Factors that lead to postgraduate students' dropout of the Master of Education Degree program: A case of African Management and Development Institute, Namibia

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors that lead to postgraduate students dropping out of the Master of Education Degree (MED) programme at African Management and Development Institute (AMADI), a branch of Midlands State University (MSU) in Namibia. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design applied in a qualitative research approach. The population of the study consisted of all postgraduate students, who were registered for the Master's degree in Education at AMADI in Namibia from 2010 to 2017. A sample comprising twenty dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master degree in Education at AMADI were purposively selected for this study. Purposive Criterion sampling was used to select, twenty dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master's degree in Education at AMADI. One research instrument which was an in-depth unstructured interview was used to collect data from dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master's degree of Education program at AMADI. The data collected from the research participants through an unstructured interview was coded, transcribed and analyzed thematically, and then presented in themes and sub-themes. The findings of the study showed that, students dropped out of the Master of Education Degree programme at AMADI because of many factors or challenges that influenced their progress. Students indicated that they dropped out of the university because of the lack of learning materials, financial problems, difficulty of working and studying at the same time. Some participants also indicated that the distance to and from Windhoek was tiresome. Others felt that their lecturers were not qualified to teach at the Master's level. The study recommends that MSU should have branches in different towns in Namibia and even offer distance courses. The university's centre also needs to have a bookshop to help students to access study materials. The study also recommends that the university should consider the qualifications of the lecturers during their recruitment. The study proposes that students should be allowed to register with their payslips if the students do not have the full amount at the beginning of the semester, so that the fees can be deducted from their salaries every month. This would help reduce dropout and many students will be able to register.

Keywords: *dropout, postgraduate students, financial problems, lack of study materials, lecturers' qualifications, master of education programme*

Introduction

The Namibian Vision 2030, stipulates that every Namibian citizen should be educated by the year 2030. This does not imply that a citizen must only know how to write and read, but also obtain at least a degree form a higher institution. Highly educated citizens are beneficial to the economy of a country as it contributes to the social welfare, economy and development of a country (Chalmers & O'Brien, 2004).

In order for a country to achieve the higher numbers of tertiary degree holders, it is not enough just to boost access to higher education, but students also have to be motivated to complete a degree. Since within a university pedagogical perspective, one goal is to get as many students enrolled and complete their studies as successfully as possible. According to Lassibille and Gomez (2008, p. 203) "Over the last ten to twenty years, university dropout has been a problem which has been given the highest priority by researchers within the education area and it still needs to be prioritized." A dropout of postgraduate students is defined by Pedro and Scott (2004) as a loss of students after registration and before the final examination. Pedro and Scott further claim that this challenge of losing students that faces universities every year requires the contemplation of institutional reforms that would adapt their objectives to these new

social needs without losing sight of the system's ultimate purpose. This means that a university has to maintain its effectiveness, and this would be seen through the students' success rate (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008).

Some postgraduate students after the registration of their Master degrees choose to quit their studies because of personal, job-related, and program-related reasons (Smallwood, 2004). To buttress the above, Smallwood (2004, p. 34) further states that, "Postgraduate students quit their studies because of several reasons just as students' academic career paths might vary significantly. For example, some students would complete their degrees within the minimum specified time, whereas others might take a few years longer to complete the same degree." Implicit from above is that, a plethora of reasons are advanced for one to withdraw and drop out of college leading to a short break, change of program, change of institution or total discontinuity. Considering the Namibian economic landscape, where funding in the form of scholarships and grants by the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, are availed to upgrade its human resource and add value to them, certainly financial reasons are not acceptable as justification for the withdrawal or dropping out. In the same token, taking heed of the political stability prevailing in the nation and the political leaders' will towards the provision of education, surely one may not hold it accountable for his or her withdrawal from pursuing a study at AMADI-MSU. This became the genesis and point of departure for this study prompting the present researcher to critically explore what informs MED students at AMADI-MSU to drop out and what is solidly behind the sad phenomena.

