Enhancing the effectiveness of FSPPP's Graduate Researchers in Print (GRiP) through a holistic and comprehensive research ecosystem framework: A pathway to promote research excellence among postgraduate students

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Abstract

FSPPP's Graduate Researchers in Print (GRiP) is a program designed to support research students in their academic writing, particularly thesis writing. This program is an emulation of the GRiP program introduced by the Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Australia. At present, the GRiP program is widely implemented in many Australian universities as it has been proven to be effective in assisting research students in their thesis writing and research completion. The FSPPP-GRiP program has been officially implemented since 10th March 2016, with a number of 16 participants: 8 Master and 8 Ph.D. students. After six months of the program implementation, the participants were interviewed to gather their feedback regarding the program's effectiveness at three different levels: individual level, peer support and assistance from the GRiP's coordinator. The findings of this study reveal that the participants have marked significant improvement at the individual level which can be seen from their academic writing (amount, quality, and improvement in writing skills and techniques), which has increased their study commitment, improved their communication repertoire alongside acted as a driving factor in propelling the participants to complete their study on time. The effectiveness of the GRiP program can also be seen from the peer support level. Peers and their research progress are recognized as benchmarks for other GRiP participants. They learn from each other's experiences (process and procedures, formatting, referencing, style of writing, writing techniques and structure), as well as obtaining support and motivation to complete their study. Learning from peers has made them feel less stressful and lonely in conducting their research. Notably, the role of the GRiP coordinator is prominently effective in facilitating discussions among GRiP participants, verifying the information and feedback from the participants, advising the participants about process and procedures and continuously support and motivate the participants to produce a sound thesis and complete their studies on time. This study concludes that the effectiveness of the GRiP program can be seen from individual, peer and coordinator levels. To further enhance research culture among students at the faculty, a holistic framework of the GRiP ecosystem is proposed. To excel in research, all parties have pertinent roles in assisting and supporting research students in their research journey—this can only be achieved through a holistic and comprehensive research ecosystem framework as proposed in this study.

Keywords: Effectiveness, FSPPP's Graduate Researchers in Print (GRiP), Research Ecosystem Framework, Research Excellence

INTRODUCTION

As Malaysia aims to achieve 60,000 Ph.D. holders to fulfill national goals by 2020 (The Sun Daily, 21 July 2014), this target has become a great challenge to all universities in Malaysia. There are many issues encircling postgraduate research students which are faced by many universities around the world. Among the issues and challenges are inclusive of: non-completion rates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2016; Smallwood, 2004); obtaining support (Gonzales, 2015); challenges in academic writing (Barbeiro, Pereira & Carvalho, 2015; Bair & Mader, 2013; Carvalho, 2012; Mehar Singh, 2015; Shafie et al., 2010; Othman & Abu Bakar, 2009). Similarly, academic writing is recognized as one of the main challenges faced by postgraduate research students in Malaysian universities (Mehar Singh, 2015; Shafie et al., 2010; Othman & Abu Bakar, 2009) and this is one of the evident aspects which hinders their completion and over-enrolled rates (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009).

A study conducted by A Majid, Mohd Shukor & Radzi (2010) reveals a high drop-out rate and dismissed cases due to attitudinal and physical challenges faced by postgraduate research students. The drop-out and dismissed cases rate are also high in the Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies (*Fakulti Sains Pentadbiran dan Pengajian Polisi* – FSPPP). FSPPP has two research programs which were introduced in 2006: Master of Administrative Science (AM780); Doctor of Philosophy in Administrative Science (AM990). Since 2006 until 2016, only 16 out of 146 students (10.9%) who enrolled in master program have completed their studies. Meanwhile, out of 56 Ph.D. students enrolled in FSPPP, only 6 students have graduated (10.7%). In other words, the completion-enrollment student ratio for both master and Ph.D. programs in FSPPP is approximately 1:10. The low performance and completion rates among postgraduate research students in FSPPP have triggered immediate action to been taken at the faculty level—to explore the issues and challenges faced by FSPPP's postgraduate research students and design specific programs targeted to their needs.

One of the prominent initiatives implemented for FSPPP's postgraduate research students is the Graduate Researches in Print (GRiP) program. FSPPP's GRiP program is an emulation of the program from the Arts Research Graduate School, Monash University, Australia. GRiP is recognized as an innovative writing program for higher degree students (by research) at the Arts Faculty and has achieved remarkable success in its respondents (Monash University, 2010). The GRiP program helps to improve academic writing, in particular, thesis writing, through friendly support from co-ordinator and peer groups' feedback. The support provided during the workshop series has helped to hasten the writing process and motivate students to submit their thesis on time.

