

Returning to Graduation Project: Attitudes and Perceived Challenges of Students and Staff at a Libyan EFL Department

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Abstract

In 1997, the Department of English (Faculty of Languages, University of Tripoli) canceled Graduation Project (GP) as a graduation requirement primarily due to growing student plagiarism. Two decades on, the Department decided it is time for Returning to Graduation Project (RGP). In preparation for this, a Research Methods (RM) module was delivered to students, and an intense 'research design and methodology' course was taken by the staff. In this exploratory mixed-methods case-study research, the main question focuses on attitudes and perceived challenges facing students and staff concerning RGP. The aim is to tackle negative attitudes and perceived obstacles in anticipation of a successful RGP, which spells out the significance of the research. Data were collected through a questionnaire (n=52) and a focus group discussion with seventh-semester students (10); semi-structured interviews with staff (13). A small majority of students (54%) supported RGP; the remaining 46% raised two kinds of concerns: realistic challenges of lacking resources, inadequate RM skills, and supervisor issues; unrealistic challenges involved time constraints, fear of presenting, and problems of determining research topics. Staff members were receptive to RGP but raised numerous concerns. Whereas experienced members expressed cynicism due to low students competencies and lacking resources, others saw RGP as an opportunity for students to gain practical research experience ahead of postgraduate study. Several challenges were perceived, chief among them are students lack of research skills, inexperienced supervisors, inadequate resources, and an ever-lasting concern with plagiarism. New staff reported the need for tuition in 'data analysis and interpretation', and 'supervision practice'. Peculiarities characteristic of the case milieu emerged.

Keywords: Challenges to research, EFL students and staff at a Libyan department, graduation project, research methods, research supervision

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Introduction

In the final semester/year of university study, undergraduate students are obliged to undertake a research project to demonstrate writing skills and independence as researchers (MacKeogh, 2006). As a result, students acquire useful research skills such as identifying researchable topics, problem-solving, critical thinking, analytical and statistical skills (MacKeogh, 2006). However, undertaking a Graduation Project (GP) is undoubtedly one of the most challenging tasks for students before graduation. This is particularly true for non-native EFL students who often struggle not only with research skills but also with Academic Writing (AW). As Abu-Rass (2015) points out, Arab students writing continues to lack supporting details and reasoning, as well as the misuse of cohesive words. Problems in Research Writing (RW) are much more prominent. Qasem and Zaied (2019) revealed that, in addition to lacking interest in doing research, Saudi students faced difficulties in determining research topics, lacked good knowledge of methodology, and were incapable of locating useful references.

The present study carried out on Libyan EFL undergraduates seeks to identify attitudes and perceived challenges by both staff and students as Returnees to Graduation Project (RGP); 'R' in RGP stands for either 'returning' or 'returnees' depending on syntax. The autumn 2018 seventh-semester cohort totalling 127 students (122 females; 5 males) along with Department staff at the time (51) comprised the research sample, for these students and staff members were faced with the prospect of RGP for the first time in over two decades following a period of suspension since 1997.

According to interviewed staff-members who witnessed the cancellation (four males), two reasons were given. First, the considerably high number of students compared with available supervisors; the second more decisive reason was serious plagiarism and the consistent replication of previous GPs; effectively amounting to fraud or cheating.

During the withdrawal of GP as a graduation requirement, students were not instructed in RM or RW, nor did staff receive any research training. In preparation for RGP, two provisional measures were taken. A staff development course on 'research methodology' covering research design, sampling, methodology issues, data analysis, and research ethics was organised. A Research Methods (RM) module was taught to students. Planning for RGP under such uncertainties entails having a sound awareness of prevailing attitudes and perceived challenges by students and staff so that precautionary measures could be taken beforehand e.g., addressing negative attitudes and what action is needed to tackle those challenges.

In view of the above research statement, the case-study seeks to provide answers to three questions as follows:

What are the students' attitudes and the perceived challenges concerning RGP?

What are the attitudes and perceived challenges by staff members concerning RGP?

What can precautionary measures be taken by the Department to prepare students and staff to address negative attitudes and perceived challenges (in one and two above) before RGP?

A conceptual framework

Significance of Graduation Project

A research project for undergraduate students assesses the extent to which they have comprehended their field of study; it helps students to broaden their horizons in learning as they

read deeply about their chosen topic. Moreover, doing a graduation project provides students with useful hands-on experience in data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and in writing up their work. Todd, Bannister, and Clegg (2004) summarise the features of undergraduate research; they include the choice of topic, independent learning, proposal preparation, data collection, data analysis, research ethics, and writing up findings. Hussey and Hussey (1997) emphasize that an undergraduate research project is valuable for students' future career as it develops problem-solving skills, and trains students to be active learners, independent researchers capable of applying academic knowledge into their chosen field.

Students problems

Although RW is primarily associated with AW, particular problems usually occur in the writing process. One of the main issues encountered by Libyan students is the inability to paraphrase correctly and tend to plagiarize, often without proper citation (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017). Taskeen, Shehzadi, Khan, and Saleem (2014) understandably attribute students' plagiarisation to supervisor inexperience to detecting plagiarised work and, as a result, students get away with it. Another explanation by Taskeen et al. (2014) is that students are untrained in RW and/or insufficiently exposed to research output, which gives them little confidence in their ability to undertake research. Other obstacles reported by Alshehry (2014) are time limitations, lack of library resources, appropriate journal references, difficulties in choosing suitable topics, and poor Internet access.

Supervisor problems

One of the main issues in GP is the quality of supervision. According to Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), supervisors can be one of the biggest problems Libyan students encounter during RW. When students start GP, they usually hesitate in choosing a supervisor; during the project, they may decide to change supervisors for different reasons. In other cases, supervisors are uncooperative particularly when students are not active enough, lack motivation or if the topic does not interest the supervisor.

