The Importance of Being Earnest:
Ensuring Quality in Postgraduate Education

Two centuries ago, in 1895, Oscar Wilde wrote a play called “The Importance of Being Earnest”. The play was a triumph in demonstrating Wilde’s wit at using humour and trivialities to highlight serious social issues of the time.

Although ‘earnest’ is not a word that is often used nowadays, I thought it apt to highlight the seriousness with which UPM takes its postgraduate programmes. The tagline “Ensuring quality in postgraduate education” is a declaration of the earnestness with which the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) of UPM pledges its intention of ensuring quality of its programmes and the support system that comes with postgraduate education.

Whereas Oscar Wilde had to teach his society to take a more light-hearted perspective to the seriousness of life, in today’s lifestyle, the reverse is true. In a world where virtual reality is perhaps more real to most people than the ‘real’, the challenge is to re-educate society on ‘the importance of being earnest’.

Nowhere should there be more earnestness to be found than at university. And nowhere more so than at the highest level of education, which is at the postgraduate level. At UPM, the SGS strives to show this earnestness in its continuous effort to provide quality postgraduate education and experience for its students. This is done by constantly and actively providing learning support programmes through its Putra Sarjana certificate courses and also by creating a transparent quality environment through better information dissemination on its website.
Testimony of UPM’s commitment to quality in its postgraduate education can be found in its Quality Assurance Manual which can be viewed on the SGS website. This manual can be accessed by both students and staff in order to have an idea of the standards UPM has set for itself for postgraduate education.

Worthy of mention here are the aspects that make up the quality standards defined by the SGS, which are in accordance with international standards in managing postgraduate education. The Quality Manual (QM) spotlights the principles for best practices which are categorised as ‘five-Rs’: right student, right research project, right supervisor, right time and right resources. Specifically, the principles of best practices detail the admission and registration process to ensure high completion rate, and elaborate on research project supervision – prescribing certain guidelines to avoid negligence and possible antagonism between student and supervisor. Desirable traits in a responsible supervisor and a good student are described with reference to supervision conduct and ethics.

The SGS’s efforts to increase system efficiency through good management practice is also captured in the QM. Other significant elements in the manual include the best practices relating to measures in monitoring students’ research progress, leading to successful completion. In addition, the QM describes a new mode of enhancing students’ academic experience and educational value through the jointly awarded/dual degree programmes, which are the result of collaboration between UPM and other institutions, and are therefore, supportive by nature.

Another important aspect of quality postgraduate education which is outlined in the QM relates to the handling of student grievances that can be pursued by the SGS, and the procedure for solving problems. The SGS asserts that the university community must be able to address conflicts which arise according to measures available and which are already implemented at other international higher education institutions.
Most importantly, the seriousness of establishing quality can be read through quality indicators outlined in the QM. The types of indicators include student satisfaction, completion rate, good supervision, publication from thesis and conference presentations, professional development, success stories and alumni support. These are areas which are being paid serious attention to by UPM.

Apart from the Quality Manual, the Learning Support unit of SGS has also published and made available on the website the Student Guide, Tips on Viva Voce for Supervisor, Chairperson and Examiner, the Supervision Handbook, and Tips and Guidelines on the Responsibilities of the Advisor, Chairperson, and Members of the Supervisory Committee. These were published with the aim of assisting both students and staff in understanding not only their roles but also in helping them get a clearer picture of the procedures necessary for the successful completion of a postgraduate degree.

The Putra Sarjana certificate courses, designed specifically to complement postgraduate education at UPM, can be seen to work as a gateway to academia for students. Most postgraduate students anticipate an academic career at the end of their postgraduate programmes, and the Putra Sarjana courses help prepare them to enter the academic world as a well-rounded scholar. These courses are geared towards developing a holistic personhood necessary for the survival of an academic career. To help students plan the courses they feel they should take and which would benefit them most, a detailed course package listing is available on the website. Students will find that a wide variety of essential academic, professional and community service skills courses are available under the Putra Sarjana learning support programme. At the completion of each newly designed course, students will be awarded a certificate of achievement, thus further enriching and giving value to the experience.

