

# International Masters Students' Perception of the Research Skill Development Framework (O237)

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This qualitative research investigated international Master students' perspectives on the Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework. Success of this framework for research based learning and teaching at the postgraduate level is thought to have a close connection with students' perceptions of it. In order to know what these perceptions are, a series of in-depth-interviews were conducted with five international Masters Students in a School of Education. After the data was collected, it was analysed using a phenomenological approach. The results showed that those five overseas master students have relatively positive perception on the use of the RSD framework as a useful tool to understand research based learning and teaching in the Master program. However, there were numerous issues to be resolved before they found the framework to be informative, including multiple exposures and timeframe allocated to understanding.

*Keywords:* Research Skill Development, international Master Students' perceptions, research based learning, learning experiences.

## 1. Introduction

## 2.

Requiring coursework Masters Students to engage in research experiences is a strategy to motivate students to utilise richly the learning opportunities in their courses (Kiley & Cumming, 2015). Moreover, coursework Masters programs in Australia are now obliged to be compliant with the substantial research requirements of Australian Qualifications Framework Level 9 (AQF, n.d.). However, an explicit requirement for research in coursework Masters is of particular concern to international students, many of whom have completed undergraduate degrees in their homeland and whose research experiences are negligible (e.g. Om, 2011). Likewise academics and tutors who facilitate courses at Masters level are concerned about how they may enable effectively this research engagement with large numbers of domestic and international students: if Masters students commence with a low interest in research, or poorly developed research skills, there exists the possibility of students either failing or being overloaded with work in an attempt to understand research and attain the research practice required by AQF Level 9.

An existing conceptual framework that has been used extensively with undergraduate students is currently being piloted to determine its effectiveness in helping educators of international Masters Students to deepen students' research-oriented learning experience, the Research Skill Development (RSD) framework (Willison & O'Regan, 2006/2013; 2007). Use of the RSD has been evaluated in the undergraduate context in a large-scale study (Willison, 2012) and in Research Higher Degrees (Velautham & Picard, 2009). However, the RSD is not well evaluated in coursework Masters, with only a few small studies showing some potential of the framework for this level of study (Venning & Buisman-Pijlman, 2013; Willison, Schapper & Teo, 2009). To this end, there is a need to ensure that the framework is effective for promoting Masters student learning in research mode, especially with international students.

## Research Context

This paper reports a study of the experiences of five international students' experiences of the RSD framework in a coursework Masters program conducted by a School of Education in an Australian research-intensive university. The inclusion criteria for invitation to be interviewed was international students who had previously been exposed to the RSD in an introductory session, in several subsequent courses and in one course that focused on research-based teaching and curriculum design, called *Research Based Learning and Teaching*.

## Method

Masters students who studied in *Research Based Learning and Teaching* were invited to attend a semi-structured interview which was voice-recorded, transcribed and de-identified. The research addressed the following question:

What is international Masters students' perception of the RSD framework as experienced in the course *Research Based Learning and Teaching*?

A phenomenological approach was employed to address the main research question about participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2012). This approach emphasizes the essentials of different individual's perspectives, negotiation and understanding and is a powerful approach for gaining information from participants (Fossey et. al., 2002).

## Results

Five international master students voluntarily participated and were interviewed in keeping with the protocol approved by the university's ethics committee. The participants were interviewed four months after completing the *Research Based Learning and Teaching* course and were from one of two Asian countries, with all interviewed having a mother tongue other than English.

All five students indicated that their first exposure to the RSD was daunting, with one student stating: *"...at the beginning it was very confused...others were also confused too...They said that we are in the same boat...we are the same feeling..." (Participant 3).*

Nevertheless, despite these understanding difficulties, all five students also found in the early encounter that the RSD addressed something worth knowing more about:

*"... [I] did not know about RSD framework at first time but [I] keep trying to understand it ..."* (Participant 3)

Each participant's current perspective of the RSD was an expectation that the framework would be valuable on return to their homeland, including for teaching:

*Strong eagerness...to implement in assignments...dealing with teaching phonology (Participant 1).*

For curriculum evaluation:

*"... the RSD gives me an idea to evaluate the curriculum implementation in my university. It will also give me information about research components, which of the research facets that the curriculum highlight... because different academic works will be different research skills. That's what I predict..."* (Participant 3).

And for guiding their colleagues' research:

*...this framework is very good in the future with giving real specification on understanding to each facets... it would be good for others in term of the development in approaching research (Participant 4).*

However, in keeping with the initial problems of understanding the RSD, those interviewed suggested ways to make the framework more international student-friendly, with several recommending more frequent exposure to and use of the RSD:

*[O]ther course lecturers need to apply the RSD in School of Education too... (Participant 2).*

*I need a lots of special practices to understand RSD framework..." (Participant 5)*

### **Implications:**

This research illustrates that the international students interviewed perceived that the RSD was a useful research-based learning framework for coursework Masters. As an early pilot of research into RSD use in Masters programs, this study is suggestive of possibilities, where the following implications for these five students may be relevant to other international post graduate students in Education and in other disciplines:

- extra support may frequently be required in early exposure to the RSD framework for new international postgraduate students
- the RSD framework can be a useful mechanism for communicating research-based learning approaches to international students
- repeated exposure of the RSD framework as a conceptual research framework in different contexts may improve student understanding at postgraduate level
- when Masters graduates return to home countries as teachers, lecturers and other trainers they may be able to use the RSD to guide their teaching, learning, evaluation and research.

These findings may have broader applicability in systems that have substantial research requirements for students relatively new to the system, such as international students in coursework Masters. Larger-scale research on this issue is warranted at Masters level by this pilot, especially given the applicability of the RSD broadly in undergraduate studies.

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