

**Academic Failure: Unspoken Experiences by International Postgraduate Students
in a Malaysian University**

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Abstract

Malaysia aspires to become a regional and international hub of higher education through an international student mobility initiative. Existing scholarly work on international students is skewed towards understanding the general challenges faced by international students, but limited work has been conducted in exploring the impact of severe supervision challenges on international postgraduate students' experiences in a Malaysian research university. Hence, this paper explores the evidence of academic failure experienced by international postgraduate students by drawing on semi-structured interviews with 33 international postgraduate students. Academic failure experiences were faced by international postgraduate students as a result of two major challenges: supervision issues, and faculty mismanagement. The experience of academic failure has impacted the students' enthusiasm, motivation and inspiration in progressing in their research work and has also impacted them psychologically. The implications for developing significant and profound strategies to assist international postgraduate students in achieving positive educational outcomes are also discussed.

Keywords: academic failure, International postgraduate students, Malaysia

Malaysia has aspired to become a regional and international hub of higher education by 2020 and this aspiration has been supported through attracting international students from around the globe. Singh et al. (2012) observed that the success of international education is stereotypically evaluated according to growth in international student numbers. Against this indicator, according to the latest statistics in 2018, there were 170,898 international students (undergraduate and postgraduate) studying in public and private universities in Malaysia (Ministry of Education, 2019). In 2017, 32,042 were international postgraduate students, of whom 21,170 were enrolled at public universities and 10,872 enrolled at private universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018). A recent study by Singh et al. (2014) found that international postgraduate students had chosen Malaysia for their studies because of its safe environment (its political stability), shared cultural values and language (especially for students from ASEAN countries such as Cambodia and Indonesia), its relatively low tuition fees and cost of living, “proximity to the students’ home country as well as access to culturally important items such as *halal* and other dietary requirements” (p. 463). In strengthening the numbers of such international students, Malaysian higher education institutions need to provide academic and social support services to them so that they have a positive, engaging international experience studying in Malaysia.

In the main, factors leading to academic success (Singh, 2018), as well as the academic and social adjustment challenges encountered by international students (Asgari & Borzooei, 2014; Desa et al., 2012; Sidhu et al., 2014) have been widely studied. However, understanding how severe supervision-related challenges contribute to academic failure experiences by international postgraduate students in Malaysia has received very little attention (da Silva & Ravindran, 2016). This paper therefore investigates several challenges that are involved in leading to academic failure experiences of international postgraduate students studying at one of the top Malaysian research universities. The paper takes one of the first steps in offering a complete picture of the academic experiences of international students in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Astin (1976) and other researchers (Ayán & García, 2008; Zhou et al., 2014) have generally measured student outcomes by way of indicators such as completion of the degree and academic grades. However, international postgraduate students in Singh and Jack’s (2018) study understood their academic success as the development of personal and professional skills as well as their contribution to their home country on return. Singh (2018) further revealed institutional services, such as workshops, financial and library services, together with individual characteristics, especially self-discipline attributes, and a quality supervision process, were the main factors contributing to achieving academic success of international postgraduate students. Other factors articulated by postgraduate students in Malaysia have included supervisor commitment to the research project and supervisees, and the frequency of consultations between supervisors and supervisees (Mohamed et al., 2012).

On the other side of the coin, scholars who have studied academic failure of undergraduate students, such as Ajjawi et al. (2019a), have defined the “failure” concept as students obtaining a fail grade for one or more subjects during their studies. Scholars such as Helfer and Drew (2019), however, refer to academic failure experiences of postgraduate students as “unhappy, discouraged or disappointed” (p. 512), stressed, exhausted and burn out (Cornér et al., 2017) or experiencing low satisfaction and engagement levels (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014) due to an ineffective supervision process and other related issues pertaining to international postgraduate students. The most common challenge faced by international postgraduate students is limited

English proficiency skills in writing, reading and speaking (Alsaifi & Shin, 2017; Li et al., 2018). Thus, international postgraduate students in Malaysia acknowledged that they might take up to three hours to read and understand one journal article because the vocabulary and terminologies used in some academic journals created complications for them in comprehending key arguments of the article (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). Postgraduate students in Malaysia have also reported that they were unable to write research papers effectively in English because they had insufficient knowledge of discourse patterns common to academic articles and this hindered their meaning-making process for writing purposes (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009).