As they go through their journey towards a postgraduate degree, most students are in need of some kind of financial support. To help ease this journey, financial assistance is available, not only from UPM in the form of scholarships, fellowships and assistantships, but also from other organisations outside of UPM. With awareness of this general need, SGS has published a comprehensive financial assistance booklet as a source of reference for students on what is available.
Quality in terms of facilities and services is also something that UPM takes pride in. Some of the more significant recent changes and additions are the new graduate wing at the library to cater for the growing number and need of its postgraduate students, and the new SGS building 2, which houses the Student Affairs, Learning Support and Publication Unit, the Industrial Relation and International Unit, the Academic Programmes and Records Unit of SGS, as well as the Bursary section of UPM dealing with postgraduate fees and payments.

Indeed, it would appear that the seriousness with which UPM works towards providing and ensuring quality postgraduate education, in the form of constant upgrading of its programmes, facilities and services, certainly marks a recognition of ‘the importance of being earnest’!

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The Winning New Graduate Wing

By Farhang Koohestanian*

Students who have been frequenting the UPM library over the past two years might have noticed some construction going on for a year or so at the ground floor of block B. Personally, I had no idea what they were planning to build and thought they were simply expanding the library premises to accommodate the growing number of students. I was wrong though.

On 16 April 2012, the new Graduate Wing opened and students were able to use one of UPM’s latest amenities. On my first visit, I have to confess that I found it quite amazing and incomparable in every aspect to the previous room for postgraduates located on the first floor of block A. This is not to say that the aforementioned Graduate Room was not any good, but the new section is proof that UPM has excelled itself. The two-storey Graduate Wing can accommodate nearly 200 students who might be looking for a cosy environment to proceed with their research and studies.

To enter the study area, the users must cross the lobby where the front desk is located. On your left there is a comfortable sofa where you can relax and refresh when you feel exhausted or face writer’s block, or you could get a drink from the vending machine installed on the other end of the lobby along with a couple of tables and chairs, and have a nice chat or serious academic discussions with your peers. Upon entering the main study area on the ground floor, one cannot help admiring the contemporary decoration and the thoughtful arrangement of the desks, some of which have been equipped with computers for those not interested in taking their laptops with them. The Internet access will be your last concern as the new Graduate Wing, like all other premises of the library, is a WiFi zone, and all the available computers provide you with an easier and much faster access compared to other library halls. The brand new desks, chairs, study lamps, and the easy chairs are an added incentive for those who wish to work long hours on their assignments or projects.
In order not to sound like I am gushing, I talked to a number of postgraduate students, both local and international, regarding the pros and cons of the new facility, and I insisted that they bring up any drawbacks or shortcomings. However, the more I insisted, the less I was given any. Mitra, for instance, was quite happy with everything and above all liked the new furniture which, to her, was very convenient. She said the first floor was a bit chilly though and the vending machine needed to be refilled more often. Mohammad from Indonesia simply could not come up with any complaints and was really enthusiastic about it.

Rasool, an Iranian PhD student, was very positive toward the new section, but funnily enough, the only negative point he could think of was that Facebook and YouTube were not blocked and he could not resist the temptation of visiting them while studying. I am sure many would disagree.

In my opinion, however, the only problem that may arise in the near future is the number of students that can be accommodated, as more and more students are showing interest in the new facility and its popularity is growing rapidly. To many postgraduate students, the new Graduate Wing is an ideal place for their work to flourish. So, if you have not been there yet, it is time to pay it a visit and see for yourself what I have told you.