The FSPPP's GRiP program was implemented on 10th March 2016 involving two groups of students: Master (8 students); Ph.D. (8 students). Notably, the implementation of the GRiP program has shown significant improvement in supporting the research students in their thesis writing, research progress as well as research completion—as of January 2017, one master student has graduated on time, five Ph.D. students and one master student have passed the defence of research proposal (DRP) and six Master students will be submitting their thesis for examination. Notwithstanding the significant improvement on research progress and completion among postgraduate research students; this paper argues that a holistic framework of the GRiP ecosystem is needed to further enhance research culture among students at FSPPP and UiTM. This proposed idea is aligned with the Council of Graduate Schools (2016) which suggests a number of recommendations that require immediate attention from vital parties particularly at university and faculty levels. It is hoped that the GRiP program and its framework will continue to support students to excel in their research journey.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia aims to achieve 60,000 Ph.D. holders in fulfillment of our national goals by 2020 (The Sun Daily, 21 July 2014). This target is aligned with the country's main agenda to reach a developed nation status through the development of human capital and talent as stated in the Tenth Malaysian Plan (2010-2015) and the Government Transformation Plan. To achieve this target, universities play important roles in increasing the postgraduate research students' enrollment. For this reason, the government, through MoHE, has implemented the MyBrain 15 program which provides scholarships and allowances for postgraduate research students who are enrolled in Malaysian universities. Other than providing financial assistance, the MyBrain 15 program also aims to increase the national competency and capacity for higher level research and innovation (The Sun Daily, 21 July 2014). This portrays Malaysia's serious attention in boosting their human capital through research and innovation. Hence, the postgraduate research students are expected to produce a quality and sound research outcome that can be utilized for development and improvement.

In fulfilling the research agenda through the emphasis on postgraduate research students, Malaysian universities are facing a number of challenges and dilemmas. Many universities are cognizant that postgraduate research students are among the assets to their universities. However, they will transform into burdens to the university if they attribute to high non-completion rates. According to Smallwood (2004), one university can save up to one million dollars a year if they can reduce the rate of non-completion and over-enrollment of students. Therefore, universities should not only strategize to

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increase the number of postgraduate research students; but most importantly, universities also need to emphasize on ensuring research students to complete their study. Another pertinent issue related to enhancing the completion rate among postgraduate students is graduating on time (GOT). These three aspects: postgraduate research students' enrollment; research completion; and GOT are circumstantial not only in achieving KPIs for MyRA and QS World University Ranking but most importantly, it will contribute to the society and country in terms of enhancing human capital and talent development.

The completion rate among postgraduate research students in Malaysia is very low. The statistics in 2005 shows that on average, the postgraduate research students who enroll in master program complete their study within 2.96 years and Ph.D. students complete their study within 4.84 years (Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). Notably, research completion for each master student is double than the minimum study duration (1 year and 6 months). Meanwhile, a Ph.D. student who is supposed to complete their study within a minimum of 3 years, need to spend another 1 year and 10 months to obtain a Ph.D. If this situation persists, it will affect students, universities and the country, particularly in terms of financial implications, university reputation and status. According to the Council of Graduate Schools (2016), research non-completion especially among Ph.D. students will become a burden not only for the students, but also for the university and the country. Whether the students complete or do not complete their study, each and every research student represents a substantial investment in terms of time, intellectual resources as well as public and private money (Council of Graduate Schools, 2016). This apparently proves that postgraduate research programs are expensive ventures. Therefore, by ensuring study completion, it will help to improve the return on investment (ROI) of the student, university and country.

There are many reasons for non-completion and over-enrolled postgraduate research students in universities. One of the reasons is because of the issues, challenges and dilemmas faced by the postgraduate research students. Researchers agree that university pay less attention on the research students' voices (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Golde, 2000). Due to this reason, research students continue to face problem during their study and become demotivated which will negatively affect their study completion. Postgraduate research students face a wide range of issues and challenges such as academic writing, attaining support, feeling isolated, managing supervisor-supervisee relationship, poor supervision, inadequate facilities, balancing work and lifestyles and many others (Barbeiro, Pereira & Carvalho, 2015; Gonzales, 2015; Hotlman & Mukwada, 2014; Bair & Mader 2013; Ezebilo, 2012; Carvalho 2012; Butler 2011; Shafie et al. 2010; Othman & Abu Bakar, 2009; Mutula, 2009; Woodford, 2005; Mehar Singh, 2005; Wisker, 2001). Among all the challenges and difficulties, academic writing is believed to be one of the main challenges faced by research

students all over the world (Barbeiro, Pereira & Carvalho, 2015; Bair & Mader 2013). There are many perspectives in discussing the challenges in academic writing highlighted by many scholars and these include: academic writing across cultures; academic writing problems and challenges; support for academic writing; peer support; feedback; motivation and others (Kirchhoff, 2016; Brodensen et al., 2016; Bickford, 2015; Amstrong, 2015; Bickford, 2015; Amstrong, 2015; Biber & Gray, 2010; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008; Wisker, 2001; Hellen, 1994; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Mohan & Lo, 1985).