A study by Simuforosa, Veronica, and Rosemary (2015) revealed that problems are not restricted to students' research skills or proficiency levels; supervisors' inadequate research skills and experience, uncooperativeness, and negative comments on students work are also influential factors. The researchers report that supervisors impact student output and the supervision process as a whole. Students reported fluctuation in supervisors' feedback; they sometimes pressurize students to change the topic instead of modifying it, which can be devastating for students. Such supervisor behaviour could be attributed to inadequate research skills, or insufficient knowledge on a chosen topic.

The lack of regular contact with supervisors is another hindrance; some supervisors are said to behave irresponsibly by not following students step by step because of other responsibilities (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017; (Chabaya, Chiome & Chabaya), 2009. Consequently, students end up doing most of the work unaided, which will, more often than not, result in inferior research projects (Alsied & Ibrahim, 2017).

Supervisor relationship

The relationship between student and supervisor is crucial for the supervision process and its final output. Simuforosa, Veronica, and Rosemary (2015) report that students gave negative

comments about supervisor relationships; some reported authoritarian treatment by their supervisor; further, students found difficulties arranging meetings with supervisors due to commitments. Such conduct inevitably results in a poor student-supervisor relationship and is likely to delay or hinder project completion.

Mahammuda (2016) noted that the quality of supervision played a vital role in students' work; when supervisors show neither punctuality nor adherence, students often resort to plagiarism to compensate for such inadequacy, which harms both students and supervisor. On the other hand, Simuforosa et al. (2015) report supervisor dissatisfaction with students' performance as they lacked commitment and progression, which resulted in poor projects. Students' indifference was also a contributing factor to the success or failure of research projects. Students emphasized that regular contact with supervisors is supportive and reassuring. Detailed supervisor-feedback on writing, especially grammar, was appreciated by students; however, instead of relying on supervisors, some students considered reading around their problem broadens their horizons and helps them understand more about their topic (Kuo & Chiu, 2009).

Previous studies

Only three relevant studies were found in the literature regarding problems or obstacles in conducting GP/ RW with reference to the narrow Libyan context: Alsied and Ibrahim (2017), Elmabruk (2019) and Elmojahed (2010). Four other studies in the broader context are reported.

Alsied and Ibrahim (2017) explored RW difficulties by Libyan EFL undergraduate students at Sebha University. The aim was to determine the lecturer perceptions of students writing. The researchers conducted a questionnaire with 42 students and interviewed four teachers. The results revealed several barriers in RW, including choice of topic, formulating research problems, collecting and analyzing data, writing literature reviews, methodology, results, and discussion sections. Furthermore, the teachers' perception of students' work was negative. This was attributed to the students' poor background in RW, shortage of facilities e.g., Internet access and library resources and, most importantly, students' unwillingness to work hard and achieve success. Such problems resulted in projects below required standards.

Elmabruk (2019) explored the impact of utilizing cooperative group learning (CGL) with a complementary approach in teaching RM at the Faculty of Education Tripoli (Libya). Students were instructed in concepts of methodology and gradually applied them into a research proposal (RP) ready for transformation into GP upon supervisor approval, thus saving time and effort the following semester. Three instruments were used: classroom observation of CGL activities, analyses of RPs and the problems therein, and focus group discussions with students regarding their learning experiences, and the difficulties faced. The results revealed considerable challenges pertinent to CGL dynamics. Difficulties in RP spanned a wide range of issues, including weakness in research writing, accuracy, determining a researchable focus, formulating research problems, generating research questions, coherent literature review, and selecting appropriate data collection tools. Serious concerns involved plagiarism and fraudulent activity by reproducing previous GPs.

Elmojahed (2010) investigated the hypothesis that research projects by Libyan university students rarely fulfil the required standards of empirical research. He analyzed samples of completed research projects from different EFL Departments, held semi-structured interviews with teachers, and conducted a student questionnaire. The results reveal students negligence of proper

citation and referencing, which constitute an act of plagiarism. The results also show that students do not adhere to primary stages of empirical research, or proofread their finished work.

Bandele and Adebule (2013) examined the attitudes of students towards carrying out research projects in Ekiti State University, India. Three hundred and sixty students from the faculty of education, arts, and social sciences participated in a questionnaire. The findings showed that most students had adverse attitudes towards research projects regardless of gender and the type of faculty; they felt they had to do it because it was compulsory. Anxiety, fear, and boredom were the most common negative responses among students who agreed that concepts of research were hard to understand. Inappropriate research environments and time limitations caused negative attitudes.

Mahammuda (2016) conducted a study at the University of Bahir Dar in Ethiopia to determine difficulties facing undergraduate students with their teachers during supervision. Four factors influenced the quality of research: educational, psychological, social/personal, and institutional. Academic factors include students' poor analytical skills, critical thinking, language skills, and unwillingness to complete the research. A lack of motivation and confidence also had an impact on students' psychological state. Regarding social and personal factors, students could not organize time effectively; they had little contact with supervisors; unwillingness to cooperate by participants to implement research instruments. Concerning institutional factors, a shortage of updated textbooks and library resources greatly influenced research quality.

Dwihandini, Marhaeni, and Suarnajaya (2013) researched factors influencing students' research projects at Mahasaraswati University, Indonesia. Three factors appeared to have a remarkable impact: psychological, socio-cultural, and linguistic factors. Results revealed difficulties in linking sentences resulting in disunity and incoherence; challenges in choosing appropriate vocabulary and structure were encountered. The researchers noted that the abovementioned factors are associated with socio-cultural components. The linguistic factors involved challenges in accomplishing good RW with minimal grammar errors. Psychological factors included students' incompetence, indecisiveness in selecting a project title, and lack of confidence regarding knowledge and experience in writing a thesis.

