Aspirations for Doctoral Study Among Academic Staff

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in doctoral studies comes with a variety of motives held by the students whose perspectives also vary about studying at that level. Nevertheless, the Malaysian public university lecturers' motives for undertaking doctoral studies remain unclear. This study undertook to explore the factors that prompt them to enroll as PhD students. Procedurally, the researcher recruited six public university lecturers as participants. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher sought to establish the participants' motivations for entry in doctoral programmes. Accordingly, the major influential factors that emerged had to do with the acquisition of higher status, encouragement from peers, contractual conditions and deep-seated desire for self-fulfillment. Subsequent to the findings the researcher devised a set of recommendations targeting potential doctoral candidates and institutions, as a means to fine-tune their motivations for the qualification.

Keywords: *Aspiration; Doctoral Study; Academic Staff; Doctoral Candidate*

INTRODUCTION

As the most superior academic qualification, a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), is issued to candidates who fulfill the requirements of study at the highest level. A fundamental requirement for PhD candidates is to mastermind novel ideas presented in the form of thoroughly researched theses. To ensure the prevalence of rigor at this level of study, candidates undertake to defend their propositions in the presence of field specialists. Admittedly, the acquisition of a PhD is advantageous in numerous ways, including empowering individuals to progressively discover the dynamic facets of a vast academic field of their interest (San-Jose & Retolaza, 2021; Cowan, Hartjes, & Munro, 2019). Owing to the high status of a PhD, holders thereof are regarded as experts in their respective areas of specialisation, who are strategically placed to spearhead development in society. At the personal level, a PhD qualification offers competitive advantage in occupational considerations. It gives leverage in view of advancing one's research interests as backed up by their passion. Furthermore, earning a PhD is a process that involves networking for future collaborations. In turn, networks are fundamental for breaking barriers as they facilitate exposure to multiple occupational prospects, both nationally and internationally (Stanfill et al., 2019).

Although the acquisition of a PhD is heavily linked to numerous gains, there are hardly any established reasons for individuals to attain this qualification. Given the risks involved in engaging in PhD studies, it is not surprising that many people are skeptical of it. For instance,

experiencing stress due to workload is almost inevitable (Abu-Zaid et al., 2016), which presents a challenge in terms of mental health. Besides dealing with the demands of the studies at this highest level of learning, students are almost always confronted by the problem of funding (Maher et al., 2014). Although most PhD students strategically rely on funding from abroad, there is no guarantee in securing sponsors or adequate sponsorship. In some instances, the flow of funding has been limited contrary to the students' expectations. As such, students are subjected to stressful situations where they must find the balance between studying and catering for their well-being. Moreover, students are obliged to deal with time constraints, considering the demands of their studies (Rimando et al., 2015). There is always a danger of failing to strike the balance between work and social life. Implicitly, those who pursue PhD studies have to overcome enormous challenges to succeed. Wiegerová (2016) noted that the pursuit of a PhD is mainly hampered on two fronts – the macrosocial and microsocial elements. Accordingly, PhD candidates are affected by macrosocial elements like the current labour market, social climate, and employment. Concurrently, they are subject to microsocial elements inclusive of the extent of belief in oneself and maturity. From a computer science perspective, Moreno and Kollanus (2013) researched to establish the motives of PhD candidates. Among their findings were the desire for professional advancement, enhancing employability, self-actualisation, and the necessity of career shifting as influential factors for engaging in doctoral studies.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The current researcher aimed to establish the primary motivations of Malaysian public university lecturers in pursuing PhD programmes. Hence, the explicit objective in this paper is to cultivate comprehension and awareness of public university lecturers' decisions to take up doctorate programmes. Equipped with this knowledge, university administrators and policy makers will be in a better position to design programmes in a manner that meets the specific needs of these Malaysian public university lecturers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For Yang, Chen, and Shen (2017) it is a priority for many students for their education to have an international outlook, especially at doctoral level. Specifically, they are motivated by the need to overcome elements of parochialism; with the attainment of this highest qualification, they feel empowered to add value to their fields of learning. Beyond that, students enroll for PhDs with the motive to improve their employability (Khojastehrad & Sattarova, 2015). Stated otherwise, a PhD qualification is considered a leveraging factor for candidates in the labour market. The necessity for competitiveness in the labour market is corroborated by Singh and Jack (2018), who opined that the qualification also improves their national status. From these preliminary remarks, it is important gather evidence about the motivation for doctoral studies in the Malaysian context.

Generally, there is a noted better accessibility to higher education in recent times worldwide as more institutions are offering greater flexibility for studies. For instance, the United States witnessed a 14% increase in PhD enrollment in 2017 (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2018). The increase in PhD enrollment and graduation was reflected in various fileds (Sakurai, Vekkalia, & Pyhalto, 2017). Nevertheless, the field of education presented significant statistics in view of doctorates conferred countrywide, with 4,823 doctoral degrees issued in 2017 as rated against 6,448 doctoral degrees issued in 2007, translating into a 34% decline. Various studies identified the increased costs of higher education as the major cause of the decline in PhDs

output. Since most of those who desire to pursue doctoral studies in education are currently teaching and are underpaid, their capacity to fund their studies is supposedly limited.