Problem statement

African Management and Development Institute has been offering postgraduate degree programs in education in Namibia since 2010. The number of students registered from 2010 – 2012 were 200 and only 30% of them successfully completed; 29% are still studying and 41% have dropped out from the program. In recent years, that is, from 2013 to 2016 the total number of students registered was 5 000 and only 40% of these completed their studies; 34% are still progressing and 26% have given up the program (Shekuhungama, 2017). Analysis of the above statistics shows a very high and significant dropout rate, which is identified as a researchable area. Although

there are many reasons provided by researchers as to why students drop out of university courses such as health problems and family problems; these reasons are not unique to students who are enrolled at AMADI-MSU for the Master's degree of Education programme in Namibia. Given that no study of this nature exists in Namibia, this study aimed to fill up this knowledge gap. It was therefore important to initiate the current research study that investigated factors that contribute to the dropout of postgraduate students in the Master's degree of Education program at the AMADI-MSU in Namibia.

This study sought to answer the following research question:

1. What are the factors that contribute to the dropout of postgraduate students enrolled for the Master's degree in Education program at AMADI-MSU in Namibia?

Theoretical framework

This study is based on the Student Integration Model (SIM) from (Tinto, 1975). This model echoes that, provided that all other variables are constant, a greater degree of integration of the student into the academic and social environment heavily influences the degree of institutional commitment, and this directly impacts on the student's decision to stay or quit (Lassibille & Gomez, 2008). This study is grounded in Tinto's student integration model.

The model theorizes that students who socially integrate into the campus community increase their commitment to the institution and are more likely to graduate (Tinto, 2007). Tinto (2006) stated that, the model is an explanatory, predictive model of the drop out process, which contains core concepts of academic and social integration into the institution. It is longitudinal and considers drop out behavior as a function of the quality of a student's interactions with the academic and social systems of the college. The theory established that in academic institutions, there are different student groups, such as African American students, students from low-income families, adult students and transfer students, with unique cultural experiences requiring group-specific interventions and policies. The minority students and students from low-income families are generally more likely to be retained in their studies if their financial aid package consists of grants as opposed to loans. In addition, when students have unmet needs (a balance remaining after institutional and

family contributions) they tend to register for part-time studies, work excessively or live off-campus. This has a negative influence on retention (Tinto, 2004, p. 203).

Tinto talked about the decision making process concerning student goal, commitment and dropout, the need to match student expectations to institutional mission, and the transitions of students moving through the college process (Tinto, 2004). To improve graduates and undergraduate retention, all institutions of higher education must offer easily accessible academic, personal and social support services. The interactions that students have on campus with individuals in academic, personal and support service centers could influence a students' sense of connection to the college or university as well as their ability to navigate the campus culture, meet expectations and graduation. Quite notable from the above is that, a university that holds high expectations; actively involves students in interaction and requires support structures in their learning to create a conducive environment where students are highly motivated and more likely to succeed (Tinto, 2004).

Literature review
Factors that contribute to the dropout of MED students
Dropout basically refers to the loss of students after registration and before the final examination (Lea & Bradbery, 2013). In other words, dropout is when a student leaves school, abandons or discontinues his or her studies, for any reason (justifiable or unjustifiable), before graduation or completion of a programme of study without transferring to another elementary or secondary school (Malene, Hanna, & Michael, 2013).

A study done by Van Dorn, Bowen and Blau (2006) on the drop out of students that were enrolled in an online program reported that students leave the online program for a variety of reasons such as personal, job-related, and program-related reasons. However, students were then asked to provide the single main reason why they left the online program. The most common responses were that, it was too hard to work full-time and be a graduate student, the program was no longer applicable to them because of a change in job responsibilities, and technology problems or limitations (Van Dorn, Bowen, & Blau, 2006). Other reasons included, the program was too demanding (in terms of hours needed to

complete the assignments), lack of interaction with students and instructors and family problems (Van Dorn et al., 2006). Lastly, Van Dorn et al. (2006, p. 222) also reported that, "some dropout students complained about the information overload as it was a problem for them plus too much reading, too many modules, and a lot of information per module."

The largest study of persistence and dropout rates undertaken in the UK involved more than 500 college staff, 8500 students, and 33 colleges. The study confirmed that students are more likely to drop out if they do not feel they have been placed in the most appropriate course or when they find it difficult to make friends. Furthermore, the same study reported that some students drop out because they find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course and some withdrew because they were less satisfied with the quality of teaching and the course timetable. Quite notable was that, some students quit because they have difficult financial circumstances or family circumstances (Warren & Jenkins, 2005).

