

Tinto's Explanatory Model of The Dropout of Doctorate Students in a Malaysian Public University

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<https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v19i3.23494>

Received: 29 April 2023

Accepted: 27 July 2023

Date Published Online: 22 August 2023

Published: 22 August 2023

Abstract: The term ‘university dropout’ is widely used to describe the circumstances where students withdraw from their university studies before completion. The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover the factors and experiences that prompt students from the PhD by Research Programmes to end their scholarly journey. A priori factors in the Tinto Model was utilised to investigate the participants’ academic and social integration at university, their achievement potential, study motivation and study condition. Semi-structured interview was employed in this study. Purposive sampling was carried out on a group of eight PhD by Research Program dropouts from a public university in Selangor. Constant comparative method was used to identify the recurring themes and concepts after the qualitative data had been collected. The findings indicated that the participants faced problems with their supervisors that affected their motivation to continue with their PhD study. Personal problems related to finance and health issues further dampened their motivation. Additional issue was lack of support mechanism for the postgraduate students. Furthermore, low study motivation and study conditions added to their determination to quit. These findings can help public universities in Malaysia to develop some relevant policies to address the postgraduate student dropout issues in Malaysia. Hopefully, university authorities could address the critical issues faced by the postgraduate students to overcome the phenomenon of university dropout.

Keywords: Academic, Doctorate, Dropout, PhD, Postgraduate, Risk, Tinto model

1. Introduction

The Tinto model (1993) suggests that student retention is affected by a combination of individual, institutional and social factors. The model posits that students are more likely to persist or succeed if they feel a sense of belonging and engagement within their educational programme and institution. This sense of belonging can be fostered through involvement in academic and social activities, and interaction with

faculty and peers. There is evidence to show that an individual student's academic performance at the university can be related to certain factors. The better a student's actual academic performance and progress, the lower the risk of dropout is from university study (Larsen, Kornbeck, Kristensen, Larsen & Sommersel; (2013). This ideation motivates the current study on student dropout, raising questions on whether academic and social integration at the university, their achievement potential, study motivation and study condition influence postgraduate student dropout in higher education. Besides, malleable variables significant for university education like personal effort and enthusiasm for learning are perceived as possible means to minimise university dropout (Tinto, 1975). However, this study did not investigate both variables in the phenomenon of dropout in postgraduate education.

To date, there are various factors that have been identified to explain dropout from university studies namely socio-demographic factors, academic competence, motivation to study, social and academic integration at university and living conditions (Larsen, 2000). Among them, Tinto (2007) identified family background, personal characteristics and prior schooling as factors that could combine to give the individual student abilities or skills as prerequisites to further their study. In fact, Tinto's model emphasises the process-based interactions between individual student attributes and institutional structure framework. Furthermore, Tinto recognises that the influences outside of the university can play a major role in student dropout, but their consequences can only be viewed inferentially as shifts are bound to occur in students' educational objectives and institutional obligations. Since, there are not many attempts to develop a theoretical model to explain why students drop out from universities in the Malaysian context, hence, this study intended to study postgraduate students' dropout based on the conceptual model of Tinto (2007) to address the dropout issues among postgraduate students. Accordingly, the research questions of this study are as follow:

To what extent does postgraduate student dropout in higher education has been influenced by the following factors: (1) Social integration factors, (2) Academic integration factors, (3) Achievement potentials, (4) Study motivation and (5) Study condition.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aimed to examine research conducted on the Tinto model and its applicability to postgraduate students in higher education. The 1987 Tinto model developed by Vincent Tinto is a popular framework for understanding student retention in higher education. While the model was initially developed for undergraduate students, it has since been used to study students at all levels, including postgraduate students. Liu, Rugutt, Leluruk (2020) found that postgraduate students' sense of belonging was positively associated with their intention to persist in their programme and their academic performance. Similarly, a study by Shieh and Chang (2019) found that postgraduate students' engagement with their programme and faculty positively affected their academic performance. However, other studies have identified additional factors that may play a more significant role in postgraduate student retention. For instance, Singh and Joshi (2020) found that the use of technology and flexible learning options were important factors in postgraduate students' persistence in their programme. Additionally, students felt the need for work-life balance was a significant challenge in their academic journey.