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Giving Back to Society

By Nadhirah Rosli*

It was problematic for me when asked to talk about giving back to society. How do I talk about it without being ostentatious, wouldn’t this defeat the very idea of ‘giving’ itself? I hope by sharing my experience of giving, readers will see that I am just being honest about sharing my experience, and not (God forbid), indulging in pretentiousness in any way.

The day I realised that there are things I could do for others was the day when Aunty gave me a tour of the Tahfiz girls’ shelter¹, as I walked round the shabby walls of the home, and met girls who gawked, giggled and smiled gleefully at me. When I offered myself to be an English teacher pro bono, I never thought that what I was doing was giving back to society. I just wanted to help, little realising how much commitment I was getting myself into.

The action of giving is simplistic, yet also often mystified. We correlate ‘giving to society’ with money, which leaves us untagged by responsibility. This does not make the deed any less valuable, yet money is just a catalyst. I am arguing that sincere help and attention to those in need is priceless. This is not easy though, and not without challenges. The moment a person wants to help sincerely and commit to it is the very moment when the trials begin. To remain consistent in this intention is itself a burden. Giving to charity is not a one-hit wonder, neither should it be an annual nor a monthly sacrifice. Similarly, giving in terms of time and effort requires shouldering it as a responsibility, with no excuses.

If money were to be involved, there is a saying that when the right hand gives, the left hand should not know. I would like to share with you an advice an aunt once gave me. The advice was “if you start counting, then Allah will count with you”. Muslims believe that God is beyond Gracious, and His rewards do not abide to logic and calculation². But when we start counting our deeds and grace, and secretly yearn for reward in the form of worldly pleasure, charity will be postponed, the giving of alms will be burdensome, and we will unconsciously weave pride into our little actions. Alas, this not only defeats, but demeans the purpose of giving. Indeed, it is hard to give without desiring reward or recognition.

This is why I was wary of writing on this topic. The effect of categorising what you do as ‘giving’ and identifying it as ‘giving back to society’ can make it difficult to stop pride and arrogance from entering your heart. In the end, it is not society that benefits the most from this act. On the contrary, it is the individual who takes full pride of their own feat through what they perceive as their moral accomplishments.
I take ‘giving’ as a task in getting to know one’s self. It takes me that much energy in giving in order to battle my own greed, and to strive for patience and tolerance. You also learn to forgive and to accept that ingratitude is an unfortunate tendency in charity work. Charity trains you to be selfless, which is a beautiful achievement. Another precious psychological training is knowing when and who to help. If there is one thing that I have learnt about sincerity is that if someone is sincere in charity work, he/ she will neither ask nor beg. You will learn to recognise that it is within this humility that they are mostly in need.

Often in novels or in short stories, the climax would involve a certain epiphany to occur in the protagonist. We too have our moments of epiphany when we suddenly ache to change and lend ourselves to others. This is probably the best form of ‘giving back to society’. If truth be told, giving to society should not be a choice. Once the act of giving becomes a habit, you will understand that it is an obligation and should have been part of our early education about civility.

In my case, I started to help with this school back in 2005 with whatever means I could. Being a teacher was one of my first ‘professions’ and I was eighteen years of age. I will not lie, it is a heavy responsibility, but it has its own intangible rewards. We need to find our own niche in charity, and for me the girls are it. Understanding this has called me to ‘soldier on’, because for me, I am obliged to make it a lifelong commitment- and that’s the truth.

¹A house that shelters girls and is dedicated to memorizing and learning the Quran.

²Abu Huraira related that the Prophet said: Allah the Majestic and Exalted said: “Every deed of man will receive ten to 700 times reward, except Siyam (fasting), for it is for Me and I shall reward it (as I like). There are two occasions of joy for one who fasts: one when he breaks the fast and the other when he will meet his Lord” (Muslim).

³Chapter 2: 273 of the Quran: [Charity is] for the poor who have been restricted for the cause of Allah, unable to move about in the land. An ignorant [person] would think them self-sufficient because of their restraint, but you will know them by their [characteristic] sign. They do not ask people persistently [or at all]. And whatever you spend of good - indeed, Allah is Knowing of it.