In addition, several interviews with students of a distance Master degree program offered at Boise State University were conducted by several researchers to determine why students drop out of the program (Allensworth, 2005). Allensworth (2005) further reported that,

> Specific reasons for dropping out included dissatisfaction with the learning environment, discrepancies between professional, personal interests and the course structure, low confidence levels in distance learning, doubts about successful online communication, incompetence in using the distance education software as an effective learning tool, feeling overwhelmed by the advanced knowledge and information overload, and the de-personalized learning environment (p. 13).

Methodology
This study adopted a descriptive survey research design applied in a qualitative research approach. By utilizing this approach, the researchers understood, discovered reasons and explained the meaning of the factors that contributed to the dropout of the postgraduate students enrolled for the Master's degree of Education at AMADI-MSU in Namibia.

One research instrument was used in this

study, namely an unstructured interview guide. Unstructured interviews are free-flowing, and allowed the researchers to modify their questions in tune with the nature of the responses given (Leedy & Ormond, 2010). These permitted researchers of the current study to make sense of non-verbal cues and allowed for the re-phrasing of the same question to check for consistency.

The population of this study was all postgraduate students, who were registered for the Master's degree in Education at AMADI-MSU in Namibia from 2010 to 2017. In this study, purposive sampling strategy was used to select the sample. A sample comprising twenty dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master degree in Education at AMADI-MSU in Namibia were purposively selected for this study. The type of purposive sampling of this study was criterion sampling as all the students that participated were drop out postgraduate students who were registered for the Master's degree in Education. According to Leedy and Ormond (2010, p. 11), "Criterion sampling is a sampling strategy that focuses on participants who meet the defined criterion." Informed of the above, twenty dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master's degree in Education at AMADI-MSU in Namibia were purposively selected for this study.

The researchers made use of an in-depth unstructured interview to collect data from the dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the Master's degree of Education program. The researchers requested for permission to collect data from the dropout postgraduate students who were registered for the MED program at AMADI-MSU in Namibia and this was done through telephone and emails. Ethical clearance to undertake this study was obtained from MSU in Zimbabwe. The researchers then made appointments with all research subjects through telephone and email on the date of collecting data. The interviews were done telephonically and the whole discussions were recorded using the phone call recorder. All respondents were informed about this before phone recording started. All the participants in this study completed informed consent forms prior to taking part in the research study. The informed consent forms were emailed to all the participants.

Results

This study followed a qualitative approach that is why data were analyzed thematically and presented in themes and sub-themes. The qualitative data collected from the participants through an unstructured interview were transcribed and then analyzed.

Furthermore, thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in phases to create established and meaningful patterns (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner, 2011). The researchers' interpretations and analysis have been integrated with the literature, which serves as evidence of the themes and sub-themes (Christensen et al., 2011). The themes were identified through sequential phases, which are data familiarization, data coding, searching for themes and theme development, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and finally writing up the themes. The data were then presented in themes with transcribed quotations of the respondents being included to support the findings. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the results of the collected data are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes on the factors that contribute to the dropout of postgraduate students enrolled in the Master degree in Education program at AMADI-MSU in Namibia

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Theme 1: Lack of learning materials	**Sub-theme 1.1:** Difficult to get prescribed books
Theme 2: Working and studying:	**Sub-theme 2.1:** Difficult to go to work and to be a student at the same time
Theme 3: Financial problems	**Sub-theme 3.1:** Lack of financial resources to support my study
Theme 4: Scholarship awards	**Sub-theme 4.1:** Awarded a scholarship to study somewhere
Theme 5: Long distance	**Sub-theme 5.1:** Travelling to Windhoek every month
Theme 6: Lecturers' qualifications	**Sub-theme 6.1**: Master's graduate teaching a master student

Theme 1: Lack of learning materials
Sub-theme 1.1: Difficult to get prescribed books

Availability of teaching and learning resources (TLR) enhances the effectiveness of schools as these are basic necessities that can bring about good academic performance in students and can reduce dropping out rates. This study found that there were some participants who dropped out of their study because of the lack of learning materials.

