Postgraduate Student-Supervisor Interface: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative paper we discuss our face-to-face experience with 28 foreign (mainly from Iran) postgraduate students who registered with the Department of Community Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Science and 31 who registered with the Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM. The paper addresses itself to three principal areas of concern: firstly, the supervisor-student relationship; secondly, the students' literacy and academic competency; thirdly, academic and social cultural interface. The discussions are predicated on our personal experiences with these students over a three-year period. The influx of postgraduate students, particularly from Iran and Middle Eastern countries made it necessary for us to pay due attention to our encounters with them. The locus of tensions largely dwelt on UPM's educational system and values. Academic incompetence, language and cultural differences are major issues. Understanding of related issues will benefit both the students and UPM in its efforts to become a global player in higher education. We recommend that both qualitative and quantitative studies be conducted by supervisors to explore and determine the overseas students' motivation and learning behavior. We postulate development of an intellectual community that can stimulate challenges beyond the academic encounters. For both faculties, various forms of learning media for the promotion of effective communication should be developed and made available for flexible learning to occur. To help students improve their academic literacy, it is important 'to identify the epistemological and ontological dimension for a flexible approach to learning' (Tavakol & Dennick 2009). Formal counselling sessions can

allow students to know what type of learner they are.

INTRODUCTION

Getting foreign students into new faculties is a milestone in a university's intellectual advancement. Yet, before the proper facilities have been put into place, the students are already making headway in gaining admission into various departments. This, however, is posing some trivial and serious challenges for the academic and administrative staff. Since 2004, the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, and the Faculty of Educational Studies, UPM has witnessed an influx of postgraduate students, particularly from Iran and Middle Eastern countries. Most of the 28 students who registered with the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences were female nurses involved in clinical practice at the hospitals or teaching medical and health science students at the universities in their country. Male postgraduate students were attached to the public health programme or working as hospital managers.

Entrance of international students to the Faculty of Educational Studies has markedly increased over the last two years i.e. 2008-2010. At the beginning of semester II 2009/2010, 198 students registered. They were from China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Philippines, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria, Libya, Maldives, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. At the Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, 31 international students registered for the Masters and Doctor of Philosophy programmes. Twenty of them were from Iran.

In the months and years that followed, negative comments from faculty advisers reverberated within the university relating to the 'pushy' attitude and naiveté of these foreign students. In this paper, we present these challenges and our ideas of how we can overcome them. Our discussions are based on notes and observations during our encounters with the students over the three-year period mentioned. We include some narratives from the students that we jotted down, having changed the names, to provide the context. In our attempt to better understand our encounters with the foreign students we reviewed literature on the subject. Based on our experience, perceptions and related studies, we indicate implications for improvements that will facilitate dealing with present and future challenges in communication, learning and research on doctoral education. Finally, we suggest a visual matrix which links key variables, and we hope this model illuminates and facilitates the learning- and research-generating process within the would-be intellectual community. The model is predicated on a dynamic relationship among components, with the cores comprising students, supervisors, their academic competency, faculty and their students, the academic-culture

milieu and the bridging social-cultural-academic interface. Development of an intellectual community is the end-goal of this model. Situating the students as a major core concurs with studies and strategies which clearly demonstrate the dynamic adaptation of many postgraduate students in order to cope and succeed in their studies (Anonymous 2010; Corbiere et al. 2006; Samuel and Kohun 2009). Central to their success are validated examples of student-supervisor interactive bridging through the social-cultural-academic interface (Linda and Wang 2008; Nelson 2006).

SITUATING THE ENCOUNTERS

Reasons for studying at UPM

Among women students, wanting to advance their career through postgraduate course was the most common reason for their choice of UPM as the institution for further studies. Another reason was that they were accompanying their spouses who had secured a place to study at UPM, and took the opportunity to make good use of their time in Malaysia. Why UPM? It was because their country recognised Malaysia as being an Islamic country. As for the men, their response was either, "My friends are studying here!" or, "My friend got his PhD degree here!" This echoed a message to us that UPM was seen as an attractive institution for higher learning in some foreign countries. For both single and married women, an unsaid primary driving factor for them to study overseas was the "possibilities for empowerment" (Sadeghi 2008). For professionals like the nurses, this could be achieved through a struggle for empowerment stimulated by the rising importance for clinical and profesional advancement in nursing practice and education in Iran (Hajbaghery & Salsali 2005).