Kuo and Chiu (2009) studied the factors influencing the performance of Taiwanese undergraduates in writing research projects. The researchers focused on students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in writing research. The purpose was also to discover students' strategies in dealing with challenges and the kind of support needed during the writing process. The results regarding perception were both positive and negative. Students described research work as tricky and challenging since they had poor backgrounds and lacked critical thinking skills. While some students considered writing a project 'exhausting', 'tiring', and 'time-consuming', others described it as interesting, thoughtful, and useful.

Synthesis; entity-related classification

In light of the above review of the relevant literature, certain deductions are made. Undoubtedly, GP is of highly significant importance to students' academic and professional growth, and no one can argue otherwise. However, the accomplishment of GP is often associated with quite a few challenges. Some studies have associated these challenges with relevant factors such as academic/linguistic, institutional, psychological, social, or personal. However, other

studies have attributed these hindrances to the entities concerned i.e., students, supervisors, or institutions. Therefore, a classification of challenges according to an entity-related approach clarifies who or what entity can be held responsible for remedial change or corrective action. The following is a list of problems drawn from the reviewed literature organized under what has been termed 'entity-related classification':

1. Student-related issues (willingness, attitude, anxiety, time management, research skills, AW, RW, RM, critical thinking, linguistic competence, referencing, choosing supervisors, supervisor relationship, problem-solving, proofreading);

Supervisor-related issues (research experience, constructive feedback, availability, cooperativeness, regular contact, punctuality, authoritarianism);

Institution-related issues (library resources, Internet access, updated textbooks).

However, it is not uncommon to encounter challenges that can be attributed to more than one entity. Research writing, for example, is institution-related and student-related since an institution has to teach it but, at the same time, the students, too, are responsible for comprehending underlying concepts and implementing them in practice.

The present case-study explores attitudes and perceived challenges to RGP following two decades of abandonment. To clarify who has responsibility to combat those obstacles, the study has adopted the entity-related approach, so the onus is squarely placed on, or combination of, student, supervisor, or institution (Faculty or Department).

Methodology

In exploring the attitudes and perceived challenges by students and staff ahead of RGP, the researchers pursued a mixed-method design in which a combination of quantitative and qualitative data was collected. The data-collection instruments were:

Students questionnaire: The questionnaire comprised a mixture of multiple-choice and open-ended questions (Appendix), which sought students attitudes and perceptions regarding RGP and the obstacles anticipated. The survey was administered online through SurveyGizmo to seventh-semester students (127), who comprised the research sample. 52 (study sample) returned the questionnaires, yielding a moderate return rate of 41%.

Focus group discussion: Ten socially active students (nine females and one male) out of the study sample were invited to volunteer in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Due to the higher proportion of females enrolled at the Department, such gender ratio was not unusual. The central theme for discussion was students' attitudes to and perceptions of RGP.

Staff semi-structured interviews: 13 members of staff agreed to participate in the semi-structured interviews. With their consent, the meetings were audio-recorded and later transcribed. At the time of interviewing, 51 staff members were officially available, but some were dispatched to other faculties while others were unreachable due to conflicting timetables. To widen the scope of interview data, three categories of staff were purposefully targeted: 1) experienced members who had witnessed the 1997 cessation (four males); 2) experienced members who did not observe the termination, but with previous experience (four males and two females); 3) Inexperienced members without prior supervision experience (five females).

Results and discussion

Questionnaire

The questionnaire sought to determine students' attitudes regarding RGP and the perceived challenges that could confront them. Concerns with the RM module as a preparatory measure and the kind of support facilities required are also included. Responses to the open-ended questions have been incorporated in the discussion.

Attitudes to RGP

As Figure one demonstrates, 10% of the students strongly agree to RGP; 44% agree; 21% completely disagree; 25% disagree. In short, overall attitudes are reasonably positive since a student majority, though small at 54%, welcomed RGP compared to 46%. Following two decades of discontinuation, this result is an encouraging sign for RGP.

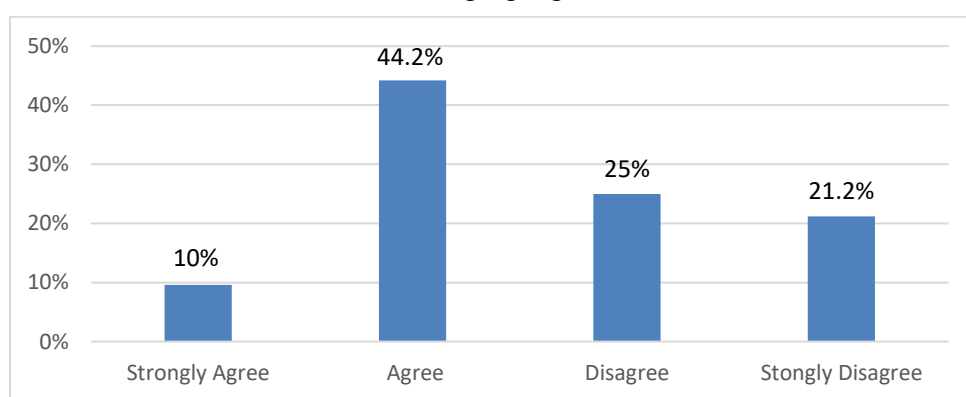


Figure 1. Students attitudes to RGP

Those students who supported RGP were very excited. According to the students, the GP experience will not only equip them with independent research, but will also inspire them with a sense of achievement; the opportunity to add their 'personal touch' marking the conclusion of an academic.