"Since I started my study in this university it has been a problem for me to find the prescribed books. I tried to look for them in Public libraries, in different higher institutions libraries but I did not get any help. Then it has been a challenge to do my assignments or to study for examinations without any studying source" (Participant 2).

"We did not have any prescribed books. The source that I used was just few lecturer notes and internet, but I was not always able to access the internet. Therefore, I was just frustrated by the way I was forced to study by the situation, and then I decided to quit" (Participants 9).

The findings above harmonize with the finding of Warren and Jenkins (2005) who contended that some students drop out because they find it difficult to settle in at the beginning of their course and some students withdraw because they are less satisfied with the quality of teaching and the course timetable.

Theme 2: Working and studying
Sub-theme 2.1: Difficult to go to work and to be a student at the same time

This study collected information from the participants, which indicated that some participants quit their study because it was difficult for them to work and study at the same time.

"To study while you are working is not an easy task to do because you will have lot of commitments to do at the same time. It wasn't easy at all since my work was demanding to do this and that and I could not get enough time to do my assignments. I also used to face a problem to come to classes especially when the dates assigned for classes clashes with some working activities that really need my presence. Therefore, the work situation forced me to drop out" (Participant 4).

"Being an educator has not been my passion then I decided to find a new job. Then after joining a new profession that I mostly enjoy, I decided to quit the Master's Degree in Education program that I was doing, since there was no need of it because I changed my career" (Participant 7).

These findings correspond with Van Dorn et al. (2006) findings that stated that one of the main reasons that was provided by students why they dropped out was that it was too hard to work full-time and be a graduate student at the same time, the program was no longer applicable to them because of a change in job responsibilities, and technology problems or limitations.

The study found that those students who were registered to do the Master's Degree of Education at AMADI-MSU in Namibia dropped out because they could not work and be students at the same time. They mentioned that their work was too demanding and they did not get enough time to do their school work.

Theme 3: Financial problems
Sub-theme 3.1: Lack of financial resources to support my study

The study elicited the various factors that contributed to the dropout of the postgraduate students and some participants indicated that one of those factors was financial problems.

"I decided to drop my study because I was experiencing financial problems. There was no other source of income except my salary to support my study. Then it was very difficult for me to cope, since there were many expenses on my shoulder, such as family expenses" (Participant 14).

"I was in big debts where my life was in trouble, I even ended up selling some of my properties just to secure my life a bit. Therefore, I decided to dropout from my study, since education was also milking my pocket. Hence, dropping out was the only option left for me" (Participant 12).

These findings concur with those by Warren and Jenkins (2005) who stated that some students quit because they have difficult financial circumstances or family circumstances. Astleitner (2000) also stated that dropout is determined by two variables,

loss of control and the source of financial assistance as influences to drop out of postgraduate students in education. This study discovered that most students dropped out because of monetary issues. Participants revealed that they experienced financial problems after their registration because expenses were increased and they did not have any income source to subsidize them except the salary, hence their option was to drop out.

Theme 4: Scholarship awards
Sub-theme 4.1: Awarded a scholarship to study somewhere
In this study, some participants indicated that they dropped out because they were awarded the scholarship to study at different intuitions.

"I dropped out because I was awarded a scholarship to go and study at a different institution, so I could not leave the opportunity" (Participant 1).

"I was very lucky because I got a scholarship from a very good popular organization to go and study somewhere else, that is why I dropped out of this programme" (Participant 2).

Most people want to study further but education is expensive and if someone happens to be sponsored to study further that person cannot hesitate because he or she is secured and he or she can go to whatever university he or she will be sent by the sponsor. Scholarships have two main potential benefits, they attract stronger students to a given university, and may promote better performance in the university (Cottrell & Jones, 2003).

> The first type of benefit is mainly for the individual institution for the good performance record that will lead to a good history of the university. While the second type of benefit, however, may apply to all students who receive scholarships because they are being helped financially. Hence these will lead to improved academic performance throughout the system of the university (Cottrell & Jones, 2003, p. 22).

