

The Experience of Mature Malaysian Postgraduates in a university in England: Learning Challenges

Faizahani Ab Rahman
faizahani@uum.edu.my

School of Education and Modern Languages Universiti Utara Malaysia

ABSTRACT: To date, the increasing number of research on international students in higher institutions in the United Kingdom has generally focused on the experiences of mainly the undergraduates coming from various countries. Research that explores the experiences of international postgraduates has recently concentrated on Chinese students as they comprise a high percentage of international students' population in England. This paper, in contrast, draws on the experiences of a group of mature Malaysian postgraduates in a university in the south-west England and focuses on their learning experiences. The qualitative feasibility study of 16 Malaysian postgraduates suggests that their learning challenges are exclusively to them being mature students such as challenges in managing time and roles, international students in terms of language barriers and racial discrimination and postgraduates, such as meeting the expectations of their supervisors and other parties and meeting the demands of research work and ethics. This leads to suggestions on the types of support that mature Malaysian postgraduates studying abroad would need to help with the completion of their PhDs.

Keywords: *higher institutions, Malaysian postgraduates, mature students, learning challenges, gender-related challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents findings from a feasibility study that is used to gauge mature Malaysian postgraduates' experiences and challenges in competing studies at doctoral level in England. The purpose was to establish whether the intended study was realistic and would provide useful data. The interpretive case study of a group of Malaysian postgraduates discusses their learning challenges in the journey in 3 themes; language barriers, differences in learning environment and issues related with supervisors.

The increasing number of international students entering higher institutions in the last few decades in the United Kingdom has fuelled extensive research to be carried out on their journey as sojourners in a foreign country, focusing specifically on their learning and living experiences. Recent research in the area has focused on Chinese students since they hold the highest number of international students' population in the UK, and even that, most research on international students has generally concentrated on the experiences of undergraduates. Research on international postgraduates in the UK has not been extensively explored and vigorous in the last few years although the enrolment of this particular cohort has risen, indicating that in the near future, this group will continue to increase. One of the reasons is due to the fact that they have not managed to garner much attention due to the smaller number of enrollments as compared to the undergraduates. Nevertheless, in the last three decades, the number has risen with students coming especially from Asian countries. With the increasing growth of postgraduates in many English-speaking countries and also due to the solitary nature of doing research, it is important that their specific needs and demands be addressed.

There are many issues surrounding international postgraduates in higher education and this research aims to explore the learning challenges that a group of mature Malaysian postgraduates faced in a university in England.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on the experiences of mature students in higher institutions have illustrated that most students mentioned that they faced certain difficulties pertaining to their studies, particularly challenges related to language, adapting to the new learning and research culture and academic concerns which are relationships with and expectations of the supervisors, changes in research topics and research experience.

The following subsections discuss the learning challenges faced by international postgraduates and postgraduates in general.

Issues Related to International Postgraduates

Language Barriers

A study conducted by Evans and Stevenson¹ on international educational students enrolling for doctorate programme in six different universities in the UK reveal immediate adjustments need to be made upon enrolling in the UK universities. These include adjustments to their expectations of the structure and content of the PhD programmes to the reality they encountered. Instead of attending highly structured doctoral programmes where they were expected to work at their own progress that would suit their learning needs. The second necessary adjustment that they need to do is to be an autonomous learner in which they are expected to work independently without constant supervision and guidance from their supervisors. This proves to be challenging for many students who come from didactic teaching method society like Malaysia, for example. Thirdly, it is expected the PhD standard and work must be original and critical enough and lastly, the expectation that they learn and write well in English, which is their second language.

Challenges in academic experiences due to differences in culture

In many instances, to expect international students to assimilate the UK ways does not necessarily work since some cultures, especially Asian, are deep-rooted and thus so any changes would equally mean challenging the identities of the students. For those who come from collectivist societies, especially Asians like Malaysians, for example, as opposed to the individualist societies such as the United Kingdom or the United States, are expected to learn through working and functioning in a society, therefore there is stress on the importance of learning the skills and virtues necessary to contribute to living in a society² :

"In the individualistic society the diploma not only improves the holder's economic worth but also his or her self-respect: it provides a sense of achievement. In the collectivist society a diploma is an honor to the holder and his or her in group which entitles the holder to associate with members of higher status groups."

This highlights the difference in perspectives between the two types of societies. In an individualistic society like most of the Western countries that places importance in preparing students as individuals in a society full of other individuals, the purpose of learning is 'know how to learn' rather than 'how to do' as is expected in a collectivist society such as Malaysia. By emphasizing what might work best for the society, it is also imperative that the notion of how to do, as applied to research students might have a different connotation. Elsey³ argues that the relationship between students and supervisors might be affected, as what students perceived as important, might be different to what is expected by their supervisors. The clash of cultures and what constitutes importance from one culture to another is thus, different and is reflected in our perspectives and values.