In confronting the challenges with regards to postgraduate research students, many universities have developed strategies to provide necessary support and assistance to the students. Among the actions or initiatives undertaken to minimize the obstacles faced by research students in dealing with their academic writing include: conduction of seminars and workshops (Mutula, 2009); the development of writing centres with peer tutoring; feedback and experiences (Kirchhoff, 2016; Bickford 2015; Amstrong, 2015); conduction of thesis writing workshops (Raisig & Vode, 2016; Nzekwe-Excel, 2015; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008); improving curriculum (Bair & Mader, 2013); and many others. One comprehensive study undertaken by the Council of Graduate Schools (2016) suggests a number of recommendations to support research students and improving doctoral completion in a university. The recommendations focus specifically on university and faculty roles: (1) proactive leadership; (2) providing the faculty with needed data; (3) respecting the uniqueness of each program and accepting that inevitable changes occur at the program-level; (4) Programs must select the right students; (5) programs must facilitate positive student-faculty relationships; and (6) programs must encourage student cohesiveness. This means, to support postgraduate research students, there is no single substantial initiative that the faculty and university should rely on. This responsibility requires effective cooperation and collaboration from many parties at all levels. This is the gap that this paper attempts to fill—implementing a program called GRiP, to support postgraduate research students in their academic writing and finally propose a holistic and comprehensive research ecosystem framework to further enhance research culture and improve research completion in FSPPP, UiTM.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative research method through interviews with 14 postgraduate research students who participated in the GRiP program. The main aim of this study is to explore the participants' feedback on the effectiveness of the GRiP program. Hence, the participants were asked about the program's implementation at three different levels: individual level; peer support; and assistance from GRiP coordinator. The data collection for this study was completed within a two-week period (15 – 27 August 2016). Notably, the interviews were conducted six months after the

participants have undergone eight sessions of GRiP workshops. The interview sessions were conducted face-to-face which took approximately 15 to 20 minutes for each participant. The findings of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to the main themes of this study: (1) impact of the GRiP programme at individual level; (2) the importance of peer support during the GRiP programme; and (3) the assistance of GRiP coordinator in facilitating the program. The findings of this study were presented in a narrative form according to the main themes. For the purpose of protecting the identity of the participants, pseudonyms were applied to represent each participant.

FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings of this study focuses on four aspects: (1) profile of the participants; (2) impact of the GRiP program at individual level; (3) the importance of peer support during the GRiP program; and (4) the assistance of GRiP coordinator in facilitating the programme.

Profile of participants

As indicated earlier, this study was undertaken after six months of implementation of the GRiP program. Out of the total 14 participants, 13 were female and only one male GRiP participant participated in the interviews. The majority of the participants were aged below 30 years (11 participants – 78.6%). Ten full time students participated in the interviews and the remaining were part-time students. The GRiP program is designed for full time students; however, students who enrolled as part-time students and are not working or working part time were allowed to join the GRiP program. Eight participants were those enrolled in the Master of Administrative Science (AM780) program and the remaining six participants were among Doctor of Philosophy candidates. Five of the participants received scholarships from government agencies such as from the Public Service Department (*Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam-JPA*) and MyBrain15 from the Ministry of Higher Education. The remaining nine participants did not receive any scholarship and they self-finance their study. Among the 14 participants who participated in the interviews, two Ph.D. candidates have passed their defence of research proposal (DRP) and currently in the process of data collection. Another three Ph.D. students and one Master student have passed their pre-defence of research proposal (Pre-DRP—the faculty requirement) – four students passed Pre-DRP within seven months of their enrolment and one student within one year and two months enrolment. Six GRiP participants (Master) are currently at their final stage of preparing their thesis draft for final submission. Notably, one Master student who participated in

the GRiP program has managed to graduate on time—submitted her thesis within one year and four months duration and graduated in January 2017.

Table 1: *Profile of respondents (N=14)*

Characteristics	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	1	7.2
Female	13	92.8
Age		
25 years and below	7	50.0
26 – 30 years old	4	28.6
31 – 40 years old	3	21.4
40 – 50 years old	0	0.0
51 years old and above	0	0.0
Program		
Master of Administrative Science (AM780)	8	57.1
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	6	42.9
Mode of study		
Full time	10	71.4
Part time	4	28.6
Year of study		
Year 1 (Semester 1 and 2)	3	21.4
Year 2 (Semester 3 and 4)	3	21.4
Year 3 (Semester 5 and 6)	6	42.9
Year 4 (Semester 7 and 8)	2	14.3
Employment status		
Not working	10	71.4
Working part time	3	21.4
Working full time	1	7.2
Freelance	0	0.0
Others	0	0.0
Study finance		
Self-finance	9	64.3
Scholarship	5	35.7
Study loan	0	0.0
Study progress		
Early stage of preparing a proposal (Chapter 1, 2 & 3).	1	7.1
Pre-Defence of Proposal	4	28.6
Defence of Proposal	0	0.0
Data collection	2	14.3
Pre-viva	6	42.9
Viva voce	0	0.0
Others	1	7.1

Impact of the GRiP program at individual level

The first objective of this study is to explore whether the implementation of the GRiP program for postgraduate research students is effective. The effectiveness of the GRiP program can be seen through the impacts at the individual level—in terms of their improvement in thesis writing; increase in participants' commitment in completing their thesis and research work; improvement in their writing styles, structure and format; enhancement of the research progress; aim to graduate on time; improvement of communication skills and also shape them to be a good researcher.

The overall findings of this study reveal that the majority of GRiP participants claimed that there is improvement in their thesis writing. They associated the improvement in their writing with becoming more alert, understanding on how to write a good piece of academic writing, being able to elaborate research findings further and attaining a lot of information during the GRiP workshops. The findings are exemplified below:

> *Yes*, *improvement in terms of my writing* […] The biggest impact of the GRiP workshop to me is *a lot of improvement in my writing*. We learnt from other students' writing; how to make comments on others writing. *This helps me to improve* […] *I can see a lot of improvement* from day one until the last day in the workshop (PhD 1, italicized emphasis added).