Priority skills

The students expressed the need to develop specific priority skills in preparation for GP. The students perceived such skill shortages (Table one) as shortcomings or challenges they needed to overcome before RGP.

Table 1. Skill shortages

Skill	Frequency	%	Cum. %
Research methods	33	26.6	26.6
Referencing and citation	21	16.9	43.5
Planning and organization	21	16.9	60.4
Critical thinking	19	15.3	75.7
Research writing	17	13.7	89.4
IT Skills	09	07.3	96.7
Grammar	04	03.3	100
Total	124	100	

Research methods

Over one fifth (26.6%) of the students thought research methods were the highest priority for them to develop. This was somewhat unexpected since they had recently covered RM as preparation for RGP. Justification for such concern was that they had not fully grasped how to apply concepts of RM, or how to select appropriate methods to match particular research purposes.

Referencing and citation

16.9% of the students considered themselves weak in referencing and citation skills. Again, this can be attributed to inadequate preparation in the RM module. It also implies that tutors in other modules do not stress the importance of referencing in assignments, if at all a requirement.

Planning and organization

16.9% of the students were concerned with planning and organization skills, which is mostly about time management. They explained that they would be preoccupied with other modules and that GP would put them under extra pressure.

Critical thinking

15.3% of the students thought they required assistance with critical thinking. The need to enhance this skill was not unexpected, for Libyan students in typically traditional teacher-centred conditions are not usually encouraged to criticize or question what they are taught. They rightly considered criticality as relevant in reviewing the literature of their research.

Research writing

13.7% believed they had a weakness in RW, which would cause difficulties for them in writing up their project. As the students explained, this is because the writing courses they had taken have not prepared them well enough for RW.

IT Skills

7.3% of the students felt a weakness in IT skills e.g., the effective use of search engines and using Microsoft Office programs. What they needed most was to identify useful references quickly. For novice researchers, massive search results, as is the case, can be fairly overwhelming.

Grammar

Only 3.3% thought they needed to improve their grammar to write up error-free projects. In reality, it is believed that a more significant percentage of students struggle with grammar. A plausible rationale for such a low proportion is that students are not fully conscious of their grammar errors and thus assume their writing is acceptable.

Effectiveness of Research Methodology

To prepare the students for GP, they had to take RM. As part of the assessment, students had to write a short paper, or a mini-project, as the RM tutor called it. Table 2 shows students' responses regarding the effectiveness of RM in preparation for RGP.

Table 2. *How useful was Research Methodology?*

Response	Frequency	%	Cum. %
Very useful and informative	7	13.5	13.5
Useful but did not cover everything	15	28.8	42.3
Useful but not interesting	14	27	69.3
Not useful and no new knowledge gained	8	15.4	84.7

Not useful and difficult to understand	5	09.6	94.3
Others	3	05.7	100
Total	52	100	

As Table two shows, a small proportion of the students (13.5%) felt RM was beneficial. This low percentage is not an encouraging sign and appears to explain why students thought they needed to improve skills in research methods (Table one).

Almost a third (28.8%) of the students thought RM was useful but did not cover everything they needed to know in preparation for RGP. Another 27% considered the module uninteresting though useful.

At the other extreme, 15.4% of the students found the module ‘not very useful’ and did not provide them with new knowledge. Some students added that they struggled to understand RM.

A further 9.6% found the module unuseful and challenging to understand. 5.7% had other thoughts but did not offer any justification. It appears (through discussions with students) that those respondents had personal issues with the RM tutor and did not wish to give further details.

Problems with Research Methodology

A range of problems was raised by the case-students concerning the RM module:

Internet access

Some students had no private access to the Internet, while others found it challenging to search for specific sources related to their topic.

Limited topics

Other students complained that the lecturer had restricted topic choice for the mini-project. One student echoed that the lecturer was not very flexible with topics and, as a result, most students were uncomfortable throughout the course.

Data collection

Even those who found good topics encountered problems with methodology. One respondent said she did not know whether qualitative or quantitative data was appropriate, as she did not see the difference between the two.

Dual-task

Task duality was another issue to worry about for the students. They felt that the task of understanding important methodological concepts at the same time as doing a mini-project, in which they have to apply such concepts, was problematic.

Course material

The students remarked the course material was weak and carelessly planned; it lacked details on project structure and how to write coherently. Further, they were not shown samples of completed projects as model examples to emulate.

Lecturer personality

Several students disliked the lecturer personality and complained they felt quite confused because she continuously changed her mind. For example, she would ask students to do a specific task, and then, in the next lecture, would change her mind and ask for a different task. Another

student complained that the lecturer had *conflicting opinions* in that *she may like some work today, but dislikes the same work next day.*

Support facilities required

The support facilities the students required in preparation for RGP are shown in Figure two:

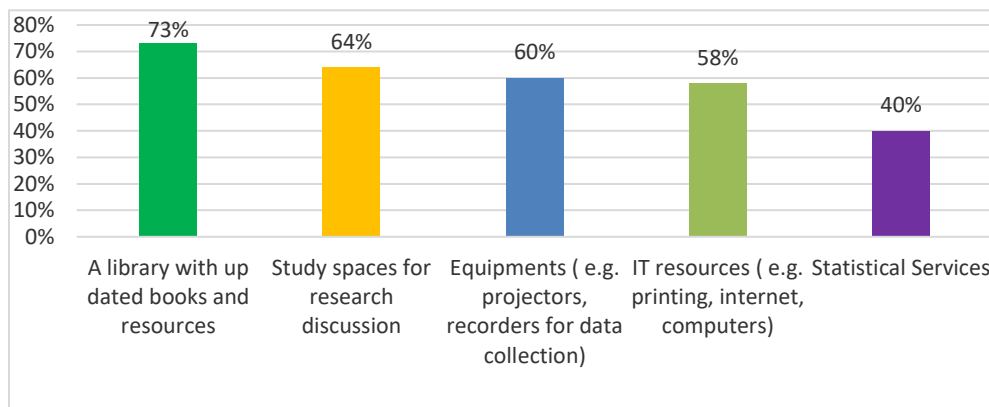


Figure two. Support facilities required by students

Equipped library

The majority of students (73%) believed that an equipped library with updated resources was the most essential requirement in doing GPs, which is not surprising since neither Faculty nor Department has an updated library of English textbooks for students or staff. University Campus B, in which the Faculty is located, has a general library with a dated collection of English textbooks.