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A fundamental characteristic of PhD research is that it is completed under the guidance of one or more academic supervisors. It is the supervisor’s responsibility to monitor the progress of the research and to ensure that the student is mastering the appropriate research skills and that the project is likely to come to a successful conclusion. The supervisor's role is therefore crucial in the whole process and indeed, it appears that one of the chief reasons why students fail to get their PhDs is because of inadequate supervision. It is therefore vitally important for students to ensure that they receive proper supervision.

The reason why I am writing about my experience with my supervisor is simply to share my experience, during which I came to understand that doing research under the right supervisor, who is also skillful, is important and can lead to a meaningful and genuine research contribution. I truly believe that a good working relationship between supervisor and student, with the supervisor providing encouragement, personal support and guidance at all stages, is instrumental to the student’s success.

My relationship with my supervisor went through different stages as my research progressed. At the beginning, my supervisor acted more as a tutor who provided training, gradually transforming to a coach-like teacher who helped me build my skills and confidence. Towards the end of the research, our relationship was already strengthened and she became my colleague and friend, a relationship that I will continue to treasure as I find my own way in academia.

Whilst it is clear that the establishment of a good working relationship is important, the successful relationship must be a reciprocal process, and should reflect the fact that both student and supervisor share a common goal. The supervisor and student ideally should also share the same passion and excitement for the research. The quality of the research can certainly be easily affected by an unsatisfactory relationship.

The most fascinating part of my supervisory experience was the fact that my supervisor always acted like both a supervisor and an external reader/examiner. She always reminded me that if I was not able to satisfy her as a supervisor, I would not be able to satisfy my examiners. As an experienced examiner herself, she was able to read my thesis bearing in mind an examiner’s expectations.
In order to get the most out of the supervision, the student, with the help of the supervisor, must draw up a PhD plan that is regularly updated throughout the process. The PhD plan must contain the student’s individual study programme and must be a mutually binding agreement between the student and the supervisor. This enables the student to have short term goals while working towards the long term goal of completing the thesis.

While the research should be the student’s responsibility, a supervisor who is inspiring and shows an understanding of the research topic is crucial in producing a thesis that is original and interesting. As in any other relationship, chemistry is an important factor in this relationship.

Without chemistry, the relationship can easily fall apart. It is therefore also important for a student to be honest from the beginning if he/she feels that the relationship is not a potentially workable one. From the beginning, I had a good feeling about my supervisor, and was determined to do my thesis under her supervision.

An important element of supervision which I received was the structured feedback on various drafts of my PhD thesis which started from the early stages of writing the proposal and preparation for the seminar. Supervision is particularly important at the beginning of the PhD process, and the supervisor should set aside ample time during this period. Since I was not absolutely sure about my methodology at that time, my supervisor invested considerable time to ensure that the research was directed towards my tentative goals. At this stage, she read my writing meticulously and presented numerous comments and questions for the various aspects of my research. I realise now that the most constructive and significant part of my thesis was formed at that time although I was not fully aware of it. My supervisor’s belief that the foundation of the research must be formed properly helped put together a well-structured research project that I was able to carry through.

I also learnt that good supervision is characterised by open questions and suggestions for discussion, not by directives. To my benefit, my supervisor never intervened in the area that I wanted to work on. Despite my often unintelligible ramblings at the early stages, she continued to push me to go further with my thoughts through her questioning and input. With her guidance, I was able to develop my own voice and infuse originality in my work. Her criticism also enabled me to think more clearly and in a more organized manner, and to transfer this clarity to my writing.

Criticism was an integral part of my PhD programme, and I learnt to revise and reformulate my research based on the thought-provoking feedback I received from my supervisor. I learnt to accept and appreciate criticism, without taking it personally. Criticism should be constructive, and stimulates the research process further, ultimately aiding intellectual development.
To me, criticism shows involvement in the research, and therefore lack of it can be detrimental to the learning process. It is therefore better to receive criticism than not to get any input, even though destructive criticism can also be damaging to a student’s confidence and self-esteem.