> After I have joint GRiP workshop for a few months*, it has improved my writing skills in academic writing*. *Now, when I write something, I become alert. I already understand on how to write, read and understand* it […] Every time, I attend the GRiP workshop, *I have learned lots of things to improve my writing* […] Even though my research progress is quite slow but it is still in progress […] (Master 3, italicized emphasis added).

> There is a lot of impact *to myself especially in my writing*. From GRiP, *I realize that my writing style is not very good and I must improve myself*. I get some ideas on how I will improve myself. *Now, I can see the improvement in my writing compared to previously* […] I can see the improvement although it does not achieve the level but almost […] (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

> GRiP workshop *teaches me a lot to improve my thesis writing* especially to cope with academic writing […] *I think I have improved a lot as compared to my first semester*. Before, I was struggling in writing and also communication. But then, GRiP workshop has *helped me to improve my thesis writing* and also my communication skills between friends (Master 1, italicized emphasis added).

> It helps to *improve my writing style* […] Besides, it *also helps me to write my research in the findings and elaborate more on my findings in my stud*y. *I got lots of information from the GRiP* workshop. (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

> Along the process, *it can improve a lot of writing styles*. Now, I am in my fifth semester but since I have joined GRiP*, I have improved a lot* (PhD 5, italicized emphasis added).

> Through the GRiP workshop, we can be on track and *improve our writing at the same time* […] (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

Further, the majority of the participants indicated that they have increased their commitment doing their thesis and research work following their participation in GRiP workshops. The participants' feedback shows that they are committed to attend GRiP workshop fortnightly; committed to prepare writing to be submitted and discussed during the workshop; create more responsibility; also claimed that their research work has become more systematic and keep their research on track; and most importantly, the GRiP program reminds the students not to stop writing. The participants' feedback are presented below:

After attending the GRiP workshop, *my life turned to be more systematic. We have the commitment to come to the GRiP workshop. We know the dateline so we need to ensure our work is done* […] The impact of the GRiP workshop is to *ensure our study is on track and bring us back on the right path* […] Indirectly, it gives us the commitment like we are in a relationship with our research […] So, we are not feeling like a kite flying without a string […] (Master 6, italicized emphasis added).

It keeps me on track. It means that when we are lazy and don't feel like doing anything […] But, when GRiP in next week*, I will write and do my best.* At least we are trying to write […] I don't think this is a burden to me. *This is the responsibility as a student* […] Currently, we don't have any responsibilities […] *so when we wake up in the morning, we will do the research* (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

I give high commitment to GRiP even though *I am a part-time student and working full time* […] So I can say my commitment to GRiP is high […] I want to receive positive feedback from my friends for the sake of improvement in my study […] I want my thesis to have the value that fulfill the criteria set by the faculty […] I hope my thesis can give impact to others (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

I'm happy to join GRiP every two weeks […] Because at the end of the workshop, *I will come out with things that I have learned that was covered in the previous GRiP.* In the next GRiP workshop, *I will make sure that my writing has been corrected. I will bring back to them and show the improvement that I have made* […] *We should keep on track* […] (Master 3, italicized emphasis added).

In terms of writing, I think GRiP is good which *indirectly forces students to prepare writing and do something to present during GRiP* […] The *most important thing is our own self as a participant. If we come with nothing then we will produce nothing* […] One more thing, this kind of effort *should not be one off. It must be continuous* (PhD 4, italicized emphasis added).

I know where I am compared to my friends. Friends act as benchmarks […] For example, I have to achieve something within these six months. But, few of my friends have already achieved it […] So, I realize that *I must work hard, even double than my friends do* (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

Sometimes, we feel lost and can't do it. But when we see others (during the GRiP workshop), they are very supportive and it boost our spirits. *This makes me fight and don't give up* (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

Through the GRiP workshop, *it always alerts me* and *always reminds me not to stop writing.* So, when I go to the workshop every two weeks, *I need to be consistent* (PhD 1, italicized emphasis added).

Based on the findings, this study has discovered that the participants also feel that their writing style and techniques have improved. Subsequently, the participants

also indicated that they have learned a lot about thesis structure, thesis format as well as the methodological aspects. The findings are exemplified below:

> When we receive comments from GRiP, we know what and how to improve […] At the end, *we can write the thesis following the right format* […] (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

> The feedback that I get from the GRiP workshop is actually positive. *It can improve my thesis and my writing style* […] (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

> I think this workshop has *helped me a lot in improving my writing style and thesis structure* […] (PhD 5, italicized emphasis added).

> *I can share techniques on writing styles and how to write good with my GRiP friends* […] (Master 1, italicized emphasis added).

> It also helps me to get *better understanding on qualitative and quantitative methods* […] (Master 5, italicized emphasis added).