¹ C. Evans, and K. Stevenson, The Experience of international nursing students studying for a PhD in the UK: A Qualitative Study. *BMC Nursing*. 10 (1), 2011, 1-21.

² G. Hofstede, *Culture and Organizations*. London: Harper Collins. 1997. 63.

³ B. Elsey, Teaching and learning. The Learning experiences of overseas students. 1990, 46-62.

a. Pressure of Adapting to New Research Culture

Other recurring issues that are highlighted in research on postgraduates are on the pressures of coping and adapting to the requirements of postgraduate work and research, difficulties in adjusting to the new learning environment and academic culture, problems of reading and comprehending academic texts critically and lack of knowledge in research skills⁴. Literature on international students has also suggested that for international students, the pressure is greater since they must meet their own expectations and those of sponsors. A study by Alpine et al (2009) lists six categories of difficulties in postgraduate students experience namely i) time issues like slow progress, time lost due to people, ii) negative affects like discouragement, depression, lacking motivation, iii) intellectual/writer's block which could contribute to lack of concentration and confusion, iv) lack of /access to resources like funding, accessing information, v) lack of support which could be in terms of support, feedback, and vi) others, such as health and data overload. Together these factors highlight the difficulties that postgraduate students encounter. Whilst many of them have expressed their joy at being postgraduate students there are still many difficulties and challenges that they have to endure before completing their studies⁵. A study conducted in Norway by Kyvik⁶ found that most postgraduate students felt that the time-scale can be a serious problem. In most universities in the United Kingdom, there is a time limit for students to complete their studies within three years, as a full-time student. This is also closely related to the period of the visa given by immigration, which is based on the offer given by the respective universities. Having this time limit poses a constraint and might cause anxiety and stress. The next section discusses the needs of international students.

Literature has indicated that students face several difficulties, but being international postgraduates, there are some issues exclusively pertaining specifically to this cohort. According to literature on Asian students, a great concern for most international postgraduates apart from language barrier⁷, is adjusting academically to the research culture of the university. Quite often, the challenges of adapting and adjusting to a different academic culture can be so overwhelming that it will take the students some time before they manage to meet the demands of learning in the new environment. These learning demands usually entail research and analytical skills that most Asian students lack as they are not exposed to these in their educational system.

Additionally, the feeling of being 'lost' and 'confused' is synonymous with the feelings of many international postgraduates abroad. Qing⁸ refers to this kind of symptom as 'learning shock,' the intense unpleasant feelings when new learners experience difficulties as they are exposed to a new learning environment. In many instances, the expectations from the supervisors are for their students to take the initiative and to be proactive in thinking of their own research questions and methods themselves. The academic culture in their home country that has always advocated 'spoon-feeding' learning and rote learning limits the students in their provisions of doing independent research and learning. Students expect to be told and asked to do things, to the extent that some supervisors might think that their students are passive.

These feelings of uncertainty and being lost that these students experience are unlike those experienced by undergraduates. With the undergraduates, in the initial sojourn period as international students try to familiarize themselves and are negotiating their positions and beliefs in the new culture, is the stage where they feel lost and uncertain. This is apparent also in international postgraduates as they prepare themselves to get acquainted with the requirements from the new learning environment of the Western world⁹. As

⁴ S. Kaur and G.K. Kaur, A Qualitative Study of Postgraduate Students Learning Experiences in Malaysia. *International Educational Studies*. 2 (3), 2009, 47-56.

⁵ Mujtaba, B. Scharff, M. and Cavico, F.J and Mujtaba, M.G (2008) Challenges and Joys of Earning a Doctorate Degree: Overcoming the "ABD" Phenomenon. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 1(Nov 2008), 9-26.

⁶ Kyvik, S. Postgraduate Education in Norway. *European Journal of Education*. 21 (3). 1986. 251-260.

⁷Zu Qing, Maturity and Interculturality: Chinese students' experiences in UK higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 44 (1). 2009. 37-52. Zhao, C.M., Golde, C.M., and McCormick, A.C. More than a signature: How advisor choice and advisor behaviour affect doctoral student satisfaction. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(3). 2007. pp. 263-281.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ R. Harris. Overseas students in the United Kingdom university system. *Higher Education*, 29 1997, 77-92

research students, the demands on them are higher since students are expected to perform not only better, but at a higher level of education. This problem is further exacerbated for students who come from a collectivist society where supervisors and lecturers are placed on a pedestal with the feeling that their supervisors must be all-knowing experts in the fields. This leads to them having high expectations of their supervisors and expecting more directions and guidance¹⁰.