Principally, international students experience difficulties in establishing good academic and social relationships with lecturers due to the inadequacy of their language skills (Kim, 2007). This leads to communication tensions because English language limitations interfere with their social and academic communication: a lack of grammar hinders them from articulating their ideas in English, thus impacting the relationship between students and lecturers/supervisors (Kim, 2007). In addition to language incompetence, Korean students in a United States-based study by Kim (2007) acknowledged several interaction challenges, such as discrepancies between the style of guidance or supervision from the supervisors or lecturers and the students' expectations, student passivity in discussion and supervisor unavailability.

Critical to international postgraduate students' academic success is their ability to use library services for a variety of academic and research tasks of reading-to-writing, such as writing research papers, theses, assignments and scientific papers (Mu, 2007). International students mainly face challenges in using such services due to their low level of familiarity with library systems and resources (Mu, 2007), which may differ from those in their previous educational background. As a result, international postgraduate students in a New Zealand-based study (Mu, 2007) expressed concerns about accessing online databases and catalogues for books, journals and other reading materials, print indexes, library classification systems, locating books, information retrieval skills and citing information (Harmon & Wales, 1999). These challenging experiences then contribute to non-completion of the degree program or non-timely completion, as well as hindering the research growth of postgraduate students.

There are, too, multiple supervision challenges that contribute to research failure experiences of international postgraduate students (Gao, 2019; Khozaei et al., 2015; Mohamed et al., 2012). For example, one of the most common breakdowns in supervision is the supervisor's varied roles in the institution. The supervisor's main role is to provide substantial time to guide a student in the chosen research project. However, as they themselves are active researchers and have other academic priorities, such as teaching and administrative loads, supervisors tend to neglect supervision time (Gao, 2019). In Gao's (2019) study, an international postgraduate student was excited to be associated with an internationally renowned scholar in his field; however, by the time of enrolment the supervisor had started a collaborative research project with a university in the United States, leaving this student alone on the supervision journey, which eventually impacted research progress severely. Alternatively, supervisor lack of research expertise or knowledge (Khozaei et al., 2015) in a specific discipline has led students experiencing research failure: for example, postgraduate students in Khozaei et al.'s (2015) study pointed out that, by not having a supervisor who had in-depth knowledge on statistical analyses, understanding of the whole research proposal was jeopardised. Gube et al. (2017) found that postgraduate students do value discipline-expert supervisors because the latter speed up research progress by "connecting [students] with appropriate literature and contacts in the field" (p. 7). As a result, "the role of supervisors has been often cited as an important

contributing factor to the success of graduate students” (Khozaei et al., 2015, p. 449) and supervisors neglecting their responsibilities as supervisors can be a major interruption to their students’ research progress.

Supervision issues mainly reported in Malaysia include individual behavior or personality clashes between students and supervisors (Sidhu et al., 2014) due to differences in academic culture. For instance, Al-Zubaidi and Recharads (2010) have explained how students from some countries are taught to express their opinions directly and assertively and yet there are also students who are educated to state their ideas indirectly in supervisory discussions. Both of these can result in offensive or unpleasant relationship outcomes for both parties. Sidhu et al.’s (2014) study further found that Malaysian supervisors may speak abruptly to international students when they fail to comprehend a supervisor’s expectations. As a result, international students felt discouraged, scared of supervisors and lacked confidence in timely completion (Sidhu et al., 2014). According to Ismail and Abiddin (2009), a high attrition rate is apparent among PhD students in Malaysia and there are also many cases of non-timely completion of PhD studies.

Other literature commonly relates supervision issues to a supervisor’s busy schedule (Abiddin & West, 2007), the differing levels of expectation between the supervisor and students (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009), communication issues (Ismail et al., 2013) and lack of clear guidance and feedback (Wang & Li, 2008). International postgraduate students in Khozaei et al.’s (2015) study also stated that repeated harsh feedback received from supervisors hampered their research growth and contributed to their low confidence levels. When these supervision issues reach severe levels, supervision ethical issues enter the discussion. According to Löfström and Pyhältö (2020), “ethics is comprised of general, normative principles concerning what is acceptable and what is not” (p. 537). Further, “ethics refers to expectations regarding moral positions, integrity refers to acting upon those moral positions” (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2020, p. 537) and therefore the term “supervision ethics” is used in this paper to understand the degree of moral behaviour of supervisors from the perspective of postgraduate students. As such, supervision ethical issues are seen as dereliction of a supervisor’s responsibility towards supervisees (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2017). For instance, Middle Eastern postgraduate students studying in one South East Asian university experienced research hindrance due to the supervisor’s unavailability and the lack of commitment shown towards assisting students (Khozaei et al., 2015). Davis (2019) further posits that a supervisor’s hectic roster impacts on students negatively, “leading to discomfort, loss of self-esteem and finally, all too often, peril” (p. 454). The extent of a supervisor’s busy schedule and lack of feedback provision have led to fidelity issues in terms of supervision abandonment and inadequate supervision (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2017) and have huge negative implications for international students’ academic success.