Communication is another important aspect of a successful supervisory relationship. It is important that communication lines are kept open even though both parties may not be able to be physically present as planned. Supervisors who have other responsibilities may not be able to hold that weekly meeting as originally intended. Or circumstances may change that either supervisor or student may have to go away for a while. My supervisor was on sabbatical for nine months during my PhD. This did not affect the quality of supervision I received. She continued to be available over emails, and had also prepared me to be an independent researcher through her infectious enthusiasm and spirit.

My transformation into an independent researcher is the biggest and most rewarding learning experience for me. My supervisor had taught me how to fish, and I am able to continue fishing on my own now.

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Much has been made about the immorality of plagiarism; appropriating another’s work and passing it off as your own is undoubtedly unethical, given that the very nature of academia is premised on the notion of originality. And though not punishable by any strict censure, and necessarily limited in the extent of its damaging consequences—someone, somewhere does suffer, but only somewhat—plagiarism is still thought of as a ‘crime’, and a plagiariser deemed little better than a criminal victimising the honest and the decent.

There is a glaring difference, however. Where criminals can call on their money, power and muscle to maintain and increase their money, power and muscle, plagiarists have no such resources available to them. All plagiarists will eventually find themselves fugitives—without allies, resources, and especially, unlike a Dr Richard Kimble, any great truth to hide behind—since they are counterfeiting the very currency that their worth will be gauged by.

But plagiarism is more folly than crime. It is, to put it crudely, an idiot’s trick. The idea that plagiarism is stupid is not new. Most recently, Jonathan Bailey in “The Stupidity of Plagiarism” lists down a number of reasons why plagiarists of web content are setting themselves up for failure. Bailey likens plagiarism to Russian roulette—where the odds of each individual occurrence of plagiarism being exposed are constant, “the more chances you take, the more likely the negative outcome will happen at least once.”

As much as this is true for online content, however, those who commit the folly in academia must be more inane still, since they (sometimes wilfully) neglect to ponder upon not only the consequences of their actions, but the very context itself in which those actions are undertaken. Why so? The flip side of academia being premised on originality, as noted above, is that it cultivates a brutal but healthy sense of one-upmanship, with every academic hoping to reap the very, very limited number of positions and acclaims on offer.

What this means is that like a macrocosmic form of reality TV, it is in everyone’s best interests to annihilate the opposition (i.e., friends and colleagues), by actively looking for the weaknesses of others, in the form of argumentative inconsistencies, fallacies, and most embarrassingly of all, unoriginality.

And this fault-finding ability is praised. Academia is survival of the brightest; there is no hiding from this fact.
If even undergraduate students—whose written works usually have an audience limited to their course lecturers, and who may more convincingly claim ignorance when their wrongful appropriations are found out—are not spared scrutiny, what more postgraduates and academics?

In short, the absolute worst context in which to steal someone’s ideas is one where ideas are held as sacrosanct, taking precedence over those who came up with those ideas in the first place. As such, the notion that the power that some academics do yield, can shield them from savagery is a grave non sequitur; while an academic’s position or status is contingent upon quality of peer reviewed articles published, the reverse is not true.

Admittedly, the task of being original is difficult. In a highly specialised field—say, Cervantes studies—it becomes increasingly difficult over time to add to what is already known. But besides functioning to exalt only the truly pioneering, contexts such as these have the added bonus of making plagiarism even more difficult. A singular expert can likely be duped, since he or she may not have read everything that has been written on the subject, but how long before a whole host of experts (and their attendant armies of bellicose postgraduates), who collectively have read everything, discovers an act of theft?