b. Mismatch Expectations of Supervisors and Students

Research on postgraduates exclusively mentioned that one of the many recurring issues is supervisor-supervisee relationship. Some research studies¹¹ seem to suggest that for a successful completion of doctoral program, there must be a positive reciprocal relationship between the students and their supervisors. Besides, the quality of this relationship and the quality of feedback and comments are vital and are of utmost paramount for students' success in their studies. Durkin,¹² in a study on Chinese postgraduates in the UK argues that quite often students and supervisors have mismatched expectations that could result in many academic problems. In another study, Sambrook et al suggest that it is critical that students select the 'right' and appropriate supervisors that would fit into the students' needs and expectations and work for the best interests of the students. Commitment to the long process of obtaining a doctorate requires both parties to manage their relationship in the most amicable way possible so that good communication and a professional working relationship and social relationship could be established to ensure that both could benefit from each other. Wisker¹³ suggest that one of the most important aspects in a postgraduate's journey is selecting your supervisor and this will determine the kind of relationship that both parties will have.

Studies by Anderson and Swazey¹⁴ and Ezebilo¹⁵ showed a prevailing issue that exists between students and their supervisors is on the expectations of the two. Very often, disagreements and disputes between students and their supervisors occur resulting in impaired relationships between the two. Friction and conflicts between the two parties could impair the progress on the student's research¹⁶ and consequently, this could lead to some postgraduate students believing that the actions and guidance from their supervisors could possibly be one of the reasons that lead to their failures in completing their theses and completing them on time. One of the most cited reasons is the issue of different kinds of expectations that both parties might have. Being postgraduates means that students have to be independent and autonomous in conducting and leading their research. This is a problem for most students as they make the transition moving from undergraduate or taught research system to a more flexible and yet demanding workload. Heussi's¹⁷ study on students' transition into postgraduate study noted that some postgraduates struggled in terms of what is required of them. Using focus group discussions to understand the transition and experience students made going into postgraduate studies, the study revealed that postgraduate students should be given an

¹⁰ R. Scheyvens., K. Wild, and J. Overton, International students Pursuing Postgraduate Study in Geography: impediments to their learning experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(3), 2003, 309-323

¹¹ G. Wisker, Cross-cultural Research Supervisors and Research at a distance: Issues for Postgraduate Students and Supervisors. SEDA Paper, 2001, 119-136. Zhao, C.M., Golde, C.M., and McCormick, A.C . More than a signature: How advisor choice and advisor behaviour affect doctoral student satisfaction. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(3), 2007. 263-281.

¹² Durkin, Challenges Chinese Students Face in Adapting to Academic Expectations and Teaching/Learning Styles. 2003. [Accessed 14th September, 2017] Available from <http://www.bournemoth.ac.uk/cap/documents/CAP> Publications.

¹³ G. Wisker, Cross-cultural Research Supervisors and Research at a distance: Issues for Postgraduate Students and Supervisors. SEDA Paper, 2001, 119-136.

¹⁴ Anderson, M.S and Swazey, J.P. Reflections on the student graduate experience: An Overview. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 1998 (101), 3-13.

¹⁵ E.E. Ezebilo, Challenges in Postgraduate Studies: Assessments by Doctoral Students in a Swedish University. *Higher Education Studies*. 2(4). 2012. 49-57.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ A. Heussi, Postgraduate student perceptions of the transition into postgraduate study. *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*. 1(3), 2012. 1-13.

introduction to the program and it was recommended that an in-depth introduction could be one of the ways to support students preparing themselves for the transition. Getting to grips with the structure of the programs, knowing what was required of them seems even more vital for international students, as suggested by the study. It is imperative that they could anticipate the academic requirements, academic challenges, and their supervisors' expectations and lastly, that of the higher education institutions they enrolled in.

It has been well documented that supervisors have different perspectives and views on what postgraduates are supposed and expected to do. Ezebilo's study¹⁸ that looked at the relationship between supervisors and doctoral students in a Swedish university suggested that problems encountered by students due to poor supervisor-student relationship might have negative impacts on the achievement of their professional career and completion of their thesis. Problems that arise would be longer completion time and a poor quality thesis. This is strongly supported by Lewins¹⁹ in Scheyvens et al²⁰ who reports that the 'indifferent attitude of university staff to overseas postgraduate students can be a major cause of loss of motivation and even depression amongst students'. Poor relationship is one of the major challenges that was often reported and documented in postgraduates experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

The first step in data collection is to redefine the topic with the use of focus group discussions which consists a group of mature Malaysian postgraduates who were studying at a university in south west of England. The participants who were both males and females were at different stages of their doctorate programs and were studying at difference faculties in the university.