Although Davis (2019) argues that fundamental challenges of supervision include supervisory expertise, time-related qualities and feedback, realistically these challenges are intertwined. The challenges discussed in this section are entirely difficulties faced by international postgraduate students without further understanding the impact of these obstacles on international students’ academic failure experiences in Malaysia. The research question of this paper is therefore “What are the critical supervision challenges faced by international postgraduate students that have significant influence on their academic failure experiences?”

Research Design and Methodology

The empirical data in this paper originated from a PhD project that explored academic success experiences of international postgraduate students at a Malaysian research university. Hermeneutic phenomenology was developed by Heidegger (1889-1976) and has both elements of lived experiences (phenomenology) and of interpretation (hermeneutic) for understanding; here the research participants' academic failure experiences (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the lived human experience and "addresses experience from the perspectives of meanings, understandings and interpretations" (Pernecky & Jamal, 2010, p. 1056). Its main focus as a method is on understanding the meaning of experiences by searching for themes and engagement with the data interpretively with a less importance on the essence of the experience (Sloan & Bowe, 2013). It offers researchers the opportunity to explore, understand and interpret experiences.

Participants

Data were collected from 33 international postgraduate students (21 males, 12 females) at a research university in Malaysia. Participants were invited using a purposive sampling method: the author made an initial contact with the elected international postgraduate ambassadors through their publicly available contact details via the Student Ambassador Program (SAP) website. Participants were also selected using the snowball sampling technique when the initial participants from the SAP identified further candidates (Minichiello et al., 2008). Notices to recruit participants were also posted on notice boards in the postgraduate lounge, library and International House (accommodation). Table 1 illustrates the demographic details of international postgraduate students who participated.

Table 1: Demographic details of international postgraduate students

	Information	Number of IS
Gender	Male	21
	Female	12
Nationality	India	4
	Iraq	4
	Iran	4
	Yemen	3
	Nigeria	3
	China	3
	Indonesia	3
	Sri Lanka	2
	Pakistan	2
	Palestine	2
	Cambodia	1
	Bangladesh	1
	Somalia	1
	Faculty	Pharmacy
Education		5
Communication		4
Humanities		3
Computer Science		3
Architecture		3
Biology		2
Management		2

	Language	2
	Industrial Technology	1
	Physics	1
	Mathematics	1
	Business	1
Degree	PhD	23
	Masters	10
Length of Candidature	0 – 11 months	8
	1st year	10
	2nd year	4
	3rd year	5
	4th year	3
	5th year	1
	Graduated	2

Pseudonyms are used to preserve the identity of participants. In reporting, qualitative comments, the following convention is used: IS for international postgraduate student, interview number (i.e. IS 1, IS 2, etc.).

Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in English for between 30 and 60 minutes at a Malaysian university and were audio-taped with a digital voice recorder with the permission from the participants to ensure that all their perspectives were captured accurately. The main ideas addressed in the interviews included experiences of academic success and failure, challenges that contributed to these experiences, strategies employed to overcome challenges, and factors that enhanced academic success. Interviews were subsequently transcribed by the author. Students were mostly interviewed in the University Postgraduate Lounge.

Data Analysis

This study sought to interpret the participants' social lived experiences by analysing the information they provided using thematic analysis. Van Manen's (1990) method was adopted because it is one of the most complete and popular hermeneutic methods that focuses on "understanding the meaning of experience (by searching for themes) with greater interpretative engagement with the data" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 109). Van Manen describes the method's base as built on three approaches: holistic reading to achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomenon; selective reading, highlighting significant statements to formulate meanings; and detailed or line-by-line reading to consider every sentence. The author used holistic and selective reading to analyse the data, because this would "result in a good balance between part and whole reading and less likelihood of idiosyncratic interpretations that are beyond the data" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 124). Techniques proposed by Boyatzis (1998), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell (2008) were also adopted to complement van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which is less prescriptive and guided more by the relationship between the text and the researcher.