The participants also indicated that through GRiP workshops conducted fortnightly, it helps to improve their research progress. This is due to the commitment given by the participants in preparing writing for every meeting; and thus, making them more disciplined and committed to write their thesis. The findings are presented below:

> GRiP also teaches me to work hard in achieving the same level like other students. Meaning to say, *it keeps you on track when seeing your friends already proceeding to Pre-Viva* […] *I feel more confident to complete my thesis* […] The GRiP workshop has helped me to *improve my thesis progress* (Master 5, italicized emphasis added).

> In terms of writing, I can see how to explain, expand and add ideas. *It also helps to expedite my research progress* […] *I become more confident* (Master 7, italicized emphasis added).

> After I have attended the GRiP workshop, my supervisor said that *my work is good and fulfill the requirement* […] *All of this I get from GRiP* (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

When the participants feel more committed, responsible and discipline in their study, they subsequently improve their thesis progress and aim to graduate on time. This is considered as a good spirit booster to be instilled among postgraduate research students.

> Yes […] *It can help me to graduate on time* […] *In order to graduate on time, writing is one of the important elements in research* […] This is because, even though we have a point *but if we don't convey it good, it doesn't work* […] (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

> Yes, it can help me *to graduate on time especially in terms of improvement in my writing* (PhD 1, italicized emphasis added).

> *It helps to boost my spirit to graduate on time* […] (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

The participants also indicated that they have improved their communication skills as they are expected to give comments to their friends' work in every workshop session. The findings are exemplified below:

> *In the GRiP workshop, we have two ways of communication*. We can get other people's feedback and opinions at that particular time […] So, when we have any *weaknesses in our writing, we tend to do the correction at that time* […] We can also correct other friends' weaknesses so it can be as a guideline in the future (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

> Before, I was struggling in writing and also communicating […] But then, the GRiP workshop has *helped me to improve my thesis writing and also my communication skills* between friends (Master 1, italicized emphasis added).

Finally, one GRiP participant stated the benefits gained during the GRiP workshop has helped the participant to be a good researcher. This is important for the postgraduate research students especially for those who aim to be an academician or researcher in the future.

> It helps me to be a good researcher […] I also feel thankful to my colleagues because they give their opinions on my writing style […] Now, I am in fifth semester but since I have joined GRiP, I have improved a lot […] (PhD 5, italicized emphasis added).

The importance of peer support during the GRiP program

Peers play crucial roles during GRiP workshops—they are expected to read their friends' writing and also provide constructive feedback to the other participants to be improved. During GRiP workshops, each participant is provided the opportunity to give and receive comments regarding thesis writing. Through this practice, GRiP participants learn a lot from each other's comments. Some of the participants really feel that they receive valuable comments from their friends; they learned about writing techniques; they helped each other through sharing their knowledge and experiences; and most importantly, they took the important comments seriously and improve their writing—this makes them feel very happy with the improvement and quality writing they have achieved. The findings are exemplified below:

> Earlier when I first joint the GRiP workshop, I think other people are better than me. But, at the end of this semester, I found that every one of us has our own strengths […] *We complement each other to improve our writing in terms of writing style*. Sometimes, we think that it is just simple like a format of writing. But then we realized that, *the input that we share give an impact to others' writing including me* (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

> I think GRiP is very good […] Before this, we do not have friends to comment. We tend to write our research recklessly. At least now, *we have friends to comment and they might discover something that we have missed*. Then, we can make an improvement on certain parts […] Other than that, we are in high spirit and *want to do it again especially in the sharing session* in GRiP (Master 2, italicized emphasis added).

I am okay *to receive others' comments*. As a student, we are willing to learn. We are willing to do everything for improvement […] I don't mind *receiving others'* (friends) *comments*. (It is good when *someone tells you to do the right thing*. It is supposed to be like this […] The important part is, we can improve our work (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

They (friends) *give me many feedback* […] I also improve since the first time I attended GRiP […] I don't know how to comment on others' work. I don't know how to see what is their strength and weaknesses (in their writing). I need to improve myself to give feedback to my friends (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

They (friends) are helping each other especially the senior students. They advise us. *They teach on how to improve our writing* […] Sometimes, what they say is correct. *If we take their advice and improve it,* I think it is even better. It *makes writing better* (Master 1, italicized emphasis added).

I think that my friend's comments are just okay […] *At least, we get to know new things and what should be done*. But sometimes, we feel frustrated with them because sometimes every person has different perspectives […] But still, it is acceptable […] (Master 6, italicized emphasis added).

I have *learned from other students* and the facilitator about which writing style I should follow and make it as an example […] We learnt from other students' writing. How to make comment on others' writing. *This helps me to improve* (PhD 1, italicized emphasis added).

Receiving feedback from friends is positive and I like it. We are still students and need to learn […] The feedback that I received from the GRiP workshop is actually positive. It can improve my thesis and writing style […] (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

GRiP also teaches me to work hard in achieving the same level like other students. *My friends give me the comments and positive feedback* […] Whatever comment they give, it will *help me to learn the appropriate writing style* (Master 5, italicized emphasis added).

We call it as a sharing knowledge session where we can share with peers and assume them as our readers. They wait for our writing […] *I am happy when they provide good feedback so that I can improve my writing* (Master 3, italicized emphasis added).