Despite the popular use of the model for different levels of education, Yorke and Longden (2004) argued that the Tinto Model should be adapted to better fit the postgraduate student experience. They have different needs and experiences compared to undergraduate students, particularly the significant investment of time and resources made by the postgraduate students.

Overall, the Tinto model remains a useful framework for understanding student retention in higher education, including postgraduate students. While the principle of the model applies to postgraduate students, additional factors such as the use of technology and the need for work-life balance may play a significant role than previously thought. Hence further research is needed to adapt the Tinto Model to better fit the postgraduate student experience.

3. Methodology

This study employed the constant comparative method in qualitative research design. The comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is widely used in grounded theory. The researchers sorted and organised excerpts of raw data from interviews into groups according to attributes and organize those groups in a structured way to formulate a new theory. After completing open coding, axial coding allowed the researchers to make connections between the emerging codes. Then, the researchers carried out comparisons between codes with codes, and created categories that connected them together. Additionally, the interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework of Tinto (2007) and were reviewed by two senior lecturers. To reiterate, the study aimed to explore the reasons and experiences of the participants that had led them to quit their doctoral programme, and to compare the findings with the theoretical framework of Tinto's model to identify discrepancies or similarities.

The sample of this study was selected using purposive sampling, targeting participants who had dropped out of the university doctorate program in the last three years. Hence data was obtained from in-depth interviews with eight doctorate students who had dropped out from the Faculty of Education in a public university in Selangor. They were invited to the study through email, with the purpose, scope of the study and the criteria for participation explained. The participants were also assured of strict confidentiality and high ethical standards.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted in-person or via videoconferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. The interviews were designed to elicit the participants' narratives about their experiences in the programme, reasons for dropping out, and suggestions for improving the programme for future students. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcript was analysed using the constant comparative method mentioned earlier. The constant comparative method entails the following three analytical steps: coding, categorising and conceptualising. Coding involved identifying key phrases, patterns, and themes in the data, and labelling them with descriptive codes. Categorising involved grouping the codes into higher-order categories based on their similarities and differences. Conceptualising involved developing relationships among the categories and creating a comprehensive understanding of the data.

To ensure rigour and validity of the study, various strategies were employed. Member checking was used to verify the accuracy and completeness of the data, and to provide opportunities for the participants to clarify misunderstandings. Data triangulation was done by collecting data from multiple sources (i.e., the participants' narratives, programme documents, and relevant literature) to cross-validate the findings. Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging researcher biasness and assumptions and using an iterative process of analysis and validation.

In conclusion, this study employed a rigorous qualitative research design to explore the reasons and experiences of doctorate students who had dropped out of a public university based on Tinto's dropout model. The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using the constant comparative method were used to ensure the validity and rigour of the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

Informants Profile

The participants/ informants in the study come from various occupational backgrounds. Two participants were working with government agencies as school improvement specialist coach and university lecturer while six were working for non-governmental organisations (NGO) and private agencies such as a logistic coordinator, an NGO officer, a lecturer, digital marketeers, and a housewife. Hence a total of eight (no=8) PhD dropouts consented to participate in this study. They were six females and two males ranging from the age of 30 to 53 years old. Their working experience ranged from one to thirty years. Most informants indicated that the earliest they had dropped out was during their third semester, and they had failed their

Defence of Research Proposal (DRP). Interestingly an informant had stayed on until his semester eight before dropped out of his PhD candidature, i.e., the longest duration found during the course of this research. Overall, five informants had studied for one and a half years before they dropped out from their programme.

Social Integration

Guidance and Support from Supervisors

The findings indicated that most of the informants have had a good relationship with their supervisors. Five out of the eight informants voiced their notion of exceptional characteristics of their supervisors, which implicated an optimistic view of their supervisors' roles. The excerpts that follow presents the verbal statements of those who have a good rapport with their supervisors.