> *We want to be better in our job. Doing a postgraduate study here can help me secure a higher position. - Fatemeh*

> *The nursing profession is fast expanding. We cannot wait. We have to get more knowledge so that we can better serve our workplace. - Parastoo*

Acceptance without full appraisal of academic literacy

We have discerned that there are three categories of students – the weak, the mediocre and the bright. This observation is based on initial encounters with the students when they visited their appointed advisers for core and elective courses and topics of research. The major difficulty in assessing the students' academic potential seemed to stem from the absence of a system at the faculty to fully appraise the students' academic literacy and research potential. In the past, the faculty had no way of determining what their Masters degree levels were. Moreover, some of the documents were in the original language, hence it was not possible to ascertain their academic worth. Under the circumstance, the advisers had to request for a brief write-up of what the students wanted to pursue and

from there, suggest a line of action for them to follow and fulfil.

In the case of most of the students, the level of spoken English was acceptable while the level of written English proved to be "excellent". Both weak and mediocre students displayed a great many mistakes in grammar and spelling. But more challenging was the difficulty they faced in developing and expressing ideas clearly and coherently. Advisers and supervisors had to repeat or rephrase questions and statements to ensure they were understood. Hence, much was at stake when the communication process was affected by the students' own 'construction of meaning' and 'distortion of meaning'.

Writing assignments and writing research proposal

Some students had shown great eagerness to demonstrate their writing ability as it appeared to them that the advisers were doubtful of their academic literacy. Advisers too were eager that the students should do this as it would help them gauge the students' intellectual capabilities. For the brighter students, the task of completing a written assignment on a Special Topic posed no difficulty in terms of length and literature review. On the other hand, the task was handled by the weaker students with provision of extensive literature, but little substance. The mission of these students was seemingly to impress and to hide their actual level of comprehension and analytical ability or academic competence.

The weaker students' inability to understand the rationale and arguments for writing research topics could be due largely to their lack of proficiency in the English language (Thomson 1999 cited in Omeri et al. 2003). The students could have been trained to absorb knowledge through rote learning rather than to acquire it through critical and creative thinking in their home institutions. There is probably more to this problem than what has been apparent in the few encounters between the students and their advisers and other assigned academics of UPM. It is widely admitted that being able to learn to memorise or to understand has to do with the individual's beliefs and conceptions. Some idea as to how these students learnt English can be obtained from a recent study done among high-school students and language learners in Iran. The study by Pishghadam and Navari (2010) found that through the use of metaphors the English language learners' conceptions represent *behavioristic* guidelines of learning – teacher as *leader, provider, moulder*, whereas institute students 'would rather have the kind of teachers in their classes who follow the guidelines of situative and cognitive learning' (p. 180), and the high-school students used metaphors such as *friend, team member, child* and *partner* to reflect their learning relationship with their teachers (p. 182). Such a system of learning anchors on teachers as the core and authoritative source of knowledge and learning. Presumably, such a teacher-centric approach portends an autocratic system of learning style. A clash of academic cultures ensues then between these Iranian students and UPM academics. At UPM and Malaysia

in general, doctoral students are expected to conduct a high degree of self-learning concomitantly with a high level of research independence. The supervisory committee is assigned mainly as an advisory, guidance and knowledge-expertise tutelage repository.

It was clear that the weaker students could not position their arguments against existing literature and the relevance of their research to the social, cultural and health context of their home country. Critical thinking was absent in their writing. One could say that the experience was an 'academic shock' as the advisers expected to receive good research. This lack could be one of their reasons for pursuing a post-graduate degree through self-sponsorship. Almost all of them stated that they had borne every expense related to their studies such as travel cost, accommodation, tuition fees and daily expenses on their own. While all had permission from their universities or health offices, several received a monthly salary i.e. they were partly sponsored. The rest, like Farouk, had to stretch their resources:

> *I don't get my salary while I'm studying at UPM – so not enough but I'm willing to use all my savings.*

We regarded this as a positive factor for their wanting to further their education to improve their career prospects and, ultimately, to get a better income when they graduate.

