supervisors to express their interests and preferences in a more conducive environment. Through this mode of communication, students will be able to improve their understanding of a particular research topic and avoid mistakes in writing their theses (Oliver, 2004). Clearly, the educational benefits of face-to-face contact outweigh the high economic cost of implementing such a communication method, which typically needs a physical space and incurs more cost (Nordin, H & Singh, D, 2018).

In a study conducted by Fauziah Ahmad (2009), it was found that students had to constantly discuss with their supervisors to ensure they could complete their study on time. Consistent discussions could help establish a strong rapport between the two parties, which would help improve students’ confidence in pursuing their studies. In this regard, students must manage their time diligently to ensure they have enough time to study and to meet their supervisors. Admittedly, writing a dissertation is a daunting task to many students, entailing proper and constant guidance from supervisors. Thus, both parties need to develop strong relationships to create an atmosphere in which both students and supervisors can discuss academic matters amicably. Undeniably, supervising postgraduate studies is challenging due to several factors, such as students’ demographic and social backgrounds that shape their attitudes, thinking, and communication skills (Moses, 1992). It is, therefore, important for both parties to understand their respective roles and responsibilities to ensure the communication between the two can yield positive, meaningful outcomes. In particular, the covenant established by students and supervisors must be respected and honored. As such, students must always keep up with appointments made with their supervisors at the appropriate time and place. Failing to do so will surely have serious repercussions that may render students become uncertain or unsure about the progress of their studies. Also, such failings can sever the relationship between both parties that can lead to poor communication, rendering students with no proper guidance and counsel to help them complete their studies on time Hamizatun Akmal (2013).

According to Alecia and Anuar (2017), postgraduate students must clearly know the direction that they have to follow to graduate on time. Knowing such a path can help them prepare for any challenges or problems that may crop up during the course of their studies. Equipped with such knowledge, students can overcome all sorts
of barriers that may lie ahead with strong tenacity. One of the main problems often cited by postgraduate students is a lack of funds. For most Malaysian postgraduate students, this is a pressing issue that has been raised time and again. Inevitably, some students may have to quit their jobs to study full-time. Even though students can apply for study loans, the amounts received are not sufficient to help them support the studies. To make matters worse, some students have families that make their financial hardship even more severe. Thus, it is not surprising that their financial predicaments have taken a heavy toll on their academic performance Zainal Abiddin (2017). Given these ramifications, all the stakeholders must take the necessary measures to help such students to help them go through their studies successfully. Left unmitigated, the failures of students to successfully complete their studies will have an adverse impact not only on the students and supervisors but also on societies and the nation at large Mohd Hasimi Yaacob (2017).

5. Methodology

According to Mohajan and Haradhan Kumar(2018), the researchers must state the research methodology in their study to ensure the instruments used will yield reliable findings. For this study, the researchers used a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews to collect relevant, detailed data from a group of participants. The sample of this study consisted of 14 postgraduate students and 1 lecturer, who were interviewed at several universities in Malaysia, namely Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Asia e-Universiti Malaysia (AeU), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Open Universiti Malaysia (OUM), and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNIZA). Prior to the interviews, the researchers contacted the respective heads of department and deans to inform the purpose of the research and seek permissions for the interviews. The respective department heads and deans randomly selected their students and lecturers deemed suitable for the interview.

Students who were currently in the second semester and above and who were in the process of writing their dissertations were selected for the interviews, which lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and their responses would be treated with strict confidentiality. They were also assured that they were free to express their thoughts and opinions without prejudice. With their permission, the researchers recorded all communications on a mobile phone. Information regarding their names, marital status, ages, and field of studies was recorded for analysis. As recommended by Sarjit and Gurman (2009), the researchers used an analysis based on the combination of the library study and field study to deductively interpret the research findings. In the ensuing discussions, the participants are referred to several identification codes, such as ‘R1’ (to indicate the first participant), to protect their identities. The discussions are divided into four themes, namely face-to-face supervision, study commitment, moral support, and financial support.