An inductive approach was adopted. Data analysis began with coding, collating codes into possible themes and generating a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The author manually selected the shortest transcript and assigned key words or phrases that described what participants meant (Tesch, 1990). At this stage, the author used van Manen's second approach, selective reading or highlighting, to see which phrases represented the phenomenon under investigation. While doing the coding, the author asked "What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem

particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 93) in order to formulate the meanings.

The next step was to group similar codes and redundant codes and reduce the list to a smaller, more manageable number (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2008). The process of thematic analysis is an iterative one (Braun & Clarke, 2006): the author revisited the list and data to see if any new codes emerged (Creswell, 2008). Quotes that supported the codes were highlighted (Tesch, 1990) and the list reduced to establish themes that answered the research question.

Findings

Supervision Issues

The lack of support from the supervisor in terms of insufficient provision of feedback on research work and communication breakdown due to the supervisor’s busy schedule were the main reasons for an Iranian Master’s student experiencing academic failure: the student from the Communication Faculty was left for months to find her own footing in her research work due to her supervisor’s extreme busy schedule; working on her research proposal for nearly a year on her own, she was deprived of constructive feedback. At this stage of candidature, she is frustrated; she is yet to present her proposal to the panel so that she can move on to the next stage of her project:

I really had difficulty finding my supervisor. He was really busy with different things, inside or outside Malaysia. Most of the time he is not around. I haven’t presented my proposal yet, and my proposal is completely ready, but he has not read it yet. I am waiting for his comments. I have sent more than 10 emails in one week to him, trying to call him, even going to his office, but I cannot find him. For example, when I want to meet him, I go to his office to set an appointment. About 1 month later I get an appointment and in this one-month period, he may postpone or cancel the meeting two or three times. And it will take another two months to meet him. It should be our meeting but it won’t last more than 15 minutes, as he will be talking on the phone, talking to people. (IS 10)

Several other PhD students indicated the same issues with their supervisors: they feel very tired of “chasing after” their supervisors. An Indonesian student said her supervisor tended to misplace her thesis chapters due to the supervisor’s busy schedule. As a result, she had to reprint her chapters several times for comment:

My supervisor is very busy. I pass my chapters to her and then she needs a lot of time to read and to give the feedback. Sometimes I pass on the chapters, and then she said, ‘I lost it somewhere, I don’t know where I put it’, so I need to reprint again, and pass it to her again... Sometimes I cry, but [there is] nothing to be done [about it]. So that’s the big challenge for me. (IS 6)

Two PhD students and one Master’s student claimed that they had challenges in meeting regularly with supervisors and receiving constructive feedback on draft chapters:

I submitted my third draft one and half months ago. I am still waiting for comments. I emailed and I have given a printout copy, I am still waiting for comments. It’s only 23 pages. (IS 21)

He was very busy, and at the same time he doesn't have time to edit or to see, to talk, [he was] travelling, meeting, lecturing in other places. (IS 23)

There is no communication between me and her. I feel very tired with her. Every time I make contact to see her, she said "Ok". I go and wait for her for 1-2 hours, [but] I couldn't find her. Later I feel very sad. (IS 12)

As a result of these disappointments, a Master's student said that she just wants to finish her Masters and pursue her PhD degree in another Faculty or even in other countries such as Australia or New Zealand. This student, however, went on to work with her supervisor:

I really want to get rid of it [the Masters]...But for sure I won't start a PhD in this [Faculty]... maybe in another [Faculty]... and maybe in another country... [I am] thinking about Australia or New Zealand... I don't want to have this challenge again... It was not a good experience for me. (IS 10)

For other students, one of the main strategies adopted was to change supervisors because of bad supervision experiences. For example, a Master's student from Iraq decided to change her supervisor due to limited support in the research project. Wisker and Robinson (2013) argue that changing supervisors influences research progress because students then might take more time to complete their research. However, this student was determined to change her supervisor because she wanted to feel comfortable in completing her studies and found herself in an unpleasant supervision situation:

I decided to change my supervisor. I found it is ok to be late, but it is better to feel comfortable than just take the degree and don't feel comfortable with it. (IS 12)

Another challenge experienced at this research university was the supervisor's limited expert knowledge on the topic. A Palestinian PhD student pointed out:

Sometimes supervisors are not very specialised in that field. Sometimes you feel your supervisor is disconnected from your field or on what you are going to do or what you are thinking. You feel you didn't make progress or you fail in making progress. This makes me think that I didn't make progress and I feel depressed. (IS 8)

A PhD student from China claimed that his supervisors seem to lack knowledge relevant to his research field. As a result, they were unable to provide meaningful guidance in his research discipline and the student felt disconnected from his supervisors:

For the PhD level, sometimes I find the supervision is not very nice, because my research is Chinese cinema, so all the supervisors here are mostly Malay, and they have no such background. (IS 3)

These findings do not add to the list of supervision challenges widely acknowledged in scholarly research, but they are serious, authentic reports associated with the spectrum of academic failure experiences felt by international students at this Malaysian university. Based on these findings, supervision commitment is being clearly breached because supervisors are

too busy to provide feedback and this then has negative implications on the students' research work and their research success.

Faculty Mismanagement

Ajjawi et al. (2019b) argue that students generally want to be connected to and supported by the university and academic staff members in order to excel in their studies. However, a fourth-year Management PhD student from Iran expressed his disbelief on the inappropriate treatment he received from the Faculty's management once his supervisor left the university:

My supervisor left and nobody wants to help me and [the faculty members] gave me a lot of corrections based on my proposal defense. I haven't had access to the EG machine which was my main equipment to do my research. The management sent the machine to [another branch campus]. (IS 24)

This particular student described his academic failure experience thus: "everything is reverse, no happy life, boring life, no acknowledgement, no scholarship, no admiration by others" when his supportive supervisor left the university. He received insufficient support from his Faculty's management in terms of accessibility to vital equipment. Other academics from the Faculty were reluctant to supervise his research project because the research was different from the typical management research conducted in the Faculty. He was asked to change his topic after three years' working on the initial research which he had been so passionate about. His grief is captured thus:

Writing a new proposal after three years, I have changed my lovely thesis and do the stupid stuff in the field and do the questionnaire, typical management research which I don't like, but I am forced to do... [It is a] boring...boring life... when you are forced to do this. It means you are forced to do... I don't have a choice right now... This is not my field, this is not my passion. (IS 24)

The student feels he has been left with no choice about his research change.

Discussion

The main purpose of this paper is to explore diagnostic supervision challenges experienced by international postgraduate students that significantly influenced their academic failure experiences. The results have highlighted two main supervision challenges that contributed to academic failure incidents in a Malaysian university. The first main challenge surrounds supervision. Good supervision is essential in research students' educational journeys but students at this Malaysian university reported supervision issues arising from lack of constructive feedback by academic staff due to busy staff schedules and supervisor unfamiliarity with the students' research topics. Although et al. (2007) highlighted that a positive supervisory relationship is primary in ensuring that students are guided and empowered to be independent learners in gaining a Masters or PhD degree, lack of constructive feedback and communication breakdown reported here influenced students' research performance because they were unable to revise their writing in good time without helpful comments from their supervisors. As a result, students experienced delay in completing their research on time and in developing constructive communication on research work with their supervisors.

Cornér et al. (2017) argue that frequency of supervision is a fundamental element of students' satisfaction with the supervision process and it reduces the risk of dropping out. However, for postgraduate international students in this study, lack of timely guidance and feedback discouraged them to move on in their projects. As a consequence, students experienced academic failure in the sense that there was limited progress in their research. Postgraduate students in Löfström and Pyhältö's (2014) study also experienced inadequate supervision because supervisors were too busy to provide research direction and had too many supervisees. Such incompetent, abandonment and inadequate supervision is categorised as an ethical issue, according to Goodyear, Crego and Johnston (1992).