“My supervisors are always available to assist me even though we only communicate through emails and phone, but my first supervisor is always there to help in my study.” – Informant 3

“My supervisors are always available and ready to assist me. I expected their assistance in terms of knowledge and networking in doing the research. I have had good personal contact with them for quite some time, and my relationship with them is not why I withdrew or quit my postgraduate study.” – Informant 4

“The best part of my postgraduate study was my relationship with my supervisors. They were always available for consultations, and I gained enormous knowledge from them.” – Informant 5

“My relationship with my supervisor was good, Dr A and my co-supervisor, Prof B, were very helpful and supportive.” – Informant 6

“I had a good rapport with my supervisors, who were always there to fulfil my needs. I would expect to spend more time with them, but I understand their condition of always being busy.” – Informant 7

In this study, supervision is a complex and multidimensional task where one-to-one conscious interaction had occurred between the informants and their supervisors with mutual respect, collegiality, professionalism and open-mindedness. The above interview excerpts showed that the supervisor-student relationship reflected a symbiotic relationship in a professional environment for mutual benefits (Priyadarshini et al., 2022). In fact, the informants' positive experience (e.g. *good, helpful, supportive, fulfil needs*) with their supervisors indicates social integration which is a multidimensional construct. It has been defined as the extent to which individuals participate in various social relationships, including engagement in social activities or relationships and a sense of commonality and identification with one's social roles (Holt-Lunstad & Uchino, 2015). In a previous study, Mhunpiew (2013) viewed supervision as a system where supervisors offered five desirable supports to their supervisees viz., technical, intellectual, administrative, management, and personal support. Like the findings in this study, supervisors have been noted as a factor that contributed to doctoral students' timely completion at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The postgraduate candidates at the local university also perceived their supervisors as wise and knowledgeable, could be frequently consulted and very helpful in guiding them to complete their study. Needless to say, candidates need to have easy access to and good communication with their supervisors (Shariff et al., 2015) to complete their studies on time.

However, the remaining three informants reported having negative experience with their supervisors. The adverse outcomes highlighted in their relationship with supervisors seemed to have influenced their decision to drop out from their PhD study as the excerpts below show:

“My relationship with my supervisor was not so good. It was difficult to meet her because her office is in another building (at another location). She always gave last minute notice and last-minute feedback. Hence, it was not so helpful.” – Informant 1

“My research approach was different from what my second supervisor wanted me to follow. There was a conflict between me and her in the use of different research approach during my DRP, however, I insisted to proceed with my own approach . . . I expect my second supervisor to assist me in the art research design because she is in the art education discipline, however she has a different research approach and cannot agree with my research approach. Her approach and mentality toward art are very different from mine. . . My supervisors are the main reason as they have different opinions from me and cannot understand my research intention in my PhD study. I cannot get assistance from my supervisors as I think only pure art and design lecturers can understand my topic better.” – Informant 2

“I expected my supervisors to allow me to do my own topic, but my first supervisor expected me to do the topic of her choice in her expertise areas. Hence, to some extent the relationship with my supervisor during my PhD study was always stressful because she wanted me to do something that was not my research interest. . . My first supervisor was why I dropped out because I always encountered a lot of stress after discussing it with my first supervisor. However, my second supervisor was helpful and friendly in helping me study.” – Informant 8

“Yes, my lecturers influenced my decision to withdraw.” – Informant 5

“I think it is due to my lecturers who lack of encouragement and attention on my situation.” – Informant 7

The findings indicated that five out of eight informants identified many issues with their supervisors which is a primary concern in social integration. Their views were not aligned with their supervisors', and they lacked the encouragement to carry on with their studies. Although the faculty had assigned two supervisors for each student, conflict sometimes arose. In some instances, the student had conflicts with one of them (e.g. Informant 8) or both of them as they each had *different opinions* (Informant 2) than the student. Worse, the fact that the supervisor was not accessible as in the case of Informant 1, i.e. the *office is in another building (at another location)*, and her professional practices of giving *last minute notice and last-minute feedback* affected the informant's learning experience. This could be verified with Informant 8's experience as the main supervisor *expected me to do the topic of her choice* from her area of expertise. Overall, there seem to be a mismatch between candidates' and supervisors' interest, and this gives rise to tension and stress. These affective factors inadvertently pushed the candidates to drop out of the programme.