6. Findings

Table 2 summarizes the demography of the 15 participants interviewed in this study, namely their name, age, gender, marital status, level of study, and the field of study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Field of study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>R1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UTM</td>
<td>(Lecturer)</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>UTM</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Soc. Sciences &amp; Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UTM</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Islamic Civilization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>UPSI</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Usuluddin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UPSI</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UPSI</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Syariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>R7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UUM</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Islamic Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>R8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UUM</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>R9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>AeU</td>
<td>Phd</td>
<td>Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>R10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>USM</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Syariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>R11</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>USM</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Syariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>R12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>OUM</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>R13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>UNIZA</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Syariah&amp; Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>R14</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>UNIZA</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Usul and Maqasid Syariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>R15</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>UNIZA</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Islamic Philosophy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Study, April 2018
When asked about the best practice needed by students to complete their studies, respondent R1, who was a lecturer working in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Skudai, Johor, stressed the importance of study preparation, the selection of relevant research topic, and meeting with his supervisor as highlighted in his response as follows:

*It is quite simple… students have to make an early preparation before seeing their supervisors at least once a week. They need to select appropriate topics of their interest and study them in detail. Face-to-face meetings with supervisors are important to guide the writing of dissertations.*

Respondent R2 was a masters’ degree student in education at UTM, who was in the third semester specializing in management and administration. The following is her response when prompted with the same question as above.

*For me, students need to have a strong will to study at this level by constantly discussing their studies with their supervisors. To reciprocate, supervisors need to closely keep track of their students’ progress of thesis writing.*

Respondent R3 was a fifth-semester master’s degree student in Islamic Study at the Islamic Civilization Academy of UTM. When asked about the decline in motivation of some students, her response was revealing as follows:

*I concur that students who have lost the mood to study will have a huge adverse impact on their learning. They need to fully commit to the writing of their theses and minimize socializing with friends to ensure it will not impede the writing of their theses. Preferably, supervisors need to provide flexible meeting appointments that are not limited to normal working hours.*

Respondent R4 was a doctoral student in her fifth semester of study majoring in the Islamic Study at the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). She was an Islamic Study teacher in a secondary school in Selangor. Her response to the same question about the best practice was also insightful as follows:

*PhD students are mandatory to see their supervisors at least once in a semester. Being a teacher, I find it difficult to see my supervisor at a certain time due to the time constraint. Ideally, my supervisor can be reached at any appropriate time. And, it does not have to be in the office.*

Respondent R5 was a master’s degree student at UPSI majoring in Sports Science, who was in the fifth semester of study. Her response to the same question as above was interesting and informative as follows:

*Today, communication is made easy with tele-conferencing applications. I have proposed this technology to my supervisor, but he was not ready to use it. Due to financial constraints, I have not met my supervisor face-to-face to present my research proposal.*

Respondent R6 was in doctoral student in her seventh semester of study majoring in Islamic Syariah at UPSI. She used to work as a lower court judge in Kuala Lumpur and secured a paid-leave scholarship to pursue her study. When probed about the importance of moral support, she made a short, pertinent comment as follows:

*Despite being mature students, moral support from all concerned, especially from supervisors, families, and employers, are important to encourage them to complete their studies as quickly as possible.*

Respondent R7 was a doctoral student in her fourth semester of study majoring in Islamic Development and Management Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Formerly, he was a university before being awarded a full scholarship to pursue her study.

*Every week, I showed the progress of the writing of chapters and sub-topics of my thesis to my supervisor. The meetings with my supervisor were ok, good, and I applaud his attitude toward quality time. He also emphasized with my problems.*

Respondent R8 was a master’s degree student in the second semester of her study majoring in the Disasters Management Study at UUM. He secured a study scholarship from a leading financial institution. When asked about the decline in student learning, he highlighted several means to avoid such a problem as follows:
Students tend to show symptoms of indolence, especially for studies with long semesters to complete. As a workaround, I tried to release some of the tension by attending seminars and checking with my supervisors on the course of actions that I had to take.

Respondent R9 was a doctoral student in the third semester of her study majoring in the Financial Management and Administration at University e-Asia, Kuala Lumpur. She had her own forwarding business for 15 years. Her response to the question relating to the way of completing a study was forthright as follows:

To complete on time, students have to be committed to writing their theses. They need to carefully plan the appointments with their supervisors. Even though their supervisors may be busy, students have to make sure they can fix the needed appointments to discuss their studies with adequate time.

Respondents R10 and R11 were doctoral students in their sixth semester of studies majoring in Islamic Syariah (Current Fiqh) at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia. They were administrative officers working at the Islamic Center of USM. When asked about the publication of journal articles as one of the requirements for graduation, they seemed to agree with such a demand based on their responses as follows:

As graduate students, they have to contribute to the enrichment of relevant body of knowledge through the writing and publication of peer-reviewed journal articles, such as Scorpus. In this regard, supervisors need to encourage students to present their research findings in international seminars and conferences, which can be selected for publication in reputable journals (R10). Hence, the imperative for supervisors to guide us in writing quality papers appropriate to the research themes of journals and in improving articles based on the reviewers’ comments (R11).