Their first priority was to a get a degree, and it did not matter so much if the knowledge they would get would improve their social or working environment. These mismatches are characteristics of the weak and mediocre students. The lack of arguments and counter arguments, which are critical in PhD proposals, could probably be traced to their tertiary education, as claimed by them, that they were trained to listen and accept what their teachers and supervisors told them.

STUDENT-SUPERVISOR RELATIONSHIP: A MISUNDERSTOOD PHENOMENON

When candidates apply for enrolment through the Graduate School Office, they are required to furnish particulars of an academic who can act as their adviser. They will, of course, have to communicate with the would-be adviser prior to application. Upon their success in being accepted they would first meet him or her to discuss their plan of study. Advisers can become supervisors and, together with the students, select the other supervisory committee members. In instances where the area of specialisation of the adviser differs from that to be undertaken in the research, advisers can opt to decline. Most committee members have no qualms about supervising. The role of these members is not only to ensure that the international students graduate in accordance with UPM's requirements, but also to get them to experience the learning and research culture of UPM.

The student-supervisor relationship yet to be established is one that calls for an acknowledgement of what is expected of each other. Central to this process is the

interpersonal relationships that would either lead to success or failure of the student in completing his or her course. As revealed in the study by Krauss and Ismail (2010), students regard their PhD supervision as involving two aspects of 'management' -- accepting and coping with the supervisor's demands:

> *Coupled with acceptance, management in this context refers to the efforts the students make to not merely accept the situation but to also devise a variety of approaches and techniques for navigating their relationships with their supervisors.* (p. 162)

Despite their coping strategies as illustrated in the above citation, more than half of the international students are slow to realise their expected role and that of their supervisors. They often need to be reminded to show their progress reports and to arrange supervisory committee meetings. As adult and experienced students they should be accompanied by maturity and should be able to be more proactive. Certainly, they should dispel the idea that the supervisory committee is responsible for preparing everything related to their course from A to Z for them.

As supervisors, we wish for our students to regard their study at UPM as an opportunity to discover an academic and intercultural context. When asked what her study had meant to her, a PhD student who completed her course in four years said this:

> *Looking back I had no problems with my supervisor or with UPM. In the beginning, yes. But more and more I realized I had to adapt myself to the learning culture of UPM. So, I did not complain much but do my best. I believe UPM has some good supervisors. – Nazilla.*

LEARNING TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION

Learning and adapting to the Malaysian educational system and values

Given that higher education is added economic and professional value, it could be argued that these students would be greatly motivated in their studies. Personal factors appeared to support their motivation. Married candidates had brought along their children to Malaysia to stay with them for part or the entire length of their stay here. It was clear from the initial academic encounters that learning was perceived to be a process of accepting wholly the advice of advisers and supervisors. There is a strong belief that listening to and accepting what is told them by the advisers/supervisors is the best way to achieve their objectives. Hence, there were few questions about the suitability of elective subjects. Their enrolment in English and Bahasa Malaysia classes was deemed necessary by the Graduate School Office of the university. Bahasa Malaysia (BM) uses Romanised characters as does English. At times students would ask the meaning of words in BM although they had been given a clearly printed document that provided the information.

While we took cognizance of the students' academic and financial background, we had to pose the question, "How long will you be here?" The immediate response, for most of them, was "three years," which more or less corresponded with their leave grant and available funds. A handful gave a more cheerful, "I plan to finish in two and a half years!" We perceived such a response as a sign of learning ability and strong commitment. The initial window to the students' academic literacy and academic competency was glazed through their interaction/non-interaction in the lecture classes. More than half of the foreign students found it difficult to converse in English, let alone to fully comprehend the subject matter of the courses they attended. The first real test of academic literacy and competency was through their written assignment. Most obtained a 'C-' or a 'C', and much resentment was shown by these students, who stated that they had never before attained anything lower than 'B-' in their home institutions.

> *My university cannot accept this grade! You know I'm a lecturer in my country! - Reza*

> *We never got anything lower than 'B-'. Why? - Sahar*

For about a year or so it was not clear to us what the students' learning behaviour was; we did, however, notice that among some of them there was a tendency to ask for extensions to deadlines for written assignments, though an exceptional few would submit their assignments on time with a cheerful attitude, exclaiming, "Here's my assignment!". When it was told to them, "This is not the way you write a proposal!" a quick response from one student was, "We were not taught how to write a research proposal," and, "This is our first time writing a research proposal!"