Questions for the focus group were designed from readings of the literature and with the guidance from the supervisors. After a few revised versions, the six questions were constructed focusing on issues ranging from the students biggest challenges studying here to issues that might be particularly gendered, their motivations, external help with studies and preparations before coming to England. To answer these questions, the allocated time for the focus groups was an hour but the three focus groups varied in time ranging from one hour fifteen minutes to on hour forty five minutes. These focus groups and the findings are vital to provide the necessary groundwork for the next stage of the research.

Contacts with and Selection of Participants

For this purpose, a focus group was specifically chosen and the next step is to email invitations, messages on Facebook accounts, and phone text messages to all the known mature Malaysian postgraduates at the university. Responses were 100 % positive with all expressed their willingness to participate in the discussions. Profiles of the participants were then drawn and once they had been categorized, participants were chosen and invited to different sessions of the group discussions. The reason for profiling each participant is to get a balanced array of representation from each category of Malaysian postgraduates in the university. These categories encompass different backgrounds of the group; single, married with children, married without children and they differ in terms of their period of stay in England and faculties. Using these profiles, the nineteen participants were invited to attend three different sessions, with the six participants in the first focus group (Alpha), eight in the second group (Beta and only five in the third group (Gamma).

Analysis and Discussions

Study after study has illustrated that language fluency may be one of the biggest challenges for most international students studying in English speaking countries. Research has linked language fluency to

¹⁸ E.E. Ezebilo, Challenges in Postgraduate Studies: Assessments by Doctoral Students in a Swedish University. *Higher Education Studies*. 2(4). 2012. 49-57.

¹⁹ H. Lewins, *Living Needs*. In Kinnell, M. (ed) *The Learning Experiences of Overseas Students*, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press). 1990. 82-106.

²⁰R. Scheyvens, K. Wild, and J. Overton, International students Pursuing Postgraduate Study in Geography: impediments to their learning experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(3), 2003. 309-323.

acculturation distress²¹ and this is a serious problem among international students. Apart from adjusting themselves to the new environment, language anxiety poses a serious impediment to the academic progress for most international students. This is emphasized by most participants in all the three focus groups:

“One of the things that I have problems with constantly is of course the English language. I have studied English for so many years since primary, but it is still hard for me. The most difficult part is the writing. My supervisor always comments that he doesn’t understand my writing (Anas)”.

A participant from Beta focus group commented that he had always asked helped from his lab mates by getting them to check his written work:

“Whenever I submit anything to my supervisor, I always get someone to read it first. This is because I am afraid that he will not understand what I am trying to say. I sometimes get 2 of my friends to check my grammar before I send my work (Dania)”.

Language barrier and proficiency is a continuous struggle for most international students and is often cited as one of the most common frustrating problems among them. The same applies to this group of Malaysian postgraduates in this particular university in England. Even by passing the required IELTS score which had enabled them to further their studies abroad, the participants still found that acquiring the sufficient language proficiency is challenging and for many, leads to the impediment of their progress in completing their thesis on time. The problem is very much evident in the produced written work where most participants expressed their dissatisfactions with the quality and progress of their work:

“The problem I have is to write good English sentences. I know I have good ideas but I can’t explain them well. I tend to translate or use the thesaurus a lot to translate words but sometimes I will give the wrong meanings (Fizah)”.

A similar comment made by a postgraduate in another group:

“Because my English is not good, I always spend a lot of time writing. I will write and then change and then write again. My work is slow because I cannot write fast. In one day, sometimes I can only write two lines. This is not good, you know. I just hope I can finish on time (Ira)”.

Nevertheless, a study by Woodrow²² seems to indicate that there is no direct correlation between the students’ academic performance and their scores in writing subtest. This could be true as all the participants will eventually obtain their doctorate qualification regardless if they score high or only the acceptable score entry when they first enrolled in the university. For a few participants in this cohort, the inability to express and write well still poses a great concern and challenge to them.

For most faculties at this particular university, the requirement for English proficiency benchmark level for IELTS is set for 7.0 but this does not guarantee that students will do well in their writing. One possible reason for the students to perform well in IELTS but not in writing is because the skills acquired during the preparation for the exams are solely to be used for a short period of time. In this instance, passing the IELTS exams means getting the scholarship offer from the university where they are attached to back home and this is also a compulsory condition for obtaining scholarships from Malaysia’s Ministry of Education. Another possible reason for the postgraduates not doing well in writing is because of the nature of the culture where writing is not habitual, therefore there are very few instances where they are required to write academically.

²¹ L. Brown, and I. Holloway, The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An Ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education*. 7(2), 2008. 232-249.

²² L. Woodrow, *Academic Success of International Postgraduate Education Students and the Role of English Proficiency*. In University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 2006, 51-70.