Study areas

A good majority of students (64%) thought that dedicated study spaces are vital, especially when working in groups. At present, students walk around looking for vacant lecture rooms to work in or have to put up with crowded spaces. *There should be special quite areas dedicated for us to work in,* one student remarked.

IT resources

A considerable proportion of students indicated that equipment and IT resources (60% and 58% respectively) should be available. The students stressed the need for projectors to prepare presentations, as lecture rooms are not fitted with these and that, at present, the Department has only one projector reserved for staff.

Statistics help

40% of the students stressed that help with statistical data analysis was needed. They commented that they were familiar with Excel, but not with SPSS, which reveals that students were not instructed in data analysis or SPSS during RM.

overall, several skill shortages were perceived by the students as challenges to RGP though at varying degrees of priority; the highest being research methods (26.6%) followed by referencing and citation (16.9%), planning and organization or time management (also 16.9%), critical

thinking (15.3%), RW (13.7%), and IT skills (7.3%). Such perceived weaknesses are, in fact, subdivisions of research skills, the treatment of which is typically addressed through a well-structured RM module. The issue of grammar difficulties, which was raised by relatively fewer students (3.3%), can be dealt with by reviewing the grammar curriculum and delivery.

The RM course was supposed to prepare students for GP. However, as the tutor admitted (to the students), the course was ready at short notice. As a result, 25% of the students were dissatisfied and thought it was not useful. Those who considered it useful saw it as either uninteresting or insufficient. Not only that, but the students also had difficulties in understanding and applying RM concepts, choosing topics for the required mini-projects, collecting data, and accessing the Internet, all of which were perceived challenges to undertaking GP since the mini-project serves an identical outcome.

To resolve those difficulties and perceived challenges faced during RM, the students expressed the need for several support facilities. These entailed a properly equipped library (73%), study space (64%), assistive equipment (60%), IT resources (58%), and help with statistics (40%).

Focus Group Discussion

Students in the FGD deliberated various issues pertaining to RGP. The objective was to gain insight into their attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding GP. Their state of preparedness and the degree to which the RM course was helpful was also discussed. Extractions from FGD (italicized) are reported verbatim. The following themes emerged:

Theme 1: Students attitude

Supporting RGP

Eight out of ten FGD students supported RGP and welcomed the idea after a long period of cessation. They noted that every student would have *something special to contribute* to celebrate the end of an undergraduate journey, for each GP constitutes a unique achievement and renders a student's scholastic plight fruitful.

FGD students looked forward to RGP and to gain new experiences in project writing. They asserted that *writing a project is a useful, beneficial and an important experience*; they considered it *a chance to apply our academic abilities and knowledge and gain new skills*. One student underlined the significance of GP: *real graduation should include a graduation project*. Other FGD students echoed this perception: *the absence of GP in our Department underestimates students' achievements and their specialization*; RGP was hence welcomed as an opportunity to *prove them wrong and leave the university with a great achievement*.

One passionate student added:

I agree on the idea of reintroducing graduation project because it provides the opportunity to present actual achievements by the students and promote the learning skills within them. I personally view it as an overall outcome from the entire academic experience. Graduation projects could also help students discover their exact tendency and passion within this field and may possibly guide their future career.

RGP concerns

The students opposed to RGP had causes for concern. One dreaded the idea of having to present her project as she felt shy to speak publicly: *I will highly agree with the decision if it was based on writing a research only and not involve oral presentation.*

Another added that she was not ready because *we still do not have sufficient knowledge to enable us to write an academic project.* They explained that *although we studied research methodology, the knowledge we got was not enough.*

One student complained about ineffective preparation for RW at the Department. In four levels of Composition and two Creative Writing modules, teachers almost repeated the same material, an observation which was shared by other FGD students:

We took Composition 1-2-3-4; we took Creative Writing 1-2. None of them at all mentioned anything about how to write a formal academic research or the methods used of writing it. These classes got wasted on repeating the same topics...fiction; imagine this, imagine that, but we don't have any experience or clue on all the methods and details of research writing. We can't just dive in writing something that big, with so little time spent practising on it.

Themes 2: Attitudes towards RM

In studying RM, the students said they expected to learn how to write a project not to do one, be it a mini-project, at the same time as understanding RM. For them, that was disappointing and more confusing.

Regarding the RM syllabus, most students said it was inappropriate and lacked explanatory detail; it listed concepts of RW without explaining how to apply them to GP. Participants reported that the lecturer said that she was asked to teach RM on terse notice and, accordingly, time was insufficient to prepare the course thoroughly.

Students criticized the tutor's constant change of opinion, which also surfaced in the questionnaire (Q6). A student reported difficulty understanding what the tutor wanted; *she asks students to do a certain task then changes her mind.*

Another confrontational issue was topic-selection for the mini-project; the tutor wanted students' to choose social rather than language-related topics. For example, the tutor asked students write about why Libyans with university degrees refuse manual jobs. The students thought such topic was unusual as they are not studying English for social science; instead, they should be researching issues in linguistics or applied linguistics in preparation for GP.