We realised that foreign students, particularly those who had never been to Malaysia previously, would not understand the working or business hours of the faculties and department. Most Malaysian learning institutions observe the official break time of 1pm-2pm on Mondays to Thursdays. On Fridays, the noon break is longer i.e. from 12:30pm-2:30pm to cater for the needs of Muslim faculty, staff and students. Academics expect students to respect these hours and not insist on meetings at this time unless they specifically request it. The common practice among advisers and supervisors is to put up notices on their office doors informing students of their availability.

ACADEMIC LITERACY AND COMPETENCY

Thinking native

Unlike foreign students from neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, most students from the Middle East and Iran prefer to document their thoughts in their mother tongue. They write everything they hear and speak in Persian. This could pose a problem as we have no way of knowing if what they have recorded is inaccurate or misinterpreted as

we are not familiar with the language. We asked some students why they preferred to write in their own language. Samir gave us this answer:

It is very easy to think in my language. And I can write faster – don't have to think if the sentence is correct.

Foundation skills

Academic literacy is usually a measure of capability-capacity in mastering the gamut of academic tasks and assignments. These include reading, understanding, writing, paraphrasing, presenting and articulating of knowledge materials and syntheses. Adjusting to a foreign language i.e. English as the language of instruction and communication is a common critical challenge for international students. This challenge is compounded in courses such as health sciences which are loaded with technical terms. Thus language skill is definitely a major deficiency for many international students.

Academic competency is usually perceived as a measure of the level of achieving proficiency; of knowledge, skill and behavioral traits such as comprehension, learning and teaching. The "student" component is paramount. The major sub-components are attitude, behaviour and skills. The academic culture in the home country of the international students is vastly different from that of Malaysia. Independent study and research are central to and the norm in academic higher education in

Malaysia. This is in contrast to the more strictly authoritarian academic culture of many of the Middle Eastern and African educational institutions.

We have conceptualised the interlinking of the various dimensions at play in these issues through a construct (Fig.1). Competency of both supervisor and student, as one of the two foundation sectors, anchors the Student-Supervisor Building Matrix. Inevitably, knowledge acquiring and application skills are the central learning outcome of postgraduate studies. The other foundation sector is the academic-social-cultural differential across faculty and student groupings. Inevitably, the social-cultural-academic interface bridges the gap separating students and supervisors. This gap is the critical determinant in bridging a successful student-supervisor relationship. A core component of this critical bridge is the mentoring dynamics. Protivnak & Foss (2009) found that many doctoral students identified "mentoring to be the most helpful experience in their doctoral studies." The two central pillars representing students and supervisors and the social-cultural bridge comprise the inner core building blocks.

The foundation elements comprising competency and social-interaction dynamics of both student and supervisor, anchor and strengthen the central pillars i.e. student-supervisor-relationship. These are enclosed by the influencing contiguous walls of the university academic system, students-adaptation milieu, the connectivity-bridges (association, study group, mentor-mentee, host family etc.) and overarching policy
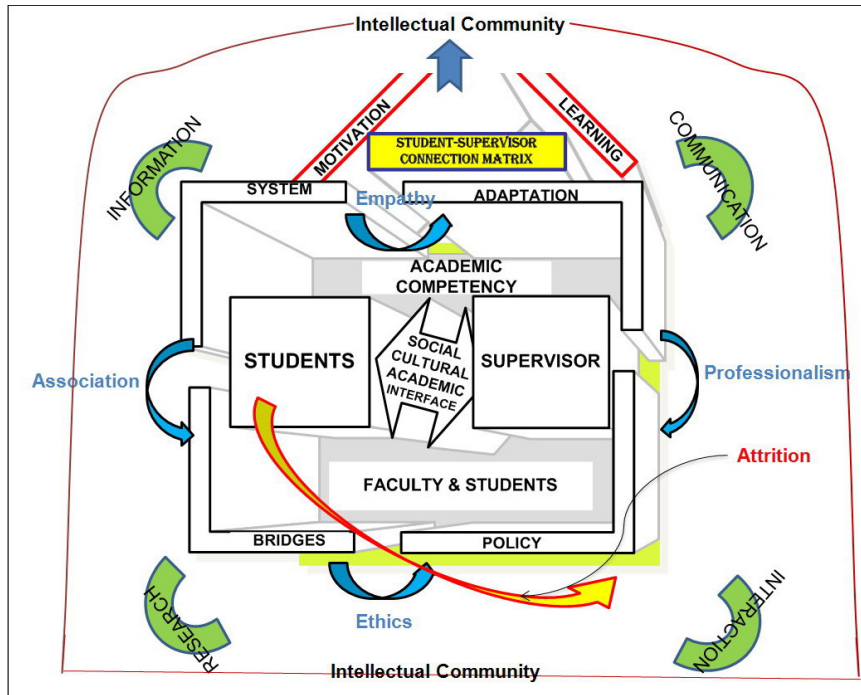
Fig.1:Interlinking matrix of dimensions which influence academic competency