Theme 5: Long distance
Sub-theme 5.1: Travelling to Windhoek every month
Students found it difficult to travel to the institution which is far from their respective towns. Therefore, students choose the university and courses that best suited their inclinations and abilities, and the potential students preferred to go to universities that they were able to afford. This is why in many countries many students attend a nearby institution to avoid transport problems of commuting long distances every day. Many students avoid travelling long distances to school because if a student travels a long distance to school he or she gets tired and during lessons that student may not concentrate because he or she may fall asleep (Stefan & Stefan, 2011). In the present study, some participants indicated that they dropped out of their studies because they could not make it to travel long distances every month.

"When I registered at AMADI-MSU I really wanted to get that Master's Degree in Education but in the middle of my first year I was involved in a terrible accident and I was instructed by my doctor not to travel long distances or to seat for long hours. Then there was no other way I could continue with my study, I just had to quit" (Participant 2).

"I dropped out because I was really tired of travelling to Windhoek each and every month, when days of going to classes were approaching I use to be frustrated, because I had to drive that distance with lot traffics and other hiccups. To give myself a peace of mind I decided not to continue" (Participant 5).

These findings corroborate with Astleitner (2000) who contended that, the more significantly influential factors on student dropout from the educational programs are, the economic background variables, the demographic variables, the variables related to student behaviour of the student support system and the variables related to distance from home to the educational institution.

Therefore, the majority of students who dropped out were expected to travel long distances every month from their respective places to Windhoek to attend classes. Participants indicated that they were not able to travel long distances due to some personal problems and some were frustrated by driving that long and hectic road every month.

Theme 6: Lecturers' qualifications

Sub-theme 6.1: A master's degree graduate teaching a master's degree student

Quality education requires highly qualified and more experienced educators than the students. That is the dream for every institute to offer quality education, in order to inspire and attract more students. However, in the current study some participants indicated that some of the lecturers were just Master's Degree holders and they were less experienced to teach Master's Degree students.

"I was very happy to be admitted at this university to do my Master's Degree of Education, but later I was very disappointed to find out that most of lecturers that are lecturing are master's degree graduates. Then I was also desperate to find out if those lecturers are more experienced to teach master's students. Then I realized if that is how the university is I better quit and move to some universities" (participant 8).

"How can a grade 12 holder, who just completed recently, who has no experience of teaching the secondary phase can teach a current grade 12 learner? Yes, he or she can do that when there is a need because he/she has passed her or his grade 12 with the highest points but he or she is not qualified to do that for a long period. Therefore, I refused to be taught by someone who has the same certificate that I'm fighting for" (Participant 4).

The study found that some postgraduate students dropped out of the Master of Education Degree programme in Education at AMADI-MSU because some lecturers were just Master's Degree holders. They were less experienced to teach master's degree students because they were not qualified.

Conclusion

The present study established that postgraduate students who were registered with AMADI-MSU in Namibia to do their Master's Degree in Education dropped out because of the following reasons: financial problems; lack of study materials; difficulty of working and studying at the same time; tired of travelling long distances from their respective places to Windhoek every month; awarded scholarships to go and study somewhere; and the lack of qualifications of the lecturers. These were the main factors that contributed to the drop out of

students from their studies.

Recommendations

The study recommends that MSU looks at the reasons given by the former students as to why they dropped out of their degree programme so that they can come up with strategies to reduce the dropout rate of the postgraduate students. The study further recommends the university to have branches at different towns in Namibia and even to offer distance courses, it also needs to have a bookshop to help students with study materials. This study further recommends the university to comprehensively consider the qualifications of the lecturers during their recruitment. The study further recommends that the university should let students register with their payslips if the student does not have full amount at the beginning of the semester, so that the fees could be deducted from their salary every month.

This study was done on the postgraduate students who were registered at AMADI-MSU in Namibia for the Master's Degree of Education. Therefore, more studies on the dropout of the postgraduate students in different courses need to be done at MSU's main campus in Zimbabwe and in other universities in Namibia in order to compare and contrast the findings from different universities. Comparing and contrasting different findings of different studies will give universities' management committees deep and clear insights of why students drop out and possible ways to use in order to reduce the dropout rates of university postgraduate students.

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