Given the hastily prepared RM module and the ensuing discontent, students expressed worries about completing GP in time (one semester); particularly with the lack of Department support facilities and library resources.

Theme 3: Concerns about supervision

Another perceived challenge was supervisors' unfamiliarity with chosen topics and/or methodology issues, in which case the supervisor would be unsupportive. Hence, students stressed having supervisors whose areas of specialism are as close as possible to their chosen topics. Students also emphasized that a good supervisor should be accommodating, flexible, and allows students to express their views instead of imposing his/her own.

To sum up, two kinds of challenges emerged from the students FGD; those of acceptable and realistic nature, and those that seem unrealistic, at least in the eyes of the researchers, by sceptic students. Realistically-perceived challenges were library support services, IT resources, tuition in data analyses, and work areas. Perceived fears of unrealistic nature included having to make oral presentations, the pressure of time, and determining research foci, all of which appear unconvincing and could quickly be resolved through a conscientious change in attitude.

Staff interviews

The staff semi-structured interviews involved their attitudes to and perceptions of RGP, the barriers expected, and whether staff were prepared to undertake GP supervision. With prior consent, data were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Attitudes to RGP

All staff members interviewed (13) apart from one welcomed RGP. They pointed out that doing research will help the students, especially those who aim to pursue postgraduate studies, and will motivate them to search and read about their chosen topic:

Students have been studying at the university for eight semesters, so this is the time when they should write projects, reflect on what they have been learning during their university studies and focus their knowledge on a particular area of research.

Another staff member confirmed that

it's a very good decision to reintroduce it (GP). And it gives students a lot of training which they might need in later stages in their lives. So they will not be surprised when they get into MA. And, actually, they should do research. We want them to change their ways of just rote learning.

Competency levels

Although the interviewed staff members (13) supported RGP at a ratio of 12:1, they had a few reservations. They stressed that students competency levels should be considered before RGP; *Students need preparation in research writing as most are not skilful in simple essay writing.*

An experienced staff member was outraged; he argued that *doing graduation project is a waste of time and most students are unable to do it.* He attributed this to poor language skills. He gave examples of fatal mistakes committed by students in the seventh semester, such as misspelling 'does' and not knowing irregular past-tense verbs like 'understand'. The lecturer strongly suggested a compulsory remedial course before RGP.

Another interviewee argued for a graded approach in preparation for RGP:

My objection is on the way of introducing it (GP). It shouldn't be at once; I mean teaching or reintroducing project subject should be graded, so for instance in the fourth semester, we should introduce the students to what we mean by project, aims....etc, next stage maybe familiarizing students with the way of writing academic things as if you are reintroducing them into research methods and this takes time. When the students get familiar with all the stuff, we can ask them to write a project.

Lack of resources

Interviewees agreed that a well-equipped library with updated resources is an urgent requirement. A well-equipped library with online access, working space, and computers are basic facilities students need. An interviewee stated that such lack of resources will limit students' creativity and will affect the quality of their work.

Confidence to supervise

Staff members stressed that preparing supervisors before RGP is critical to ensure they are confident about the task. *The Department must train staff members who are expected to supervise projects, especially the newly recruited ones; RGP is good as long as supervisors are aware of their roles and responsibilities.*

Four new staff members expressed willingness to supervise but needed updating on data collection instruments and analyses. Two of them suggested giving training workshops for inexperienced staff to prepare them for supervision.

Three new staff members were unwilling to supervise projects and confessed they were not confident to take up supervision. One member added that, with a full teaching load, quality supervision is difficult.

One new member of staff was not too confident to begin supervising projects, for she saw the task as *challenging*. In a redress, she remarked that *consulting experienced colleagues would help*; a positive attitude towards collaborative development.

Supervisor skills

Most interviewees were anxious about the criteria for qualified supervisors. They noted that *some supervisors do not update themselves and will not know if students reproduce previous projects, nor if proposed topics are viable or practical*. It is the latter point. Because of that, it was stated that some staff members are not eligible for supervision. *The wrong selection of supervisors may eventually lead to unsuccessful projects and failure of students.*

GP assessment

An interviewee commented on supervisors' role in GP assessment. He noted that assessment is a significant concern, especially with the presence of nepotism. Staff stressed that students should not be assessed on written work alone, but also on presenting their projects orally where *they demonstrate an understanding of their work and respond to panel questions*. An experienced member added that assessment criteria must be set by the Department and that *coordination among supervisors is very important, by following agreed assessment procedures.*

Plagiarism

Interviewed staff members shared concerns with the endless problem of plagiarism. An interviewee warned that, through the Internet, students nowadays have easy access to all kinds of information. Thus, supervisors must be alert and check students work more carefully. *Students can easily copy and paste material from the Internet without being detected due to absence of plagiarism detection software*. Another staff member commented that for GPs to be successful, *supervisors must take their work seriously*. It was observed that *as students plagiarize from the Internet, some supervisors just pass them instead of advising them to paraphrase.*

Staff observed that students could still reproduce previously submitted projects as they did in the past. Moreover, supervisors would not necessarily notice such fraudulent activity due to the absence of a database for GPs. Two staff members were saddened to note that *students actually buy completed projects through private services*.

On the whole, staff members met RGP with praise but not without scepticism. Although student numbers have decreased compared with the nineties (due to stricter enrolment conditions), it is still considered relatively high given the number of experienced staff available for supervision. On a positive note, however, doing GP is expected to provide undergraduates with opportunities to gain practical research skills to enhance their future careers.