frames. It is envisaged that these boundary walls are glued by drivers of tools including various infrastructural-systems: information, communication, research and interaction components.

These drivers enhance and stimulate the interaction and exchange dynamics between student and supervisor and other teachers. It is an academic cultural imperative to include research modules and information-communication-technology (ICT) expertise as part of the learning dynamics through interactive input and response in the student-supervisor-teacher interface. The outermost boundary-fence of this entire "ecosystem" is the intellectual community representing the entire campus life-system. Binding the contiguous walls are the empowering

primers of empathy, professionalism, ethics and associations (student club). These empowering binders represent the human/humane strengthening scaffolding, which is essential in constructing the student-supervisor-teacher learning ecosystem.

Roofing the entire building set-up are the students' own motivation and intention. While our construct is reflected as a comprehensive entity comprising components which influence academic literacy and especially academic competency, some "non-academic" components do populate the intellectual community ecosystem and these have to be recognised by both academics and students (Samuel & Kohun, 2009). They are to be addressed accordingly. Nevertheless there

is no available data on some elements e.g. attrition rate, hence no discussion or inference can be made here.

Coping deficiency in academic culture, professionalism and ethics

Poor understanding of the diversity of the learning landscape e.g. sensitivities of culture, religion, fraternities, mannerism and societal norms appear to confront international students. As eager as they were to start off on the doctoral education journey, they were, however, ill-prepared to cope with stress due to e.g. work-load, emotional pressure, unplanned time-management, ignorance of the rigours and requirements of academic sojourns. The nursing fraternity, particularly, had placed greater emphasis on coursework and practice in the Master's programme, and hence, found themselves clueless as to academic professionalism. The high level of authoritative style and dependence on the system posed a difficulty to the promotion of an independent working style of academic life. The students' deficiencies were especially critical in research-based programmes where issues on ethical matters such as plagiarism, copyright, courtesy and etiquette were central concerns. For example, students thought that if references are retrieved from the Internet, it was not an act of plagiarism to use them without citation as they held the view that the Internet was public domain. If they could cite the author's work and date of publication, it was regarded as "citing the literature review." The student's effort

was merely in the form of collecting and assembling data.

English and Bahasa Malaysia requirement

In 2008, the Graduate School Office, UPM required all foreign students to pass an English language test before they began their studies in UPM. However, attendance at the foundation English language class was found to be inadequate for a higher degree course. It was soon noted that the students lacked the language competency. Questions arose as to whether the course content was insufficient or the students' learning ability for language was low. As they were required to obtain optimum scores in TOEFL or ELT and subsequently to register in English Language and Malay Language classes while studying in UPM, they were expected to do their best.

In the mean time, the Faculty of Educational Studies has started a counselling lab for UPM students and the public. To what extent it is being used by the international students is not yet known as there is no data available to gauge this. Emotional emotions are solved with least involvement of their advisers. At the Department of Professional Development and Continuing Education, there is a society for postgraduate students. The main objective of this society is to help in the development of postgraduate students in the department. Having a concourse in the centre of the department building makes it easier for students to gather and interact. International students have enriched the experience of faculty in many ways and

contributed new and different flavours to teaching and learning methods in use today.