Interaction with university staff and peers

Part of social integration involve dealing with administrative staff. Most informants stated that they had good interaction with university staff who helped them iron out their personal issues and problems. Six of the eight informants shared positive experience as stated below:

“The university staff were very cooperative when I seek for assistance.” – Informant 2

“University staff were helpful, and I can communicate well with them. Their service was excellent, and they have done a good job.” – Informant 3

“The university staff were good and helpful.” – Informant 4

“Even though communication was not much done with the university staff, however, their service was good as they have helped me to get through my registration and other things.” – Informant 5

“Everything was fine, and the admin staff were accommodating, in my opinion. Their service was also very helpful. I have good personal experience with them” – Informant 7

“Most of the time, they responded fast, and I have no problems to communicate with them. Their service was quite helpful” – Informant 7

However, a few informants (Informants 1,6 and 7) shared their negative experience regarding the roles and responsibilities of university staff which could be summed as being counterproductive in the excerpts below:

“Overall, their services are not so helpful.” – Informant 1

“The interactions with the university staff were always too brief... their service could be better. I do not have any good personal contact with them. I also did not have any interest to build a good relationship with them.” – Informant 6

“The admin staff were not always readily available to attend to our needs.” – Informant 6

“The only disadvantage was that no one could offer or give advice on our financial problems.” – Informant 7

The three informants' experience when dealing with the support staff showed that the services rendered were not satisfactory to them. Comments *not so helpful, brief, not readily available*, and *inability to offer financial advice* reflect obstacles to the students' social integration at the faculty. As adult students continuing their higher education on their own accord, financial issues could pose a threat especially to full time students with no financial aid. In the current study, all who dropped out were married which meant that they had added responsibilities and financial strains. Undoubtedly (in)accessibility to financial resources, or the lack of information from the faculty in this matter posed a weakness in the overall support system. In fact, such peripheral support contributed to student dissatisfaction, low quality of studies (Abidin & Ismail, 2011). In fact, the lack of institutional support and the need for better institutional services and practices to be made available to postgraduate students (Sidhu, Lim & Chan, 2017) and staff (Supramaniam, Razak, Arumugam, 2020) to conduct their research work has been clearly made in the past.

Social integration also involved the informants' relations with their peers. Most of them did have an optimistic view towards the roles played by their peers during the scholarship, even some held different opinions. Five out of the eight informants voiced positive comments as follows.

“During PhD time, I have no friends, so I still mingled with my old friends from my earlier master class.” – Informant 1

“My relationship with them was very good. Some of my peers were from the same faculty, and some were from different faculty. I cooperated well with my fellow friends, and some were able to assist me in my PhD study.” – Informant 4

“They were able to assist me in my PhD study as they helped with my presentation slides and gave me much encouragement.” – Informant 7

“My relationship with my PhD course mates was good as they were very helpful and willing to provide me ideas to go through my DRP process.” – Informant 8

Nevertheless, there were some negative comments too as could be seen in the following excerpts:

“I was not able to cooperate well with other students.” – Informant 2

“I did not have many friends on campus during my postgraduate study because I was an out-campus student while doing my study.” – Informant 5

“I did not have friends around campus, which might have contributed to my decision to drop out.” – Informant 6

“Peer influenced my thinking a lot because they always told me that “family first”. However, university staff and supervisors did influence my decision to drop out.” – Informant 1

As social integration also involves peer interaction, the informants’ feedback from the excerpts above reflects that there were both positive and negative influences during their candidature. The positive comments were the assistance given in completing tasks and in rendering support (e.g. *encouragement, cooperation*) while the negative ones seem to be the inability to work with others, and reminder to focus on family. Interestingly having a good support system in the form of peer relationship could possibly have influenced some to continue their education. Not having them was a sure factor as in the case of Informant 6.

Academic Integration

Besides social integration, academic integration was also explored in the study.

Academic Goal and Expectations

Discovering the informants’ academic goal at the time of their candidature was important to learn about their motivation for further studies at the Faculty of Education at the public university.