One possible recourse for the plagiarist, it may seem, is obscurantism, both in subject matter and the victim of the theft. But again, this is folly. In the case of the former, obscure subject fields only mean that the pool of articles and books written on the matter would be smaller, making stealing more difficult to hide. And with the latter, would it not be only reasonable to presume that if someone had come up with an original idea somewhere, that the idea would be in mass circulation already?

And of mass circulation, Bailey also points out that plagiarists often commit a supremely illogical act of self-deception: the tools that a plagiarist uses to source objects of theft are the very tools that will be used to identify the theft itself. In this sense, Google thieves are the most absurd creatures of all. It takes only a few seconds for even the most untrained reviewer or editor to copy and paste a sentence into a Google search bar, and even less time for Google to identify the source of the theft. While this particular act of puerility may be the reserve of undergraduates, many more advanced detection software tools exist to weed out the more foolish of postgraduates and academics.

So why plagiarise? A would-be plagiarist who has bothered to source for obscure texts to steal ideas from, and gone through some lengths to cloak those ideas in paraphrases, may as well take a little extra effort and cite his or her sources; in effect, a pair of parentheses or a single footnote can be the difference between meticulousness and idiocy, and can save an academic career built up over years and years from irreparable ruin.


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WATCH OUT FOR THE UPCOMING THREE MINUTE THESIS COMPETITION (3MT) AT UPM!

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THREE MINUTE THESIS COMPETITION

1ST PRIZE RM400
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CALL FOR ENTRIES

The School of Graduate Studies of Universiti Putra Malaysia is pleased to announce the first ever Three Minute Thesis Competition in Malaysia. The entries are now open to all UPM PhD students who have submitted their thesis and are awaiting their viva voce. This inaugural 3MT event offers doctoral students the opportunity to compete for prizes. All participants in the final heat of the competition will receive certificates for their participation.

In case you are wondering, the Three Minute Thesis Competition (3MT), requires you to describe and explain your thesis succinctly within three minutes in language that is accessible to an intelligent lay audience. This provides you with a great opportunity to practise your presentation skills, and also to consider and develop a way of communicating the significance of your research (in simple terms) to interested people. Apart from preparing you for your viva, you have probably had people ask you about your research – 3MT challenges you to articulate a quick and coherent response that can help you in such situations as job interviews and social events.

3MT was first developed and held successfully in Australia, and is now regularly held in universities across both Australia and New Zealand.

Entry forms, which are due in by Wednesday 12 September 2012 are available on our website www.sgs.upm.edu.my along with the description and guidelines of the 3MT. There will be a demonstration and meeting for all registered participants on Thursday 13 September 2012 at Bilik Menyuarat 3 (Meeting Room 3) at the School of Graduate Studies 2. All registered participants will be officially informed and invited via email.

www.sgs.upm.edu.my
Congratulations to the following students for being awarded Distinction for their thesis!

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Faculty: Engineering

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Name: Nor Hassifi Bin Shuib  
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Nationality: Malaysian  
Programme: PhD  
Faculty: Institute of Bioscience

Name: Ismayadi Bin Ismail  
Nationality: Malaysian  
Programme: PhD  
Faculty: Institute of Advanced Technology

(As July 3, 2012)
Quotes

“Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I’m not sure about the universe.”

Albert Einstein

If you want to succeed in the world, you must make your own opportunities as you go on. The man who waits for some seventh wave to toss him on dry land will find that the seventh wave is a long time a coming. You can commit no greater folly than to sit by the roadside until some one comes along and invites you to ride with him to wealth or influence.

John B. Gough

A Thought

"Instead of putting others down, try improving yourself. The only person you have a right to compete with is you. In the meantime, treat others how you’d like to be treated. One trait that some of the best (communicators) share is empathy. A couple of kind words can not only make a person’s day, but earn you a friend and supporter for life. For the rest of the week, whenever you see someone you want to judge negatively, pay them a compliment instead. See what happens."

Neil Strauss