On the other hand, serious concerns were raised regarding potentially recurring issues since the termination of GP in 1997. Amongst these concerns are students low competency levels, scarcity of resources, plagiarism, and whether the problem of replicating research work could ever be eliminated. The issues of supervision skills, the capability to supervise, particularly by inexperienced staff members, and standardized project-assessment criteria need to be addressed before RGP.

Summary and conclusion

With reference to findings concerning attitudes and perceived challenges, a summary is presented in Tables three and four consecutively. Researchers' interpretations are added as appropriate.

Table 3.. *Summary of attitudes*

Students (52)		Staff (13)	
Positive	Negative	Positive (with caution)	Negative
54%	46%	12	1

On the whole, the students' attitudes towards RGP, resulting from the questionnaire, were not conclusive, but reasonably positive. Following two decades of cancellation in GP, even such a small majority (54%) is encouraging. The size of negative attitudes (46%) was probably a product of students' uncertainties in accomplishing GP successfully, particularly under the low-resourced conditions the students are well aware of.

On the other hand, attitudes by the members of staff were distinctively optimistic. Twelve out of thirteen members interviewed encouraged RGP. Still, they expressed serious concern regarding some issues e.g., students language proficiency, lack of resources, supervision skills, absence of assessment criteria, in addition to the endless problem of plagiarism.

As for perceived challenges to RGP, Table four provides a summary of responses by students and staff with respect to skills shortages or unavailable support. Entities (students, supervisors, Faculty, or Department) that are considered responsible for addressing those challenges are stated alongside. Responsibility may, nonetheless, be shared by two entities e.g., SS/D (students and Department) where both share accountability for taking action. For brevity, one example from the literature is included to indicate alignment of perceived challenges with the reviewed literature in each case.

Table 4. *Summary of perceived challenges*

Skill/ item	Sub-skill/ item	Perceived by	Entity responsible	Alignment with literature
Research skills	Topic selection	SS	SS/S	Taskeen et al. (2014)
	Planning/ time management	SS		Alshehry (2014)
	Data analysis	SS		Alsied and Ibrahim (2017)
	Methodology	SS/S	SS/D	Elmabruk (2019)
	Referencing and citation	SS/S		Qasem and Zaied (2019)
	Critical thinking	SS		Mahammoda (2016)
	Research writing	SS/S		Alsied and Ibrahim (2017)
	Plagiarism	S	S/SS	Elmojahed (2010)
IT skills	Internet search	SS	SS/D	Qasem and Zaied (2019)
	Statistics and related software e.g., SPSS	SS	F/D	N/A
Language skills	Grammar/ linguistic competence	SS	SS/D	Mahammoda (2016)
Supervision skills	Familiarity with topic	SS	S	Simuforosa et al. (2015)
	Knowledge of methodology	SS/S		N/A
	Experience	SS/S		Taskeen et al. (2014)
	Personality	SS		Kuo and Chiu (2009)
	Commitment	SS		Mahammoda (2016)
	Detecting plagiarism	S	SS/D	Taskeen et al. (2014)
Faculty support	Library services and resources	SS/S	F	Alsied and Ibrahim (2017)
	IT resources, e.g. Internet	SS/S	F/D	Alshehry (2014)
	Equipment, e.g. projectors	SS	F/D	N/A
	Study areas	SS	F/D	N/A
Department support	Supervision skills	S	D/S	N/A
	Assessment criteria	S	D/S	N/A

Key: D= Department; F= Faculty; N/A= Not Available; S= Supervisor; SS= Students

As observed, most of the perceived challenges are aligned with the literature. However, some (flagged N/A; Not Available) have not apparently been reported (as far as the researchers are aware). Therefore, it can be concluded that such unaligned perceived challenges are peculiarities to the Libyan ill-prepared and under-resourced context. These peculiarities have been

reproduced in Tables five and six to reflect who the perceivers are (students or supervisors, respectively):

Table 5. *Peculiarities in students perceived challenges*

No.	Skill/ item	Entity responsible
1	Statistics and related software e.g., SPSS	F/D
2	Equipment e.g., projectors	F/D
3	Study areas	F/D

Key: D= Department; F= Faculty; SS= Students

1. **Using statistics software e.g., SPSS (Entity F/D):** At any other university that takes research seriously, educating students in the use of statistical software is seen as a must; hence, such skill is unlikely to emerge as a challenge for pre-final semester students, for they typically learn statistics and how to use statistical packages at much earlier stages of undergraduate study.
2. **Equipment, e.g. projectors (Entity F/D):** The same line of reasoning also applies to the provision of tools and equipment. It is uncommon for schools let alone higher education institutions to be without projectors. These are considered one of the simplest pieces of equipment that should be made available for teaching staff.
3. **Study areas (Entity F/D):** These too, are a Libyan peculiarity. Anyone who has studied at or visited a foreign university, or school, knows that workspaces are basic entitlements for students, something that would never be perceived as an obstacle to research/ group work.

Table 6. *Peculiarities in supervisors perceived challenges*

No	Skill	Entity responsible
1	Supervisor skills	D/S
2	Assessment criteria	D/S
3	Knowledge of methodology	D/S

Key: D= Department; S= Supervisor

1. **Supervision skills (Entity D/S):** Lecturers in higher education are expected to acquire and develop supervision skills throughout their academic careers. Moreover, staff are often trained in research supervision through workshops and/or shadowing of expert supervisors. In the present case-study, this peculiarity is nevertheless justified by having a relatively large number of untrained staff consequential to two decades of withdrawal of GP.
2. **Assessment criteria (Entity D/S):** This predicament is also a peculiarity of this case-study owing to the period of GP termination. Typically, GP assessment criteria are a recognised standard across faculty or department.
3. **Knowledge of methodology (Entity D/S):** Admittedly, there had been no research supervision training for staff at the Department since the cessation of GP in 1997. At more developed universities, teaching staff are expected, as MA or Ph.D. holders, to possess a reasonable working knowledge of research methodology.

