



MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY LECTURERS' MOTIVATIONS FOR DOCTORAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The decision and motivation to pursue doctoral study can differ depending on the perceived significance and importance among doctoral students. However, little is known about the initial motivations for enrolling in doctoral programmes among Malaysian public university lecturers. The aim of this study was to investigate their motivations for pursuing doctoral study. Six public university lecturers were interviewed about their motivations that influenced their decisions for pursuing doctoral study. The method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews since it enables participants to freely express their personal views about their motivations that influenced their decisions for pursuing doctoral study based on their personal experiences. The data revealed that contractual conditions, support from others, intrinsic motivations, as well as recognition and status advantages are the main factors for enrolling in doctoral programmes. The findings identified potential recommendations for both would-be doctoral applicants and universities to offer prior to enrolment in order to further investigate their motivations for doctoral study.

Keywords: Motivations, Doctoral Study, Doctoral Candidate,



1. INTRODUCTION

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest academic level degree awarded after a course study. Since it is an earned research degree, persons studying for it should develop original research meant to expand the boundaries of knowledge in the form of either dissertations or theses. Additionally, the work should be defended against experts in the field. So far, studying and getting a PhD has several benefits. One of them is enabling one to indulge in their interests, meaning that they are projects of passion that enable a person to explore a field of study that they find fascinating (San-Jose & Retolaza, 2021; Cowan, Hartjes, & Munro, 2019). After completion, one becomes an expert in their specific niche. Secondly, having a PhD exposes one to unexpected opportunities. This means that it may aid one to develop their research interests further and get projects that they are more passionate about. Thirdly, doing a PhD establishes a person's network of contacts. This means that one can expand their network outside their country, thus allowing them to gain access to various projects, research opportunities, and work experience (Stanfill et al., 2019).

Despite the pursuing of a PhD being associated with several benefits, little knowledge concerning the decision and motivation to pursue it exists. Most people tend to ask the question, 'Why would one decide to pursue a PhD?' Doing a PhD is considered to be a high-risk strategy since various challenges are encountered. One of them is stress. Issues such as large-scale projects, pending deadlines, and significant amounts of the personal investment may make a PhD quite stressful (Abu-Zaid et al., 2016). The situation may be aggravated by the fact that all activities ride on one person. Secondly, funding issues may also arise (Maher et al., 2014). A majority of PhD students depend on external funding for support as they study, but this funding might be insecure. There have been situations where financial support has been reduced for learners while in the middle of their PhD. This is a risky situation that can leave one in an extremely stressful situation. Thirdly, time management is also a significant issue. In this case, there is so much to do, but time is always limited (Rimando et al., 2015). In other words, pursuing a PhD may make it hard to have a proper work-life balance. These challenges tend to make several people question why a person would dedicate their time to studying for this degree. A few researchers have tried to establish some of the motives behind this cause. For example, a study by Wiegerová (2016) established that the motivation to pursue a PhD is affected by two major factors: macrosocial and microsocial factors. Examples of macrosocial factors include the present labor market, social climate, and employment. On the other hand, microsocial factors include one's own conviction and inner maturation. Moreno and Kollanus (2013) sought to investigate the motivation behind graduates pursuing a PhD, especially in computer science. Their findings revealed that professional development, employment opportunities, personal fulfillment, and career changes were the major factors that influenced people to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy. In this awareness, this research study seeks to establish the initial motivations for enrolling in doctoral programs among Malaysian public university lecturers.



OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to investigate the initial motivations for pursuing doctoral studies for public university lecturers in Malaysia. The specific objective of this paper is to promote the understanding and knowledge of why public university lecturers opt to pursue doctorate programmes. Such knowledge is important for university administrators and policy makers to tailor the programmes in such way that it fulfills the motives for these Malaysian public university lecturers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The motivation to pursue a PhD may differ based on significance and perceived relevance among international students. Yang, Chen, and Shen (2017) state that attaining an international education pushes most students to apply for doctorate studies. In particular, they seek to overcome what is considered the restrictions associated with parochialism, meaning that the learners are encouraged to enroll in higher degrees to contribute additional knowledge in their fields of interest. According to Khojastehrad and Sattarova (2015), most people apply for PhDs to enhance their chances of employment. In other words, it is a means to improve competitiveness in the labor market after the successful completion of their research. Singh and Jack (2018) also support this position by stating that Malaysian students pursue further studies to gain a competitive advantage over others, which later improves their national reputation. Based on these findings, it becomes crucial to gather and gain more knowledge concerning why students in Malaysia pursue doctorate degrees.

Recent research has shown that there is better and increased access to higher education that also allows a greater flexibility in the program delivery. For example, this increased access was evident in the United States where 2017 registered 54,664 doctorate degrees that represented a 14% growth since 2007 (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018). This was a highlight of the significant increase in the doctorate degree attainment. The increase in the enrollment in doctorate degrees as well as graduation was also noted across multiple disciplines (Sakurai, Vekkalia, & Pyhalto, 2017). However, education registered the contrast of the doctorate degrees that were conferred in the country. In education disciplines, a total of 4,823 doctoral degrees were conferred in 2017 compared to 6,448 doctoral degrees that were conferred in 2007 in the same discipline representing a 34% decrease. Different studies attributed this decline in the doctoral degrees conferred in education to increased costs of higher education or other factors that are not well understood. Another observation is that the majority of the people who are seeking the doctoral degrees in education are in most cases the current teachers and realizing that they are notoriously undercompensated, then it could have led to the decline in the number of them seeking doctoral studies. The



financial factors could be among other factors that have led to the decline in the number of teachers seeking doctoral studies.

However, there is no current research to show the barriers to motivation to study doctoral programmes among teachers. There are many myths and stereotypes regarding the difficulties and barriers to pursuing doctorate studies in most societies. According to Golde (2005) deciding to pursue a doctorate degree is considered a high-risk strategy for the majority of scholars. However, there are still many people who are going ahead to study these programmes (Skakni, 2018). Among many other reasons that people are studying doctoral degrees include prospects of improving career, personal development, and intrinsic interest in their disciplines. There are also a good number of doctoral students who enroll for these programmes for multiple motives. There are also overt motives that relate to the students sense of their own identity as well as pressing social justice concerns as are in these studies as politics (Lynch, Salikhova, & Salikhova, 2018). The role of third parties is also a huge factor as a deciding factor for whether to study a doctoral degree or not (Ceglie, 2019). However, there is little that is known about the initial motives for enrolling in doctoral program. As a result, a study that will explore these initial motives will help further the understanding.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a qualitative research methodology that sought to explore the initial motivation for lecturers enrolling for doctoral programmes. Six public university lecturers were selected to partake in the study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data concerning their motivations that influenced their decisions to pursue doctoral studies. This data collection method offered several benefits. First, it allowed the participants to offer open-ended responses about their motivations to achieve a doctoral degree. Secondly, it allowed the participants to open up about sensitive issues related to the matter being studied (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Mojtahed et al., 2019). Thirdly, the interviews offered an opportunity to study the answers to the questions as well as the reasons behind the answers. Prior to the study, study participants were offered informed consent to enlighten them concerning the aspects of the research. As such, it enabled them to make informed and voluntary decisions about 'to 'not to' partake in the study (Hardicre, 2014; Mandal & Parija, 2014). With regard to the inclusion criteria, the research participants were required to have completed a doctoral degree within the past two years. Besides, they were also required to have significant career experiences in their fields and also be in their thirties. The results were grouped and analysed based on major themes. NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to analyse the data. The focus group and interview data were grouped into NVivo nodes under important themes that developed during the data analysis process.



The key themes present in the participant responses were categorise, identified, summarised, and recombined during the data analysis process. The data was then analysed to see if there were any underlying patterns or trends that emerged from the research.