Respondent R12 was a doctoral student in her fourth semester of study majoring in the Management of Islamic Education Curriculum at the Open University Malaysia (OUM). She was a former lecturer at the Matriculation College in Johor. Her response to the question regarding the effective approach to completing her study was revealing as follows:

Doctoral candidates have to see their supervisors to acquire the essential knowledge. If face-to-face meetings are not practical, there are other alternatives, such as email, tele-conferencing, and web-chating, to discuss with their supervisors at least once a week. These types of communication help inform the progress of students’ writing to the supervisors.

Respondents R13 and R14 were master’s degree students majoring in Islamic Law and Judiciary and Fiqh and Contemporary Issues, respectively, who were in their fourth and sixth semester of studies. On the other hand, respondent R15 was a doctoral student in her sixth semester of study majoring in Islamic Civilization and Literature. All these students pursued their studies at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, (UNisZA). When asked about the best practices that they could use to help them complete their studies, the responses were varied as follows:

The financial hardships have adversely affected my study, compelling me to work as an early childhood education assistant (R13). Studying at the postgraduate level entails a strong commitment from students as they have to plan the progress of their dissertations (R14). Their relationships with supervisors must be close. In fact, supervisors prefer to see them every week where they can present the development of their dissertations (R15).

7. Discussion

As revealed, the above findings suggest postgraduate students need to adopt several practices that can help them complete their studies on time. Their feedback and comments helped highlight issues that they had to deal with in the course of their studies. The discussion of the research findings is divided into several sub-sections with their respective themes as follows:

Face-to-face discussions

Initially, most of the postgraduate students had to struggle to select the research topics. Admittedly, selecting topics that interest them can drive them to pursue their studies with motivation and determination. In such a
situation, discussions between students and supervisors in the latters’ offices are of paramount importance. To make their meetings more flexible, such discussions can be arranged at other locations and non-formal working hours. As highlighted by Zainal Abiddin (2007), one of the most important tasks of supervisors is to provide comprehensive guidance in thesis writing encompassing all related aspects, such as the selection of research topics, the writing of thesis chapters, research methodology, research findings, the format of research, ethics in field research, and the general management of thesis writing. In this respect, some universities practice the concept of ‘one student two supervisors’, arguing for the need to have different fields of knowledge with one of them assuming a principal role (Russell, 1996).

According to Darmono (2002), face-to-face discussions between the two parties are important to ensure the selected topics will be relevant and of interest to the students. Ideally, such discussions, either formal or informal, can be carried out in a series of sessions that lead to harmonious relationships. As such, supervisors have to play the role of a facilitator to guide students to have a full grasp of thesis writing, with the former suggesting the latter the appropriate theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and research concepts. Also, supervisors need to ensure selected research topics are relevant and current, the scopes of research are appropriate, and the research objectives have practical significance. In the interviews, most of the respondents (R2, R3, R4, R5, R7, R9, R11, R12, and R15) agreed that the discussions on research topics were important as their supervisors had strong knowledge and vast experience to guide them.

The meetings between the two have to be focused, harmonized, with both parties acknowledging their respective responsibilities. In certain cases, despite some reservations, students need to accommodate and accept their supervisors’ views as a reflection of their respect for their latter (Kamarul Azmi, 2010). With such attitudes, students can be guided to carry out their studies with quality, smooth supervision. Simply put, face-to-face communications can help students learn and acquire appropriate knowledge directly from their supervisors. As such, universities in Malaysia need to put greater emphasis on the presentation of research proposals as one of the requisites for the approval of studies at the master’s degree and doctoral levels. Hence, it becomes the imperative for universities to provide the necessary guidelines and appoint highly experienced lecturers as supervisors for postgraduate students.

**Study Commitment**

Certainty, the pursuit of knowledge at the postgraduate level entails students to have a strong will, commitment, and identity, as there are many challenges lying ahead. Studies have shown that students have to grapple with many issues, such as poor motivation, a lack of interest, emotional distress, and poor communication with supervisors, which collectively impede the progress of the writing of dissertations. According to Siti Radhiah (2017), some students tend to lose their will to study when face with cumbersome bureaucracy to collect research data. As such, students need to remain steadfast and work tirelessly in their academic endeavors (Tala Michelle K. E., 2018). From a religious standpoint, students need to view such undertakings are their religious duties to acquire the knowledge required for the betterment of societies. From the Islamic perspective, people with knowledge occupy a higher religious station than those without knowledge.