We have done some writing before, *lots of things can be improved after the discussions with everyone* in the GRiP workshop […] We can confirm with others by getting their feedback (Master 8, italicized emphasis added).

I also feel thankful to my friends because they provide their opinions on my writing style […] Now I am in fifth semester but since I have joined GRiP, I have improved a lot (PhD 5, italicized emphasis added).

Further, the participants agreed that their GRiP friends always motivate and support each other. This is especially when they share similar problems and is able to explore different ways to deal with the problems. Through the GRiP program, the participants feel that they are no more alone in their research journey. The findings are presented below:

In GRiP, we have our friends to discuss together. Our friends will share solutions to our problem. At the same time, we can share our personal problems with them […] Personal problems is one of the important aspects that need to be given care. If personal problems remained unresolved, it will be difficult for a student to perform […] (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

Currently, when I changed my research topic like the previous time, I really do not know what I should do with the legalization topic […] But when I submitted a full piece writing on chapter 1 and ask my friends to read and understand it, *they gave good feedback and now I see what should I do with my topic* […] Everyone have read and made me feel like I am doing the right research (Master 7, italicized emphasis added).

At this level, we have friends that do more or less the same topic like us. But, it is good because generally, *they will give feedback on writing* […] *We can complement each other* […] GRiP is a *meeting platform* for *discussions and sharing ideas*. We as postgraduate students, really do need that kind of discussion. *If not, we are alone* (PhD 4, italicized emphasis added).

My friends in GRiP, *they share their experience* […] *I know I can do it because all of my friends can do it. They also give motivation* […] Sometimes we feel lost and can't seem to do it. But when we see each other, *they are very supportive and it boosts spirit* […] It makes me want to fight and not give up […] (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

We *call it a sharing knowledge session where we can share to peers and assume them as our readers* […] *They wait for our writing* […] I am happy when they give good feedback so that I can improve my writing […] (Master 3, italicized emphasis added).

Peers are helpful because we can't do it alone. But, when we have friends, we are willing to learn […] They are *willing to give comments* to us. I think they are good […] *Everyone wants to make improvements* […] (PhD 3, italicized emphasis added).

In GRiP, we have our friends to discuss together. *Our friends will share solutions to our problems* […] Every 2 weeks, we will receive comments and feedback for our writing (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

It also helps us and we like to compete with one another […] *We have friends now to support us to complete our study*. Before this, everyone is lonely and lost […] (Master 2, italicized emphasis added).

The assistance of GRiP coordinators in facilitating the program

The role of GRiP coordinator is found to be crucial in facilitating the program. The findings discover that a majority of the participants feel that there is no conflicting role between GRiP coordinator and their supervisors. They claimed that the coordinator's role actually complements the supervision they received. In most situations, GRiP coordinators will listen to all comments given by the participants during the workshop. The coordinator acts as a natural party and will provide further advice and information related to academic writing, process and procedures. The findings from the participants regarding the coordinator's roles are exemplified below:

The facilitator is a natural party. Sometimes, when we are unsure whether we give the right or wrong comments to our friends. *The facilitator plays such an important role*. *The facilitator always provides her own opinion or feedback without favoring other parties*. The facilitator will *give ideas on how to improve our writing* […] (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

Facilitators and supervisors might have different roles. The facilitator will listen to all the opinions from the participants and other participants […] So that, the *students can understand other students' comments* […] The facilitator will add on more and better tips […] (PhD 1, italicized emphasis added).

I think facilitators play a very important role. The *facilitator provides very useful advice and helps student in everything* […] *The facilitator hears our voices and problems* […] *The facilitator is very wonderful* […] (Master 1, italicized emphasis added).

So far, there is no conflicting role between supervisors and facilitator. Because they act as supplements. They complement *the role of a supervisor*. From the perspective of a *facilitator*, of course *we learn and do a lot of things* […] (PhD 4, italicized emphasis added).

There is no conflicting role between my supervisor and facilitator […] My supervisor has given full support and understands the role of the facilitator. My supervisor keeps on encouraging me to attend the GRiP workshop (Master 3, italicized emphasis added).

There is no conflicting roles between supervisors and facilitators […] So far, *the facilitator is really helpful* […] I personally feel that GRiP is so fun. I am looking forward for it […] (Master 2, italicized emphasis added).

For me, there is no conflicting role between supervisors and facilitator. It actually helps me […] Sometimes, *we need assistance other than from our supervisor* […] (Master 4, italicized emphasis added).

I think the *facilitator and supervisor do not have different roles* […] It's like magic to my writing […] (PhD 2, italicized emphasis added).

I really appreciate of what the facilitator does for us in this GRiP workshop […] (PhD 6, italicized emphasis added).