4. MAIN RESULTS

The analysis of the findings established some major themes associated with the motivation to undertake a doctoral degree, including support from others, contractual conditions, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and the recognition and status advantages. The details of these themes are as described below.

Contractual conditions

This refers to the situation where every party is needed or obligated to execute a duty under a contract. Two participants stated that they were guaranteed financial aid in case they pursued a PhD. Participant 1 stated that “After completing my masters’ degree in History, the institution convinced me to pursue a doctoral degree at no cost. After some thinking, I considered that it was a good offer since it would alleviate financial pressure on me.” Participant 2 stated that “The faculty promised that my education needs would be catered for if I pursued a doctoral degree in my field. This opportunity was too good to pass up.” One of the most important employment terms is that education-based lecturers must begin applying for and gaining positions at learning institutions in Malaysia and abroad, where they will pursue their PhD studies. As such, these findings emphasise that Malaysian institutions have scholarships with contractual duties, and that their employees are bound by these obligations if they are to improve their skills and assist their institutions progress and become more globally competitive in the future.

Support from other people

During the interviews, some participants stated that support from their friends and families played a significant role in their pursuit of a doctoral degree. For instance, Participant 6 stated that “Initially, I did not believe that it would be possible to pursue my PhD. However, people around me, especially my family, convinced me that they would offer all the support I need in my studies.” Participant 4 stated that “I spoke to a close friend who is a lecturer. After long discussions concerning the opportunities that a doctoral degree would offer, I decided to give it a try.” Friends, coworkers, family members, and academic advisors can also support or motivate would-be candidates, according to the findings from this sample.



Intrinsic motivation

A variety of personal factors influenced the participants' decision to enroll in doctoral programmes. During the interviews, it was discovered that a sense of cultural or personal identity played a significant role in their pursuit of a doctorate degree. For example, participant 3 stated that "Even after completing my masters, I still believed that my academic career was not over. Therefore, after two years. I decided to pursue a doctoral degree." Participant 3 stated that 'Pursuing a PhD has always been my dream since childhood.' The desire to enroll in PhD studies has been validated in the literature as a fundamental intrinsic motivator that informs participant decisions to continue their studies.

Recognition and status advantages

During the interviews, it was discovered that pursuing a doctoral degree enabled one to have an established status in society. For instance, Participant 4 stated that "Pursing a PhD makes it easy to attain recognition wherever I go." Participant 5 claimed that "Having a doctoral degree offers me a more significant status in the academic and social world, and people would call me a Dr." Participants stated that the prospect of earning a "Dr." title encouraged them, and that this influenced and informed their decision to continue their education. These findings have been cited in the literature as examples of possible identity issues that encourage students to advance in their careers. They also stated that having a PhD gave them a sense of advancement in society and that they were respected in the community.

This study was not restricted to a specific doctoral degree. The findings above indicate that people pursue PhDs due to various influences and factors, including recognition and status advantages, intrinsic motivations, support from other people, and contractual conditions. However, there were some elements of uncertainty and risks expressed by some of the participants. In spite of the small number of participants and hearing different versions of the same themes, it was possible to establish a degree of reliability in the findings.

5. CONCLUSION

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest academic level degree that is awarded after a course study. It is associated with benefits such as being able to indulge in ones' interests, being exposed to other opportunities and expanding one's networks. Despite the challenges encountered by the learners, very few researchers have focused on the exact reasons that motivate them to pursue the studies. The research study identified factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, contractual conditions, support from others, and recognition and



status advantages as the major reasons why people pursue doctorate programs.

As such, higher learning institutions should always strive to further investigate each learner's motivation to study. Most public universities in Malaysia have also made the requirement of obtaining a PhD a compulsory for their lecturers. The findings of the study established the need for higher learning institutions to always investigate potential doctoral candidates' motivation to undertake their studies. Future research is welcome to look into this study in a larger scale.

6.0 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The major limitation for this study was the small sample size that was utilised for gathering data. For the purpose of generalizing, the sample need to be expansive and as representative as possible.

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