Almost all the participants in the focus groups are lecturers in universities in Malaysia and are not exposed to the culture of research. Due to their positions in the universities, those who are without doctorates are often assigned to teaching tasks and very often ask to assist the more qualified and experienced lecturers in research. Despite the fact that most of the participants are sponsored by universities which have the status of research universities, meaning universities that have been identified and recognized by the Malaysia Cabinet in 2006 as the ones that are focused on research, development and innovations, the academic staff is still lagging in terms of their contribution to research.

"My supervisor has said that I wasn't critical enough, so this like you know having the language being critical is a very difficult. I've been studying here so that Malay culture, we are not supposed to criticise experts and also we are not used to write academically and critically. This is my main problem in writing (Wana)".

"My literature review has so many drafts. I have to redo them again and again. This is because I don't know how to do academic writing and how to be critical in my writing. This is a big problem for me since I am in social science (Suria)".

This problem resonates with Cadman's study²³ where the postgraduates made distinctive remarks between their backgrounds and what the university demands of them; that they be more critical and analytical in addressing ideas and literature. The issue lies in the distinction and clash of cultures, between the Confucian-heritage cultures, which include Malaysia as well and the Western world. Brown²⁴ notes that the problem lies in British academic culture that has individual orientation which promotes equality between individuals and their opinions, whilst Asian values hierarchical relationships which promotes respect in authority. Interestingly, the comments made by the participants above illustrate specific contrast of approaches to writing. What is encouraged and expected from students in one culture and therefore deemed necessary will be a struggle for the others since they might not have been exposed nor encouraged to be critical and evaluative in their previous academic experiences.

Literature has indicated that students face several difficulties, but being international postgraduates, there are some issues exclusively pertaining to this cohort. Another great concern for most international postgraduates apart from language barrier is adjusting academically to the research culture of the university. Quite often, the challenges of adapting and adjusting to different academic culture can be overwhelming that it will take the students some time before they manage to meet up with the demands of learning in the new environment. These challenges can be acute that few students might find them burdening, hence impeding their work progress and research:

My first year was tough because I have no experience in research and what we do back home is not the same as here. I was not prepared and I did not know what to expect or what to do in my first year (Zuliana).

This is further elaborated by another participant in the same focus group who remarked:

"I was lost the first few months when I was here. When I met my supervisors, they asked me to read and kept on reading. I had to attend some courses before I know what I knew I was supposed to do. I had to ask around and I kept on asking myself what I was doing. I was confused (Dania)

²³ K. Cadman, The 'Songlines' of academic writing: Integrating the voices of international and NESB students into the texts. In R. Murray-Harvey and H. Silins (eds) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: advancing international perspectives. Proceedings of the 1997 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. 8-11 July, 1997. (Adelaide, Flanders University Press).

²⁴ G.K. Brown, Making ethnic citizens: The Politics and Practice of Education in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 27. 2006. 318-330

The striking feeling of being 'lost' and 'confused' is synonym with the feelings of many international postgraduates abroad. Qing²⁵ refers to this kind of symptoms as 'learning shock,' the intense unpleasant feelings when new learners experience difficulties as they are exposed to a new learning environment. In many instances, the expectations from the supervisors are for their students to take the initiative and to be proactive in thinking of their own research questions and methods themselves. The academic culture that has always advocating spoon feeding learning and rote learning limits the students in their provisions of doing independent research and learning. Students expect to be told and asked to do things, to the extent that some supervisors might think that their students are passive:

My supervisors think that I am not capable of doing a lot of things. I think I can do it but because I have always been told what to do and what not to do, I don't know if I should take charge of my labwork. I found that I have to wait instructions from my supervisors before doing anything because I was afraid that I might do something wrong (Muaz).

Another profound challenge for international students is for them to be actively involved in group discussions and when meeting their supervisors. As mentioned earlier, the education system of a country is very much influenced by the national culture and experiences being exposed to a new academic culture can be quite distressing and unmanageable to some. In situations where students are required to participate and actively contribute to discussions, most students find this opportunity to be one of the most dreadful, daunting and frightening experiences:

I remember one time when I was asked to lead a discussion on a journal article to my . I was so scared because I know how active and critical they (my labmates) are during discussions. They will ask me a lot of questions and I don't know if I could answer them. I could not sleep the night before (Rosma).

Being independent and achieving autonomy are just a few of the changes that these participants felt they need to cultivate in themselves. This is similar to what was reported by Andrade in her study on international students where international students felt that it is their responsibilities to adjust to the host's educational methods (2006). Changes in their approach and attitudes towards learning are crucial in ensuring that these students get the most of their learning experiences here. Since the students are here for a short period of years, they strongly feel that they need to ensure that they make the most of their learning and gain as much research experience as possible. A typical comment of many postgraduates illustrates just that:

I think I am beginning to produce the research work that I am supposed to. It was difficult in the beginning because the experience as student and also researcher in a university in Malaysia did not prepare me to what I am going to face in here. Students have much more freedom in here, they are expected to be independent and learnt about everything themselves. The lecturers are just there to guide and help you sometimes. I have to make sure that I learn everything and about my research as quickly as possible before the end of my fourth year (Diana).