There is *no conflict between the facilitator and my supervisor* […] (Master 5, italicized emphasis added).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The GRiP program is designed based on the needs of postgraduate research students in FSPPP. Formerly, before the implementation of the GRiP program, a research was conducted in October 2015 to explore issues and challenges faced by research students as well as acknowledging their suggestions to address these issues; the feedback was used to design programs and initiatives to support research students. After six months of implementation of the GRiP program, the participants show significant improvement in their thesis writing, research progress and completion of study. These findings are consistent with the GRiP implementation at the Faculty of Arts, Monash University which has achieved remarkable success in its participants (Monash University, 2010). Hence, the implementation of the GRiP program among postgraduate research students at FSPPP can be regarded as an effective and successful medium or measure to support students in their academic writing. This finding is similar to other researchers who presented the implementation of programs/workshops/initiatives to support their postgraduate research students in academic writing (Raisig & Vode, 2016;

Nzekwe-Excel, 2015; Kirchhoff, 2016; Bickford 2015; Amstrong, 2015; Mutula 2009; Cuthbert & Spark, 2008).

The effectiveness of the implementation of the GRiP program can also be seen at three different levels as presented in Diagram 1.
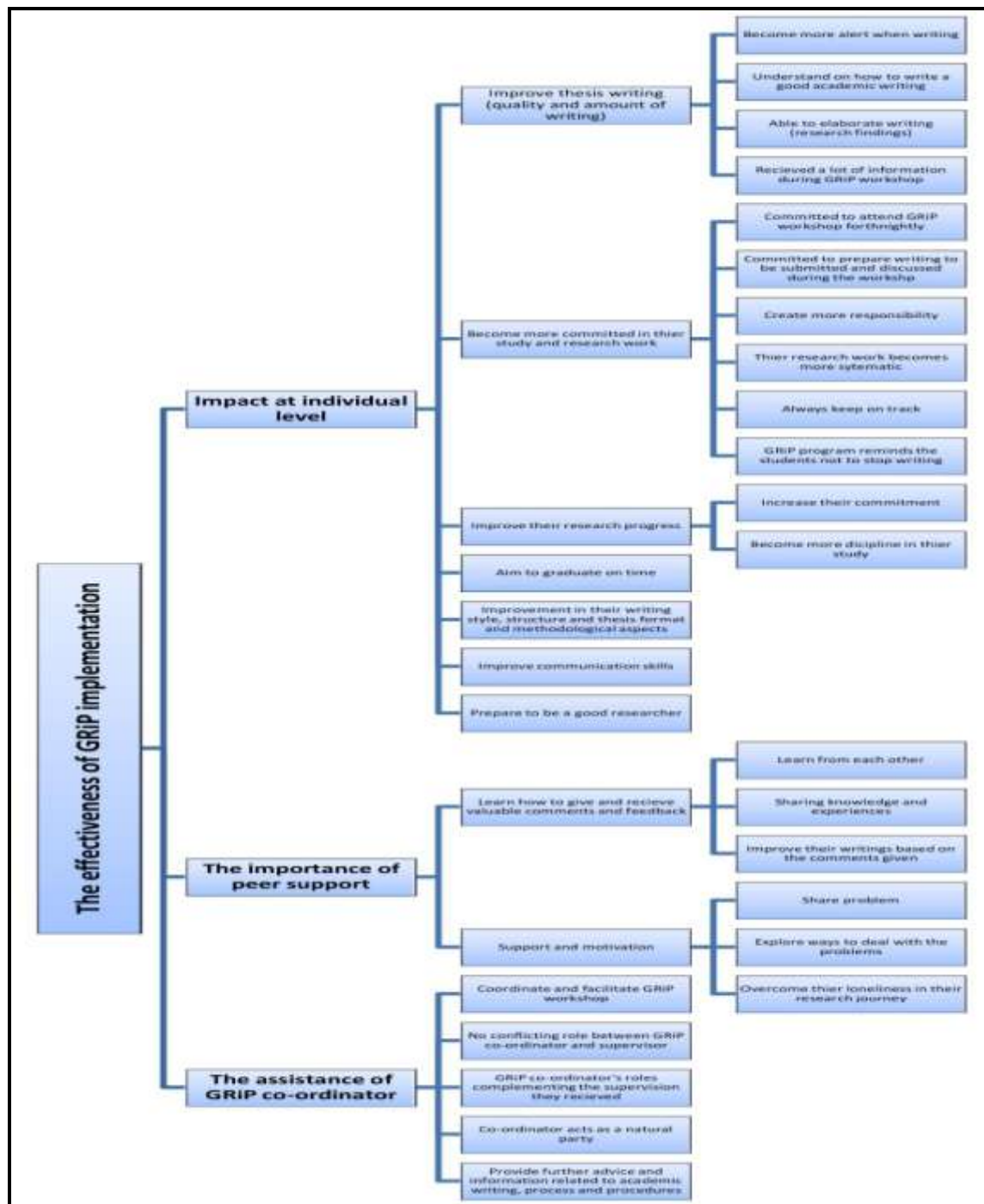
Diagram 1: The effectiveness of GRiP implementation among FSPPP's postgraduate
research students at three different levels

In terms of the impact of the GRiP program at the **"individual level"**, the findings of this study reveal that the participants have significantly improved their thesis writing (quality and amount of writing), they have become more committed in doing their thesis and research work, have improved in terms of their writing style, structure and format, have hastened their research progress, have envisioned themselves to graduate on time, have improved their communication skills and have prepared them to be a good researcher. The findings of this study have also prominently proven that **"peer support"** is circumstantial in enhancing the effectiveness of GRiP implementation. The participants stated that they received valuable comments and constructive feedback from their friends, learnt from each other (writing techniques and thesis format) through sharing knowledge and experiences, received support and motivation and most importantly they took the important comments seriously and improved their writing. Finally, the **"co-ordinator"** role was found very significant in facilitating the program and assisting the students in academic writing. The GRiP participants stated that there are no conflicting roles between GRiP co-ordinator and their supervisors, and further claimed that the GRiP co-ordinator's role actually complements the supervision they received. The coordinator acts as a natural party which provides further advice and information related to academic writing, process and procedures.

