Graduate Life: A Study on Students' Commitment towards Professional Development

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Abstract:
Background: The higher education reform in the Philippines is patterned to foreign educational systems. It has myriad of restructurings on its curriculum which makes it tough for graduate students to finish. Without motivation that can be explained by the postulate link on the environmental influences and ultimate human necessities aligned with Deci and Ryan's Self-determination Theory, graduate student will find it hard to finish their program. Thus, it is important to address this concern.
Materials and Methods: This research used qualitative descriptive case study which aims to analyze post graduate students' commitment in pursuing professional development. Participants were identified through a selection criteria and selected through purposive sampling. The data gathered in the semi-structured interviews were analyzed through thematic process. This study could help improve the curriculum by considering the factors that hinders commitment in finishing graduate studies.
Results: Graduate students face different challenges in their studies- priorities, responsibilities, pressure, and ability to cope with problems and stress are big factors that affect commitment to finish their master's degree. It is very important to take note that graduate institutions should consider these factors in plotting their curriculum.
Conclusion: Research findings show that students who can't handle stress and balance time towards work, home and studies have lesser chance to finish their graduate studies.
Key Words: Graduate Students' Commitment, Self-Determination Theory, Descriptive Case Study, Thematic Analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

With countless reforms made and various programs implemented, the Philippine sector of education pushes for quality, accountability, excellence, and relevance on its instruction as educators seek for professional growth (Calma, 2008). The graduate programs in the country points to reinforce students' understanding of educational theories, concepts, curriculum, and instructional techniques in order to further advance in their professional careers (finduniversity.ph). In this process, we focus too much on managerial and administrative solutions rather than on the challenges posed by academically underprepared graduate students (Mouton, 2007). In the background of global change, the knowledge systems of our graduate students today must demonstrate flexibility and innovation, while still maintaining their commitments (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 2011). Motivation is the core reason for graduate students' actions, desires, and needs. According to Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt (2017), what our graduates learn in the education process equips them later to work as academics, researchers, or professionals in leading positions.

Literature Review

At first point, it is easy for students to move from undergraduate to graduate study but then again there are salient factors that could affect students' performance in graduate school. Graduate education is focused on efficiency rather than effectiveness and quality.

Graduate students are expected to participate in the game of academic enculturation. They face challenges and struggles in textual, social, and political arenas. Learning in and from graduate school requires more than just intelligence, strategic social, cultural, and political participation, and constructing a professional identity are at least as important (Casanave & Li, 2009). Academics have adequate priorities like family, friends, and et cetera. Unsatisfactory combinations of work and home duties can result in various unfavorable individual and organizational outcomes for scholars (Putnik, et al. 2018). Lack of intellectual stimulation, lack of facilities and materials, excessive red tape, lack of opportunity and time to do research are whys and wherefores of scholar's failure to finish graduate schooling.

Therefore, there should be sustainable supervisor-student relationship to help achieve greater successes in graduate education (Ezelibo, 2012). There is a need for the development of theoretical frameworks that take cultural context into account in relation to work-home interface (Putnik, et al. 2018). Desire to acquire better expertise in field of study, thirst for higher qualification and the need to meet requirements for choice career/job are needed factors in motivating oneself to finish post graduate studies (Fadairo & Ogundipe, 2016). Student employment status significantly affects academic performance thus the institution should focus much more effort on helping students adopt strategies that will enable them balance their studies with employment. The coping strategies used by the respondents include seeking for help from colleagues and asking for more support from supervisors (Ezelibo, 2012). Forms of commitment can be distinguished by considering different combinations of student identity. Understanding these motivations are important because they can account for students' regulatory focus on studies (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2010)

Mbogo (2016) identified teacher friendly interactions, inspiration for further studies, family responsibilities, language proficiency, age, gender and lack of finance as some of the factors identified to be affecting academic performance of students. The challenges included problems related to facilities, social environment, and academic system (Talebloo & Bin Baki 2013). On the other hand, financial status and marital status insignificantly affect the academic performance of graduate students (Kasaija, 2009). Graduate students' choice in educational studies particularly the characteristics of the program enrolled can be a form of motivation. Whereas post graduates' enthusiasm towards finishing their studies can be affected greatly by their program choice (Saiti, Papa, & Brown, 2017).