Another student articulated along the same predicament:

Here in England, I have to learn quickly about everything. Otherwise I will be behind. I enrolled in a lot of research classes and I asked around so that I will not look stupid when I meet with my supervisors. Also, your supervisors expect you to try and learn first before asking them. It's so different from back home (Suraya).

These feelings of uncertainties and lost that these students experience are unlike those experienced by undergraduates. With the undergraduates, in the initial sojourn period as international students try to familiarize themselves and negotiating their positions and beliefs in the new culture, is the stage where they

²⁵ Zu Qing, Maturity and Interculturality: Chinese students' experiences in UK higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 44(1), 2009, 37-52.

feel lost and uncertain. This is not the similar feeling that postgraduates feel. From further discussions with the participants, it is suggested that the nature of their worries and concerns evolve around studies. This is apparent in international postgraduates as they prepare themselves to get acquainted with the requirements from the new learning environment of the Western world²⁶. As research students, the demands in place on them are higher since students are expected to perform not only better, but at a higher level of education. This problem is further exacerbated for students who come from a collectivist society where supervisors and lecturers are placed at the pedestal with the feeling that their supervisors must be all-knowing experts in the fields. This leads to them having high expectations of their supervisors and expecting more directions and guidance²⁷.

Another prevailing issue that was raised during the discussion was on the pressure being students as there are expectations that come from various people. All of the participants in the focus groups are sponsored by Malaysian universities with one who is from the Oil Palm Institute, a semi-government body of the Malaysian government. They were given contract of 3 years to complete their doctorate programmes with a possibility of extension up to four years of study. The number of bonded years for them to work with their universities depend on the number of years it takes them to complete their studies. If it extends to a four year period, they will be bonded for eight years, and seven if it is three and a half year. Many literature has mentioned that postgraduate students are typically professionals and hold high status and positions within their societies. They obtain scholarships, financial aids from other sponsoring bodies or even family members and relatives, and these are few of the sources of stress as well. With the scholarships and loans, come huge responsibilities and expectations to do well since for each Malaysian to do a doctorate, the Malaysian government has to spend on average of 500 000 Ringgit Malaysia which is approximately around 100 000 Pounds in the three year tenure that a student is here. The following excerpt illustrates a participant's frustration on the expectations that come from themselves, in particular:

I do agree with XYYX. What he has mentioned before. In my case, the pressure is on myself. I want to do well and I expect myself to do well, but I think it we study without having any constraints or whatsoever, we can study better and more relaxed. I wish I could do that (Rosa).

The same predicament is expressed by another participant from another group who strongly felt that the pressure from sponsors could also pose as a serious factor that could be detrimental to the progress of their work:

Every time a new term starts, I feel the pressure of doing everything on time. The thought of having to pay on your own after 3 years or the half a million RM if I did not complete my PhD is a problem. I get scared and really worried thinking of that. What happens then (Arissa).

Felix and Lawson²⁸ mention that since graduate students are mostly sponsored, they face 'considerable pressure to perform and any reduction in their grades, especially in the contexts where they are working extremely hard, can lead to disappointment, depression and loss of motivation'. This is very true for any sponsored students that the time constraint puts extra stress and pressure on these mature students not only to do well, but to be able to do so by the sponsors' stipulated time period. As the students face tight deadlines from their sponsors, they seek the extra attention in order to finish on time or face the embarrassment and disgrace of going back as failures²⁹. For many government sponsored students, the enormous pressures results from contractual obligations and the needs to save face are the added stress and pressure.

Apart from these two expectations, postgraduates also have expectations from their supervisors. It has been well documented that the supervisors have different perspectives and views on what postgraduates are

²⁶ R. Harris, Overseas students in the United Kingdom university system. *Higher Education*, 29, 1997, 77-92.

²⁷ R. Scheyvens, K. Wild, and J. Overton, International students Pursuing Postgraduate Study in Geography: impediments to their learning experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(3), 2003. 309-323.

²⁸ U. Felix, and M. Lawson, Evaluation of an intergrated bridging course on academic writing for overseas postgraduate students. *Higher Education research and Development*. 13 (1), 1994, 56-69.

