Enhancing the graduate experience

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A new year ushers in new implementations for University of Malaya’s Institute of Graduate Studies. Their students have always been their focal point, and this year IGS has taken steps to ensure that the graduate student experience at UM will be lifted to the next level. Starting from the first welcoming ceremony to the end thesis submission, IGS strives to cater to the needs of the students while pushing them to distinguish themselves as academics rather than students merely completing a degree.

“We focus on our students, because they are our assets,” says Professor Datin Dr Norhanom Abdul Wahab, the Dean of University of Malaya’s IGS. “We try our best to make them comfortable from the moment they step on campus through their briefing sessions and when they are fully immersed into the graduate life.

“We value their feedback, as it allows us to identify areas where we can improve, and it shows that they are proactive members of the student body. For our research students, we provide research grants, financial support to attend conferences, and research skills training clinics.”

IGS’ role is as a central entity that deals with the administrative issues of postgraduate life, from enrolment and admission to graduation, while the academic side—teaching and supervision—are handled by the individual faculties. The IGS also advises the university senate on the governance of postgraduate programmes and acts as a custodian in terms of such matters as rules and regulations, and policies involving the postgraduate student community.

ACADEMIC FOCUS: UM has a long list of collaborations with international academic institutions. From medicine to engineering, with countries like Australia, France and the UK, UM hopes to provide their students the opportunity to enrich themselves via knowledge exchange or the opportunity for a student exchange.

“We now have five dual doctorate programmes,” reveals Professor Norhanom. “The latest are the collaborations with Ecole Polytechnique, France and National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan, with the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Medicine respectively.”

Taking into account market demand, IGS is happy to aid UM in rolling out new graduate programmes or calibrating old ones. This year UM will be graduating its first batch of doctoral students in public health, as well as a mixed-mode doctorate from the Faculty of Education.

“We regularly conduct a curriculum review for all the postgraduate programmes,” Professor Norhanom says. “We then do some updating, as some programmes are given a change in nomenclature to portray accurately the training received. For example, students of the master’s of pathology will receive a scroll upon completion with their sub specialisation mentioned, rather than a general pathology endorsement.”

Aside from their 12 faculties, UM has several institutes and centres that offer postgraduate programmes with a specific focus. The Asia-Europe Institute offers four master’s with an international basis, namely ASEAN studies, information management, regional integration, and small-and-medium enterprises, as well as a doctorate programme.

The Institute of Educational Leadership deals with programmes pertaining to the education sector, one of their offerings being a master’s in principalship, while the Institute of Public Policy & Management (INPUMA) presents a master’s in public policy. IGS itself has a master’s and a doctorate under it, both of which have an emphasis on multidisciplinary topics.

Aside from the institutes, UM also has two centres, one dealing in sports and the other in the arts and culture. While the former offers a doctorate, the latter has four master’s in dance, drama, music and visual arts, as well as a PhD.

STEPS TO INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY: Every postgraduate student has a supervisor, but UM has realised that there was tendency for a supervisor to take on too many students to be effective, and that sticking with the one supervisor—one student rule would not maximise on the existing talents and knowledge of the more experienced educators.

“We are changing the system so that the more experienced lecturers will be able to take on comparatively more students, while the less experienced will have two or three,” explains Professor Norhanom. “We wanted to make sure that those who took on a certain amount of students would be up to the task, as we want to give our students the very best. We are also carrying out training sessions for supervisors, to better acquaint them to handle students.”

IGS also conducts an Upskills programme, where postgraduate students are taught skills and given tips through a series of workshops presented by lecturers themselves. Some of the topics covered include how to get papers published in ISI journals, theoretical framework, data analysis, and how to avoid plagiarism in academic writing.

“We want our students to have an education on par with reputable universities abroad.” Professor Norhanom says. “We want them to graduate with a strong academic foundation and a good graduate experience that they can apply anywhere in the world.”