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The Research Problem
The research used a descriptive case study by Yin (2003). The research problem is engrossed on the "graduate students' commitment on their professional growth". It aims to answer the questions:
1. Why some graduate students fail to finish their Master's Degree?
2. What factors affect graduate students' commitment towards complying needed requirements for program and course?

Theoretical Framework of the Study
The study adhered to the Self-Determination Theory of Deci & Ryan (1985, 2000, 2008). It is an empirically based theory on human motivation, development, and well-being it focuses on the types of motivation, with particular attention to the autonomous and controlled ones. It is also related to social conditions, proposing variations for each basic psychological need for autonomy- need to control the course of their life; competence- need to be effective dealing with the environment; and relationships/relatedness- Need have a close and affectionate relationships with others.

II. MATERIAL AND METHODS
This research is a qualitative descriptive case study by Yin (2003). The data were analyzed using thematic process by Braun & Clarke (2014).

Research Design
This research is a qualitative descriptive case study by Yin (2003). The research design was used in order to understand the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of graduate students towards finishing their studies. It will provide information to the problem and develop ideas for potential quantitative researches and intervention program. The researchers would like to describe the motivational experiences in pursuing post graduate studies (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2011; Yin, 2017). This would help the graduate school assess their curricular programs and reflect to the experiences that the graduate students are facing.

Data Collection
The participants were identified through a selection criteria set by the researcher. The researcher used purposive sampling by Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun (1993). Also, the researcher adopted Drever, et al.(1995) semi-structured interview.

Data Analysis
The participants' responses were coded and analyzed through thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2014). The thematic analysis takes in cutting across data and searching for patterns and themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2014; Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas, 2013). Thematic analysis is performed

through the process of coding in six phases- (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes among codes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report- to create established, meaningful patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2014). In analyzing qualitative data, thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach (Boyatzis, 1998, Braun & Clarke, 2014). Content analysis is evident through audit trail.

Ethical Considerations

For confidentiality, the researcher will not divulge the name of the participants. The researcher also sought for the approval of the Dean of the Graduate School to conduct the research. Furthermore, the participants were given consent form and were informed before the actual conduct of research. The participants were not coerced to engage in the research. As much as possible the researcher made sure that the participants were comfortable before, during, and after the data collection.

Triangulation

To establish the validity of the study, the researcher checked the family, educational, and professional background of the participants. To confirm some data, the researcher asked some of their colleagues and professors.

Reflexivity

The researcher is an instructor in a university at the same time a graduate student. Thus, the researcher is aware of the common struggles graduate students encounter in day-to-day bases. The researcher followed a systematic process in conducting, collecting, and analyzing the data to avoid biases.

III. Discussion

In the background of global change, the knowledge systems of our graduate students today must demonstrate flexibility and innovation while still maintaining their commitments (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 2011). They should learn the know-hows on surviving their graduate programs.

Theme 1: Responsibilities

It was found that the graduate students have several priorities. They need to stabilize time solving, work problems, family issues, and school works. Allocation of limited time for bulk of urgencies is the main problem of graduate students. One must think how to prioritize things. Thus, time management is a vital skill when pursuing graduate studies. Failure to budget time would mean disrupted studies.

"...I need to juggle my time just to finish loads of work I have in work". (P1, L21-22)
"I need to be absent in some of my graduate classes just to attend on the demands of my family" (P6. L10-12)

"With the skill I have… the graduate school requirements are easy but I also need to attend weekend tasks at work… time is a problem" (P5, L1-L5)

Graduate students have duties or tasks that they are required or expected to do. Work tasks must be done for living. Family obligations must be done for social security. School activities/seminars/trainings are done for professional growth. With these immense and equally important roles, they need to be extra driven to fulfill all of these roles. Problems arise when one of the roles is taken for granted. It is then important to balance these roles.