²⁹ E. I. Okorochoa, *A study of overseas students' experiences in UK higher education and issues that affect counselling and working with them*. PhD Thesis. University of Surrey. 1997. 91-112.

supposed and expected to do. This has been strongly expressed by Lewins³⁰ in Scheyvens et al³¹ who reports that the ‘indifferent attitude of university staff to overseas postgraduate students can be a major cause of loss of motivation and even depression amongst students’. Participants from this set of focus groups have also confirmed this sentiment:

When I first came here.. my research area.. I don't know, but I think the quality here is very high.. when u compare to what we have in Malaysia, especially in my area.. for example, when you want to do something.. an experiment or something.. my supervisor always wanted and expect the highest quality.. because at the end of the day, the experiment will be used by the consumers (Akmal).

FINDINGS

The three focus groups differ in their dynamics and to some extent in their responses to the questions. The time took for each group to discuss the posed questions also varied and numerous issues were extensively discussed in each of the group. The following table summarises the different themes that were mentioned and raised during the group discussions: The highlighted issues evolved around their own academic struggles and challenges, language barriers, differences in learning environment, expectations and relationships with supervisors. There were also mentions of advantages of studying abroad for the postgraduates and also their family members. Different focus groups seemed to discuss different issues extensively. For the purpose of analysis, the three focus groups will be labelled as Alpha, Beta and Gamma consecutively and the three focus groups will be referred to the three names. In Alpha, the issues are more wide-ranging and comprehensive, covering an array of several issues. Based on the list of themes in Alpha, the key areas of discussion concentrated on the advantages of studying and living abroad, personal worries and academic concerns. On the other hand, Beta extensively discussed issues in the advantages of studying and living abroad together with academic concerns while the final group, Gamma expressed similar findings as Alpha as they mentioned many of their issues were advantages of living and studying in England, personal worries and academic concerns.

TABLE 1.1 EMERGING THEMES FROM THE 3 FOCUS GROUPS IN FEASIBILITY STUDY

FOCUS GROUP 1 (ALPHA)	FOCUS GROUP 2 (BETA)	FOCUS GROUP 3 (GAMMA)
<p><u>Theme 1: Language Barriers</u> -Writing critically -not able to properly analyse and be critical when reading journal articles</p>	<p>-Write good, grammatically correct work -could not produce written work that is to the standard</p>	<p>-difficulty in understanding spoken English -write grammatically sound English work</p>
<p><u>Theme 2: Differences in learning environment</u> -active and critical discussions in host academic culture, -challenges in doing phd/research work -Not able to be critical enough in reading and writing due to education system back home</p>	<p>-Malaysian culture does not allow to think critically and to criticize experts</p>	<p>--no experience in doing research or independent work -new subject and a new area that needs to be studies</p>
<p><u>Theme 3: Academic concerns</u> -Problems with supervisors -Supervisors move to other universities</p>	<p>-Loss in the beginning of study due to inexperience in conducting research</p>	<p>-Has to learn new area since research requires them to familiarize with the concepts</p>

³⁰ H. Lewins, *Living Needs*. In Kinnell, M. (ed) *The Learning Experiences of Overseas Students*, Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press). 1990. 82-106.

³¹ R.. Scheyvens, K. Wild, and J. Overton, *International students Pursuing Postgraduate Study in Geography: impediments to their learning experiences*. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(3), 2003, 314.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Managing time -Balancing studies and responsibilities at home (especially mothers) -Needs for study skills workshop /academic writing skills -No prior experience in conducting research -Finishing on time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Research standard is high -inability to produce high quality standard -Has to quickly familiarise with new programming/experiments -Has to learn from zero -Managing time because family and children /require attention and time and housework -Failing/Not being able to complete PhD -Supervisors expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Balancing time -has to learn doing research since not in academic line -supervisors hopes and high expectations, -others' expectations to do well
--	--	---

CONCLUSIOsN

In a nutshell, language barrier is still a major concern among international students and this is supported by the large body literature addressing this issue. There are still on-going research on the appropriate ways of tackling this issue for instance, increasing the entry level of IELTS ³² and also the writing subtest. In another study, postgraduates at a higher learning institution are encouraged to do a reflective learning journals where they can discuss the ways they perceive their previous academic learning processes from what is expected from them in their current learning experience³³ (Cadman, 2000). These are some of the suggested solutions to the language problems that most international faced.

On the issue of adapting to new and different learning and research culture, regardless on the extensive literature that has reported on these differences, it is still a prevalent issue among international students since there is a stark difference in the education system and tradition in which they came from. However, it is vital that international postgraduates quickly adapt and adjust themselves and their mind sets so that they would be able to complete their studies successfully and on time as required by their sponsors in Malaysia.

REFERENCES

Anderson, M.S and Swazey, J.P. (1998) Reflections on the student graduate experience: An Overview. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 1998 (101), 3-13.

Barker, J. (1997) The Purpose of Study , attitudes to study and staff-student relationships. In McNamara, D and Harris, R (eds) *Overseas Students in Higher Education: Issues in teaching and leaning*. New York: Routledge, 108-123.