Participants recommendations

Proposed recommendations made by students and staff to combat perceived challenges in anticipation of RGP are drawn from the students' responses to the questionnaire and FGD interview, as well as the staff interviews.

By students

1. The writing curriculum should be reviewed to effectively prepare students for RW. Constructive feedback by teachers is imperative throughout the writing modules.
2. RW is crucial and should receive particular attention in structure and delivery. Model examples of writing at different stages of GP should be available for students to study and emulate if necessary.
3. Attention to writing accuracy must be given priority throughout all writing modules.
4. RM should be delivered by experienced and confident instructors. It must be restructured such that theoretical concepts are simplified without imposing a mini-project on students at the same time.
5. IT skills, including Internet search skills and statistics software e.g., SPSS, should be introduced at earlier stages of university study.

Library resources with a full range of updated textbooks and online access, IT facilities such as computers and the Internet should be available to students and staff.

Basic essential equipment such as projectors, if not installed at every lecture room, should be available and accessible to teachers and students.

Students should have dedicated study areas where they can work individually or in groups.

Students have the right to be guided by experienced supervisors who are committed, flexible, and able to provide constructive feedback throughout the stages of GP.

By staff

1. Standard criteria for GP assessment must be prepared and mutually agreed upon by all supervisors.
2. Library facilities should include online access to appropriate journals.
3. Updating in research design and methodology/ data analysis and interpretation is required.
4. Staff, especially new members, should go through structured training workshops to enhance supervision skills before RGP. Topic selection and viability must be addressed early on.
5. Access to and training in plagiarism detection software should be a prime concern.

Researchers recommendations

1. The idea of asking students to do a mini-project is credible, but would be more productive if integrated into RW instead of RM, where students work on a topic of their choice as a research proposal that can later be developed into GP. Accordingly, students should take AW, followed by RM, then RW integrated with a research proposal (see Elmabruk, 2019) and finally, GP.
2. Institutional online subscription to relevant journals is a must for both students and staff.

3. Staff development workshops on research supervision skills should be arranged and delivered by expert supervisors. Staff members who are new to supervision may act as co-supervisors, where they shadow an expert first supervisor, until sufficient experience is gained to proceed independently.
4. A database for GP is indispensable to combat the reproduction of previous GPs. Staff should have access to such database and be trained in using plagiarism detection software.

A final word

A final word in the government's ear is in order. For how long will the peculiarities of the ill-equipped and poorly-resourced conditions within the Department, or higher education contexts for that matter, persist? Over two decades have elapsed since the termination of GP (which the first author of this paper witnessed in 1997) and very little has changed.

If we were to ask an emergent research question 'what has changed since 1997 that warrants RGP?' Our answer would simply be "not much"; the conspicuous peculiarities of the Libyan context still linger on. The only promising thing that has changed somewhat is attitude; the prevailing strong attitudes of staff, and those by the motivated students who aspire to make a lasting impression at the end of a unique academic journey.

Limitations of the study

Certain circumstances may have limited aspects of data collection in some way. For example, due to a clash of timetables, it was not possible to interview all the staff members at the Department. Although 51 lecturers were officially teaching, 13 of them were giving general English at other faculties of the university; three had administrative duties, and two were on leave.

The students' response to the questionnaire was not as high as expected. Out of 127 students, only 52 responded, which gave a moderate return rate of 41%. To overcome such a limitation, it is recommended that students' questionnaires are administered face-to-face, rather than online or by e-mail, to guarantee a higher rate of return.

Suggestions for further research

The researchers suggest further studies on:

1. The nature of problems encountered by students in RW and the extent to which it can be developed through collaboration between students and/or between students and supervisors using appropriate online platforms.

How inexperienced members of staff are engaged as co-supervisors in research supervision and how they can their supervision skills be scaffolded through shadowing of expert supervisors.

A close observational study of the dynamics of the supervisory process and the kind of obstacles encountered by students and staff. In fact, the researchers are planning to carry out such research as soon as the first implementation of GP since 1997 takes place at the Faculty of Languages.

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Appendix Students questionnaire

- Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with reintroducing graduation projects?
 Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
- Q2. Please state a major reason for your answer:
.....
...
- Q3. What skills do you think you need to develop before starting your project? (You may choose more than one option)?
 Research writing
 Research methods
 Grammar
 Critical thinking
 IT skills
 Planning and organization
 Other (please specify)
- Q4. Please give a reason for your answer(s):
.....
- Q5. To what extent was Research Methods useful in preparing you for the research project?
 Very useful; covered everything I wanted to know regarding research projects
 Useful but didn't cover everything regarding research projects
 Useful but not interesting because the content was ineffective
 Not useful and I didn't gain new knowledge regarding projects
 Not very useful and I had difficulties understanding the topics

Other (please specify)
.....

Q6. What problems have you encountered while studying Research Methodology?
.....

Q7. Do you think the Research Methodology module should be improved next semester?

Yes No If 'yes' please say what improvement you would like to see.
.....

Q8. What kind of problems did you think you are likely to face in your project next semester?
Please give at least one major problem or concern.
.....

Q9. What kind of support/facilities would you think the Department to provide for students?

- Technical support
- Statistical services
- Equipment (projectors, recorders for data collection, etc.)
- Library with a range of up-dated resources
- Study space
- IT resources (printing, accessing computers, Internet, etc.)
- Other (please specify).....