"I already sacrificed my own personal happiness just to attend on the requirements we have in the graduate school" (P5, L14-15; P12, L8-9)

"Being married is never a problem in taking up my master's degree but having child and seeing physical changes in my body as I conceive while taking up my graduate studies is a big thing… I would rather choose my child's sake than personal development" (P1, L27-30; P2L1)

Theme 2: Pressure

From a simple critique paper, demonstrations, to outreach programs; graduate students have to accomplish array of requirements in school. They also need to balance their financial obligations from paying their house electricity bill, laboratory fees, and other monetary expenses. Furthermore, passing examinations is also one of the aspects to consider because students are often anxious in preparing for major examinations. And production of research outputs give not only pressure but also adds apprehension to students since research is bounded and consumes time. In addition, less support from work administrators and the pressure to finish studies in a given time in order to gain promotion adds to the many things that graduate students are worried about.

"Due to the bulk of requirements from different courses to be submitted on the same week... sometime I think I can't do it anymore." (P2, L1-6; P6, L1-2)

"We have teaching demonstration that or class need to finish in our classroom 'till midnight" (P8, L1-2)
"Requirements in school adds up to my financial problems..." (P7, L1; P9 L2)

"I prepared so much for my comprehensive exam but unfortunately I failed in one of my courses... it made ma anxious for I prepared... I think I just wasted my one week of leave of absence to work." (P11, L20-27)

"Professors give sets of requirements sometimes without orientation on the output they want us to finish... we need to submit on a given period of time" (P11, L30-33)

Theme 3: Coping Mechanism

As students face pressure in different adult endeavors, the ability to cope with very stressful situations is needed. The graduate students, given several problems in school, home and work, are having difficulty coping with their school tasks. Their ability to cope with stress is tested especially when they are to take comprehensive examinations, comply responsibilities in the work place and face family issues all at the same time. Some of the students who cannot handle stress tend to drop out in their courses and discontinue studying. Acceptance occurs when students agree on the fact that they fail in a specific course and retake if needed.

"When our professors ask for all the requirements on the same week and we have problems at home and in work... I end up thinking and tell myself, "I don't know what to do." (P13, L12-16 & 18)

"When I am to take the comprehensive exams all at the same time along with my problems in work and at home, I opted to quit studies and focus with work and home issues." (P11, L11-13)

"I had several INC's (Incomplete Marks in the Transcript of Records) and Dropped subjects but I accepted the fact that I need to keep myself motivated to finish my studies.
"I don't feel support from my administrators in work... they have this rule that I need to finish my master's degree in 3 years' time for my permanency but I don't feel their support in many aspects" (P6, L6-7)

IV. CONCLUSION

It is very apparent that graduate students face different challenges in their studies- priorities, responsibilities, pressure, and ability to cope with problems and stress. These are big factors that affect commitment to finish their master's degree. It is very important to take note that graduate schools should consider these factors in plotting their curriculum. Student's priority talks about their ability to allocate limited time for bulk of urgencies. One must think that more important things must be done or dealt with first depending on its weight one at a time to achieve success. Responsibilities refer to graduate students' duty or tasks that they are required or expected to do. With these immense and equally important roles of a graduate student, they need to be extra driven to fulfill all the parts. The pressure exerted on the students come from the urge to balance financial obligations, the drive to pass examinations, and the need to finish their research outputs. The students'

ability to cope with very stressful situations in school, home, and work is needed. Their ability to cope with stress will lead to acceptance and more eagerness to finish studies or dropping out from school. It is tested especially when they are to take examinations, comply responsibilities in the work place, and face family issues all at the same time.

There should be harmony in the graduate students' priorities and responsibilities. It is necessary that students are mentally and emotionally capable to handle stress and pressure. Time management is a very important skill to be developed, without this ability a student will be astounded with stress and pressure. Proper spending will also lessen financial problems. The commitment to finish a degree in graduate studies will continue as long as students balance time for work place, family, and school.

The School administrators together with graduate student representatives should plot policies that may help graduate students who are losing commitment to finish their graduate program. Thus, there should also good student-mentor relationship especially during the production of research outputs.

Research findings show that students who can't handle stress and balance time towards work, home and studies have lesser chance to finish their graduate studies. Interventions should be made by the school administration in partnership with the guidance and counselling unit. They should track and monitor students who are performing low or less motivated to finish graduate program. Conducting seminar on time management, coping with stress (at work, home, and school) and emotional tolerance is recommended as an immediate intervention to students who are on this category.

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