Bochner, S., McLeod, B.M and Lin, A (1980). Anticipated Role conflict in returning overseas students . *Journal of Social Psychology*. 110 (1980) pp. 265-272.

Brown, G.K. (2006). Making ethnic citizens: The Politics and Practice of Education in Malaysia. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 27 (2007) pp. 318-330.

³² L. Woodrow, *Academic Success of International Postgraduate Education Students and the Role of English Proficiency*. In University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 2006. 51-70. L. Brown, and I. Holloway, The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An Ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education*. 7(2), 2008. 232-249.

³³ K. Cadman, The 'Songlines' of academic writing: Integrating the voices of international and NESB students into the texts. In R. Murray-Harvey and H. Silins (eds) in *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: advancing international perspectives*. Proceedings of the 1997 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. 8-11 July, 1997. (Adelaide, Flanders University Press).

- Brown, L and Holloway, I. (2008). The adjustment journey of international postgraduate students at an English university: An Ethnographic study. *Journal of Research in International Education*. 7(2), pp. 232-249.
- Cadman, K. (1997). The 'Songlines' of academic writing: Integrating the voices of international and NESB students into the texts. In R. Murray-Harvey and H. Silins (eds) in *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: advancing international perspectives*. Proceedings of the 1997 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia. 8-11 July, 1997. (Adelaide, Flanders University Press).
- Carroll, J and Ryan, J (2005) (eds) *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for all*. London: Routledge.
- Durkin (2003) Challenges Chinese Students Face in Adapting to Academic Expectations and Teaching/Learning Styles. [Accessed 14th September, 2017] Available from <http://www.bournemoth.ac.uk/cap/documents/CAP> Publications.
- Elsley, B. (1990) Teaching and learning. The Learning experiences of overseas students. 46-62. In Barker, J. (1997). *The purpose of study, attitudes to study and staff-students relationships*.
- Evans, C. and Stevenson, K. (2011). The Experience of international nursing students studying for a PhD in the UK: A Qualitative Study. *BMC Nursing*. 10 (1), 1-21.
- Ezbilo, E.E. (2012). Challenges in Postgraduate Studies: Assessments by Doctoral Students in a Swedish University. *Higher Education Studies*. 2(4). 49-57.
- Felix, U. and Lawson, M. (1994) Evaluation of an integrated bridging course on academic writing for overseas postgraduate students. *Higher Education research and Development*. 13 (1), pp. 56-69.
- Harris, R. (1997). Overseas students in the United Kingdom university system. *Higher Education*, 29 (1997), 77-92.
- Heussi, A. (2012). Postgraduate student perceptions of the transition into postgraduate study. *Student Engagement and Experience Journal*. 1(3), 1-13.
- Ho, E.S, Li, W, Cooper, W. and Holmer, P. (March 2007). *The Experiences of Chinese International Students in New Zealand*. Report for Education New Zealand: The University of Waikato.
- Hofstede, G. (1997). *Culture and Organizations*. London: Harper Collins.
- Kaur, S. and Kaur, G.K. (2009). A Qualitative Study of Postgraduate Students Learning Experiences in Malaysia. *International Educational Studies*. 2(3), pp. 47-56.
- Kyvik, S. (1986). Postgraduate Education in Norway. *European Journal of Education*. 21(3). pp. 251-260.
- Lewins, H. (1990). *Living Needs*. In Kinnell, M. (ed) *The Learning Experiences of Overseas Students*, pp. 82-106. Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press).
- Mujtaba, B. Scharff, M. and Cavico, F.J and Mujtaba, M.G (2008) Challenges and Joys of Earning a Doctorate Degree: Overcoming the "ABD" Phenomenon. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 1(Nov 2008), pp. 9-26.
- Okorocho, E. I. (1997) *A study of overseas students' experiences in UK higher education and issues that affect counselling and working with them*. PhD Thesis. University of Surrey.

- Qing, Zu. (2009) Maturity and Interculturality: Chinese students' experiences in UK higher education. *European Journal of Education*, 44(1), pp. 37-52.
- ScheyvensR., Wild, K and Overton, J. (2003). International students Pursuing Postgraduate Study in Geography: impediments to their learning experiences. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 27(3), pp. 309-323.
- Wisker, G. (2001). Cross-cultural Research Supervisors and Research at a distance: Issues for Postgraduate Students and Supervisors. SEDA Paper, pp. 119-136.
- Woodrow, L. (2006). *Academic Success of International Postgraduate Education Students and the Role of English Proficiency*. In University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, pp. 51-70.
- Zhao, C.M., Golde, C.M., and McCormick, A.C (2007) . More than a signature: How advisor choice and advisor behaviour affect doctoral student satisfaction. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31(3), pp. 263-281.