While the overall findings have proven the effectiveness of the GRiP program to support postgraduate research students in improving their academic writing, in particular, thesis writing, through friendly support from co-ordinator and peer group's feedback; this study further proposes a holistic framework of the GRiP ecosystem to further enhance research culture among students at FSPPP (see Diagram 2).
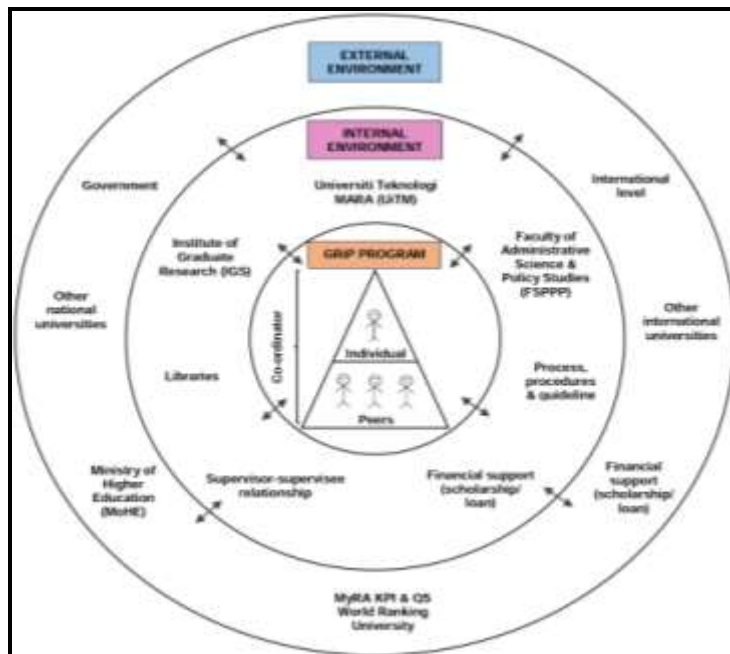
Diagram 2: GRiP ecosystem framework

GRiP ecosystem framework comprises three ecosystem levels:

i.   **Postgraduate research student and GRiP program level** – At this level, individual or postgraduate research student herself/himself has to play an important role in voluntarily participation in the GRiP program. If the student is not willing and not ready to improve his/her academic writing through this comprehensive program, he/she will not give full commitment in attending and participating in the workshop (submit his/her writing, read and comments other people's work). Peer support is very important in the GRiP workshop—the comments and feedback provided to other people's work are encouraged to be constructive. Peers share useful information, knowledge and experiences in doing their research work as well as measures in dealing with the process and procedures of the program. Peers provide support and motivate each other, thus making their study journey less lonely. The co-ordinator acts professionally and is considered as a natural party that facilitates discussions during the GRiP workshop. The co-ordinator provides further advice on academic writing, processes and procedures. There are high-interactive discussions during the GRiP workshop and the environment during the workshop is very open and flexible.

ii.   **Internal environment** – The internal environment covers the faculty and university levels. At the faculty level, ensuring effective postgraduate research supervision is the most crucial aspect. Both the student and supervisor have to play crucial roles in the supervision alongside supporting students' research work. Maintaining a good supervisor-supervisee relationship is a very important aspect in ensuring research completion and providing quality and sound research. The faculty processes, procedures and guidelines should be clearly informed to the students—the role of the Research Coordinator and Head of Program are very vital in advising the students about the right processes and procedures. This will expedite certain processes such as thesis examination, submission and others. Furthermore, the roles of graduate schools will assist in the provision of clearer processes and procedures to the students and faculty. Finally, universities have to carry out pertinent roles by providing support, facilities, enhance academic talents, providing financial support and many other amenities should be made available to the research students. The vision, mission and objectives of the University should be clear and the information about this should reach the faculty members as well as the students respectively.

iii.   **External environment** – External environment covers the Ministry of Higher Education, agencies that provide financial assistance such as MyBrain, JPA, PTPTN, *Pusat Zakat,* foundations, private scholarships, study loans from banking institutions and others. They play important roles in supporting postgraduate research students. Other external environment entities that indirectly influence postgraduate research students are other local and international universities, other government agencies, media, private and non-governmental sectors and society as a whole.

This study concludes that the GRiP program implemented for postgraduate research students at FSPPP is considered an effective and successful program to support and assist students in academic writing, improve research completion and GOT as well as produce quality and sound research. This program will be continuously implemented with the focus on two types of workshops: "thesis writing" and "writing for publication" with the aim to promote research culture among research students. Finally, to excel in research, all parties have important roles in assisting and supporting research students in their research journey—this can only be done through applying a holistic and comprehensive research ecosystem framework as proposed in this study.

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