Postgraduate students in Gube et al.'s (2017) study argued that discipline-expert supervisors were appreciated because they were strongly connected with the discipline context and therefore "provide[ed] support in relation to research direction and content-specific feedback" (p. 10). This is a sharp contrast to experiences reported here, where some students did not receive positive or clear feedback from the supervisor because the supervisor lacked relevant knowledge. This is a dishonesty on the part of the supervisor and this then impacts not only students' research success but also students' well-being in terms of their experiencing psychological distress such as depression for not progressing in their research work. As a consequence, lack of guidance does impede international students' completion of research and studies within a stipulated timeframe. Although the Malaysian Internationalisation Policy document (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011) strongly recommends that it is the responsibility of universities to provide positive learning experiences to international students, these supervision challenges obstruct the national strategy that wishes to promote student engagement and experience.

The second main challenge is mismanagement at Faculty level. The Faculty management failed to acknowledge that postgraduate research program is indeed a vibrant body of research, as argued by Wisker et al. (2003). The management clearly neglected to accommodate, facilitate and manage a student's research when his supervisor suddenly left: the PhD student was left "hanging" or an "orphan", in Wisker and Robinson's (2013) terms. As a consequence, the student was devastated by the whole situation, resulting in limited passion and enthusiasm to carry on with his new research topic which to him was not challenging enough compared to his first topic. Yet this student is resilient: he wants to persevere with his PhD studies (although not within the completion timeline), which also aligns with established literature that international students have an "edge" in striving, thriving and demonstrating resilience in their studies (Nguyen, 2013).

International postgraduate students in this study have adopted several varied strategies to overcome supervision challenges. Some had the mindset of going along with the supervisors' timeline, because too much time and effort had been invested in the research and also in the supervisory relationship – there was no turning back. Nonetheless, after these negative experiences, students may not want to persevere or engage with the supervisors for further educational opportunities. Others took a drastic step in changing their supervisors because they were just uncomfortable with the situation.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this paper reveal not only new but unique findings on the international postgraduate students' academic failure experiences at one of the research universities in Malaysia. A spectrum of academic failure experiences was experienced by international

postgraduate students due to various supervision challenges. Students felt that they were not valued or admired; they were unhappy, demotivated, depressed, disappointed, tired and frustrated.

Two main supervision challenges that were themselves unethical were also observed. Firstly, management at the Faculty level was unethical in “taking away” research equipment of an international student while this student was still collecting data for his PhD study. In addition, due to his supervisor leaving the university, this student was asked to change his research topic in his third year of study, which is wrong to do if the ground is that the research area is unique and yet no academic is interested in that topic. Ethically and morally, PhD students need specific guidance and feedback in their research project, even though independent learning is vital and is asked for from students. But, in this situation, guidance was not provided nor was genuine assistance offered to this student to pursue his research.

Secondly, inadequate supervision has contributed to international postgraduate students experiencing not only academic failure but also undergoing psychological distress. In particular, receiving unclear feedback or none at all from the supervisor due to the latter’s busy schedule, lack of discipline expertise or lack of research support is unacceptable, because it has breached the supervision code of ethics. Students are left stressed, demotivated and unsure of their research direction in their project, which subsequently impacts their research growth.

These findings contribute to the non-Western literature on academic failure experiences, particularly for valuable and vulnerable stakeholders – the international students at this prestigious research university. In practical terms, these findings have not only exposed serious academic and research problems, they also have implications for students’ academic failure experiences. Singh and Jack (2018) reported that international postgraduate students seek international education to achieve academic success, build knowledge and skills, and contribute to their home country on return. However, if these benefits are abridged by research or academic issues, international student numbers may dwindle in Malaysia.

Recent scholars (Brimble, 2016; Löfström et al., 2015; McCrohon & Nyland, 2016) have suggested that there is a lack of institutional guidance and support in place for academic staff members to adhere to research integrity practices and procedures. However, many Western universities, particularly Australian universities, have taken initiatives to build online modules on research integrity, informative websites on research integrity, and conduct training and development workshops and forums for faculty staff members (Devlin, 2006; East, 2016; Zangenehmadar et al., 2015). Since Malaysia is a new contender in attracting international students, such ethical guidelines and policy concerning supervision and management support need to be put in place to minimise and then eradicate challenges experienced by international postgraduate students. Such guidelines and policy will also generate positive experiences of international students’ academic success in Malaysia.

Like many other research studies, this study has its limitations. This research was based on semi-structured interviews from one single research university in Malaysia, which limits the generalizability of these findings. Further research could overcome this limitation by conducting mix-methods research design with supervisors, as well as with domestic students, from public and private universities in Malaysia and beyond.

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