Such a position denotes the ability of knowledgeable people to discern the difference between good and bad deeds, which is in line with a Koranic verse (Holy Koran, 39:9). Also, equipped with better knowledge, they can improve their economic standing in society. For students seeking knowledge, they need to have an open mind to listen to other people’s ideas and views and be receptive to criticisms of their supervisors, lecturers, and colleagues (He & Hutson, 2018). However, it is common knowledge that some students will be reluctant to admit their weaknesses, which may be due to their egoistic or negative attitudes. Admittedly, there will be students who prefer to work alone or refuse to work in groups. Thus, it is not surprising that they lack the social skills to negotiate and agree with other people’s ideas or views, including their lecturers’ comments and feedback Thompson (2018).

In the context of pursuing one’s goals, age is deemed insignificant insofar that postgraduate students’ willingness to learn will never diminish, which can help them to complete their studies on time. According to Cassuto (2013), even those who have reached the age of retirement need to muster the courage and determination to seek knowledge at the highest level of study. For this to materialize, postgraduate students have to focus on their studies by focusing on strategizing their learning activities, arranging flexible discussion appointments, and collecting research, among others. Surely, such practices can help them to go through the learning process smoothly and meaningfully.

**Moral Support**

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The moral support in the context of higher learning is the support postgraduate students received from their parents, friends, families, and supervisors in their pursuit of higher knowledge. As revealed in the interviews, most of the respondents seemed worried that they would not be able to complete their studies on time. Arguably, their worries have some merits in that postgraduate students are inevitably subject to a myriad of challenges in dealing with their supervisors, spouses, children, and administrative staff. Hence, they need all the support they can get, including moral support, from all concerned to cope with the pressure in completing their studies. In this respect, close relationships among various parties will have a significant impact on the supervision of dissertations. Effectively, all concerned must practice good communications in their interactions, which certainly can eliminate any misunderstandings or misgivings between students and supervisors.

Inevitably, some students may feel frustrated or unappreciated when their supervisors severely criticize some parts or chapters of their theses. Unresolved, this may lead to serious confrontations that bring no benefits to both parties, culminating in students abandoning their studies or seeking new supervisors. Such a hypothetical scenario underscores the importance of moral support from supervisors in motivating and encouraging their students to focus on their studies. Surely, completing doctoral and master’s degree dissertations on-time gives postgraduate students a sense of self-fulfillment or self-accomplishment that they will cherish for a long time. As such, supervisors must provide strong moral support to their students by being helpful, mindful, and caring. In other words, supervisors can and shall be the first person that postgraduate students willturn to when they are in a dire situation, which ultimately may impedethe progress of their studies.

Financial Commitment

Undeniably, the financial factor can have a huge impact on students’ efforts to complete their studies successfully. Students must, ideally, have sufficient financial means to support their necessities, such as reference books, fees, food, lodgings, and transports. No doubts, all these necessities can only be met when students have enough money; otherwise, they may find themselves in a tight financial situation, which surely can adversely affect their studies. For those lacking financial means, they can venture into the job market to become part-time workers, such as sales assistants, petrol kiosk attendants, online sellers, tuition teachers, and point-of-sales tellers, and others (Aisyah Abdul Rahman & Wajeeha Zulkifly, 2016). Of late, many students have been taking up various positions on a part-time basis in the economic sector to earn extra incomes. Presumably, their involvement in this sector is to complement the scholarships or study loans that they have received from various public and private agencies, which are hardly enough to help them get through their studies. However, their involvement in such businesses may take a heavy toll on their studies. As such, they need to manage their time wisely to ensure they will enough time to study and carry out their research as planned (Hamizatun Akmal & Norzaini Azman, 2013).

8. Implications and Conclusion

As discussed above, it can reasonably be concluded that the most practical rate of face-to-face discussion sessions between postgraduate students and supervisors is once a week, with each lasting not less than an hour. The research findings suggest that one of the major concerns among students is to complete their studies on time, the failure of which will have serious financial ramifications. In all likelihood, the overall cost of their studies will skyrocket as they need to pay extra academic fees, house rents, food, lodgings, and transports. For those who have major issues with their supervisors, the former are advised to bring such matters to the attention of the management of postgraduate studies to seek new supervisors who can provide better supervision. With improved relationships, supervisors can guide their postgraduates with greater empathy and care in helping the latter to complete their studies as planned. Also, postgraduate students need strong moral support from all concerned, especially their supervisors, friends, families, and employers, as learning at this high level is inevitably fraught with many challenges or problems. From the affective perspective, firm moral support can help motivate and boost postgraduate students’ morale to remain focused on their studies. Overall, the research findings can inform all the stakeholders, notably students, supervisors, and administrative officers, factors that have profound impacts on postgraduate students’ efforts to graduate on time.

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