At the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, we have taken steps towards promoting a better adaptation and learning culture by publishing postgraduate seminar materials in 2009 such as the 'Essential Guide to Postgraduate Study and Research: What it takes to succeed'. This was a sequel to the first booklet published in 2007, in which we stressed on the importance of getting adequately prepared for the undertaking of a 'journey of learning' in UPM. A note on plagiarism was also included. We hoped the contents would serve to stimulate and inform the students of the attitude to adopt and the directions to take to ensure success in their study.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Two sides of the coin

Universiti Putra Malaysia is a 75-year-old university that in 1999 transformed from an agriculture-based learning institution to a leader in agriculture as well as other fields of science and social science. In 2007, it attained research-based university status. Hence, the influx of foreign students who enrol in the disciplines of medicine, health and education is welcomed and seen as a boost to increase research activities within its campuses. While academics face various challenges from these academic encounters with foreign students, UPM must acquire the infrastructure facilities that will reduce both the academic and cultural constraints faced by students and academicians. For students

to learn and adapt faster to UPM culture, there should be opportunities for a wider intellectual community/ecosystem. Students learn quicker if they can channel into the scientific culture of UPM. Encouraging and getting them to conduct group learning and exchange sessions would serve this purpose.

Foreign students have to understand that UPM's curricula are western-orientated, and, therefore, self-reliance is the order of the day. Students should help themselves to overcome their personal challenges. There is need for students empowerment initiatives. Each student articulates his/her own desired outcomes with definitive milestones throughout the study period. A student needs to map out key strategies and tactics based on his/her motivation factors and intention drivers. A faculty member (adviser/supervisor) should then act as coach in the mentoring process. Not of the least important is that students should realise that their learning should not only be confined to the academic setting. They need to socialise with fellow students and their families. That would provide them with the social and psychological support they will need while they are away from home.

The foreign students might not have been adequately exposed to writing skills prior to their entering UPM. The university's Graduate School Office conducts some writing workshops from time to time, the most recent one being held in July 2010. The Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Education may add such activities to cater for the needs of their own students. An

online writing strategies and skills module can be one way to help students improve their writing skills. Apart from Special Topic lectures, writing workshops should be conducted on a regular basis with the objective of demystifying the writing process.

Some faculties make it a requirement for entering students to provide TOEFL or ESLT scores. Those who feel they want to further improve their proficiency can register for English classes at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, UPM. The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, in particular, can probably, with the help of the former, offer special English classes for its postgraduate students. This and together with the faculty's approaches to develop a more conducive learning environment can help build an interactive relationship between students and their teachers. The promotion of a reading and writing culture should be seriously undertaken in order for all students to have an adequate level of academic literacy. It goes without saying that entering students must adapt quickly to the academic, social and educational structures of their host environment. They should also make time to discover the personalities and demands of their advisers/supervisors and their course mates. Other possible attrition factors such as homesickness and loneliness should also be addressed accordingly.

The adaptation success of the "survivors" requires a considerable time span. The gradual inter-phasing of adjustment may perhaps be summed up by Lysgaard's (1955) U-Curve adjustment theory, curiosity-expectation-enjoyment, crisis-disappointment-disillusionment and coming-to-terms stages.

Learning more flexibly

Compared to the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, the Faculty of Educational Studies has been in existence for a longer time. While the former is witnessing encouraging trends in student-supervisor relationship given the increase in annual enrolment of international students, both need to reassess their students' learning capabilities. At the same time, both faculties need to develop and make available various forms of learning media for the promotion of effective communication. It is also timely that both faculties pay attention to a more "flexible approach to learning" (Honey 2004). Students ought by themselves to know what type of learner they are and to be able to suit their learning with facilities that are available. Formal counselling sessions can help them identify their learning styles. The supervisors too should develop "the area of appreciative thinking in order to identify the epistemological and ontological dimension" required for flexible learning (Tavakol & Dennick 2009). For Iranian students, particularly, the ancient proverb, "One pound of learning requires ten pounds of sense to apply it," should be fully realised and acted upon by them.

Research on postgraduate education

Observations and perceptions can be used to stimulate deeper interest in matters

concerning postgraduate studies. In this paper we recommend that supervisors from both faculties conduct both quantitative and qualitative research. Instruments for assessing student motivation for knowledge and skills acquisition can help gauge their levels. Grounded theory studies and other qualitative research can be useful in identifying students' different learning needs and cultural and psychological experience. Both quantitative and qualitative studies can pave the way for developing models and theories to form the basis for counselling and training programmes to help international postgraduate students develop a wholesome attitude towards their study and research activities.

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