There are multiple suggestions on the hindrances in pursuing doctorate studies. In Golde's (2005) view, opting for PhD studies is a high-risk undertaking, yet a considerable number of people are still enrolling for doctorates (Skakni, 2018). Some of the leading reasons for attaining PhDs relate to career improvement, personal advancement, and inherent interest in one's field. For some students, a PhD gives them a new sense of identity in the face of societal competition (Lynch, Salikhova, & Salikhova, 2018). Besides that, the role of third parties cannot be underestimated in the determination of taking up doctoral studies (Ceglie, 2019). Yet, there is still a huge knowledge gap in terms of what aspires lecturers in Malaysian institutions to undertake doctoral studies. Therefore, a study in this regard will be important for both policymakers and those who design curriculum.

METHOD

Using a qualitative research methodology, the study explored the primary motivation or aspiration for lecturers enrolling for doctoral programmes. Procedurally, the researcher enlisted six public university lecturers as participants. As tools for gathering data, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used to establish motivations for pursuing PhDs. Participants were free to respond to open-ended questions, thereby offering insights into their motivations in enrolling for doctoral studies. In the same vein, the participants were easily drawn to venture into sensitive issues related to the matter without feeling uncomfortable (Brown & Danaher, 2019; Mojtahed et al., 2019).

After the interviews, the researcher had the privilege to analyse the responses and to deductively attribute reasons for specific answers. Prior consent to participate in the study was sought from the participants; they did so on voluntary basis (Hardicre, 2014; Mandal & Parija, 2014). The selection criteria was such that participants ought to have earned doctoral degrees, no longer than a couple of years ago. Furthermore, participants needed to have significant career experiences, and to be within the age bracket of thirties. The analysis of the results was thematic. The researcher utilised the NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis tool, to analyse the data. Accordingly, the focus group and interview data were categorised into NVivo nodes beneath the significant themes developed during the process of analysing data. While analysing data, the key that emerged in the participants' responses were, identified, categorised, summarised, and recombined. The data was subsequently analysed in terms of the underlying patterns or trends pointing to specific conclusions.

MAIN RESULTS

The researcher emerged with major themes in view of the aspirations for doctoral studies. These themes included personal support, contractual conditions, intrinsic motivation, and the necessity for identity and image improvement, all described in detail as follows.

Contractual Conditions

Accordingly, the parties in a contract have obligations to fulfill, as exemplified by two participants who mentioned that their financial assistance was guaranteed as long as they pursued a PhD. Participant 1 remarked 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 said "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." Among the
employment terms, one of the most important is that lecturers in education have the
obligation to apply and secure PhD admission at institutions in Malaysia or overseas. In this
light, Malaysian institutions normally offer scholarships with contractual duties, making it
clear that their employees are under obligation to improve their skills, thereby assisting their
institutions to progressively become globally competitive.

Personal Support

A significant percentage of the participants cited the importance of support received from
family members and friends, who encouraged them to pursue doctoral studies. For example,
Participant 6 confessedly remarked 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 said "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." PhD candidates usually receive support from
peers, workmates, family members, and academic supervisors.

Intrinsic Motivation

Among various reasons for pursuing doctoral studies, is the quest for cultural or personal
identity. For instance, participant 3 intimated 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 mentioned that 'Pursuing a PhD has always been my dream
since childhood." The personal need to engage in PhD studies has been corroborated in the
literature as a key intrinsic motivator that influences participant decisions in favour of
furthering their studies.

Identity and Image Improvement

The one motivating factor that emerged during the interviews for attaining a doctoral
qualification was the enhancement of one's status in society. For example, Participant 4
remarked that "Pursing a PhD makes it easy to attain recognition wherever I go." Participant 5
declared that "Having a doctoral degree offers me a more significant status in the academic
and social world, and people would call me a Doctor." The participants generally observed
that the prospect of earning the title "Dr." motivated them, and that this prompted them to
further their education. Hence, education is not pursued not only for the sake of knowledge;
it is also essentially sought for the improvement of one's status and identity.

According to the findings, people are influenced by various factors to enroll for PhDs,
including the anticipation of recognition and status in society, intrinsic motivations, support
from family and friends, and favourable contractual circumstances. Nevertheless, participants
expressed elements of doubt, bearing in mind the potential risks associated with undertaking
doctoral studies. Although the participants were very few, the diversity of content they
generated for the themes was rich enough to provide consistency pointing to the reliability of
the findings.

CONCLUSION

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the highest level of academic learning. Earning it comes with advantages like indulging ones' interests, exposure to a wide variety of opportunities at the national and international level. Comparatively, the dearth of literature on specific motivating factors for pursuing doctoral studies does not do justice to the numerous challenges confronting PhD candidates. This study has identified factors like intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, contractual conditions, support from others, and identity and image improvement as the main motivating factors for engaging in doctoral studies among academic staff.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The main limitation for this study was the small sample size, which comprised of six participants. As such, the findings may not be easily generalised, since doing so requires carrying out research using a relatively bigger sample to represent a population.

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