“My goal at that time was to become a lecturer.” – Informant 1

“My goals before enrolling into the university was to get a PhD and to get a better career path as a lecturer.” – Informant 3

“I aimed to become a lecturer and have better a self-reward in my future.” – Informant 7

“My goal was to get a PhD and to become a lecturer in a public university.” – Informant 8

The answers given were similar. The above four informants shared that furthering their education would help them advance in their teaching careers, from teachers in schools to university lecturers. There were also short-term goals which could be considered as weak reasons for academic integration such as getting promoted at their workplace, as could be seen in the following excerpts:

“Doing a PhD will help me to better understand my job scope and was hoping that I could contribute better to the overall academic achievement at my district.” – Informant 5

“I wanted to get a PhD status so that I could move up in my career” – Informant 6

The interview excerpts reflected that the demand for doctorate degree was found to be highly influenced by individuals’ recognition of their future rewards (e.g., *move up in my career*) and opportunities such as better career paths and higher potential wages (Ng, Muhd, Ab Rahman & Ismail, 2011). The individuals’ academic goal and expectations seemed to be aligned with the achievement potential that would be discussed next.

Achievement Potential

Self-Confidence in Academic Study

Six informants provided positive feedback on their achievement potential throughout their PhD candidature before they decided to quit. They mentioned that they had delivered their best effort in completing the course and in gaining satisfactory results. Most of the informants had completed their research proposal for defence. In fact, an informant had even completed up to Chapter four of his thesis. The excerpts below are the informants' own voices on their personal achievement potential.

“Yes, I have gained some research knowledge and experience from my PhD study.” – Informant 1

“I did achieve great results in helping my lecturer to write articles and module which made me quite satisfied with my academic achievements. My lecturer appreciated my writing talent. I feel that I can do better if I did not drop out from my study.” – Informant 3

“I am satisfied with what I had achieved before I quit. I feel that I can do better if I did not quit my research. I was unable to complete my PhD study mainly due to my personal issues and health problems.” – Informant 4

“It was going well, and I was satisfied with what I have achieved so far. I did feel that I could do better if I got financial aid for my study” – Informant 7

“Yes, I have made good progress and I was ready to go for DRP. I have confidence that I can complete my study. I just worry that the PhD in Education that I was doing may not be able to make me a lecturer in education management.” – Informant 8

“I am satisfied with my thesis writing progress except the obstacles that I faced during data collection. I feel I could do better if there were no schools closed due to pandemic that time. I do believe that I have the potential, but I was not persistence enough to continue with my study.” – Informant 6

“In fact, I have prepared my proposal for DRP, however, I was not satisfied with the emphasis given by my supervisors. I believe my proposal would have the potential to pass if it was to be continued from an art and design perspective.” – Informant 2

“I feel that I can do better if I haven’t quit as I am still doing my own research currently that is related to my job scope. Recently, I have presented a few papers in conferences, and I was

invited to conduct hands-on coaching for teachers in schools. I know I have the potential to conduct research” – Informant 5

The excerpts above showed that almost all the informants believed that they had academic competency and ability to complete their PhD journey if not for the personal (e.g., *finance, health*) circumstances, environmental (*pandemic*) and institutional (*supervision*). Realisation of their potential for research success is reflected in their mentions of *research knowledge and experience, good progress* and *writing talent*. Evidence of their learning experience extended beyond thesis writing to presenting papers at conferences and writing modules. Without the PhD commitment, Informant 5 also continued to engage in research work related to his job, which meant that the rigorous research experience itself was not the main hindrance to them. What was disturbing in the sharing was their dissatisfaction stemming from supervision that were not aligned to their field of interest or aspirations (e.g., Informants 2 and 8), which again revolved around the relationship with their supervisors discussed earlier under social integration. Claims of what an informant did, *helping my lecturer to write articles and module* instead of his own research raises questions of the type of learning experience afforded to the candidates, and if it is aligned to the student’s objectives.

Reasons for Dropout

A total of five informants revealed that they dropped out of the programme after the Defence of Research Proposal (DRP) which prompted the researchers to conclude that this phase was a critical one in their decision to quit. At this point of candidature, the five out of eight informants pointed out personal reasons like health problems, inability to juggle with other commitments, and demotivation after they failed in their defence of research proposal. The excerpts below listed their personal reasons for dropping out.

“Before DRP I decided to drop out was due to many reasons . . . “I would say that my failure was partly due to my time management skills, lack of self-motivation and also my own financial problems.” – Informant 7

“It was due to personal reasons as it involved my mother’s health. she had a stroke at that time which caused me decided to drop out so that I can take care of my mother. At that time, when my mother encountered a stroke, I had to spend 24 hours taking care of my mother. Hence, I am not able to do any study at that time. However, I admitted that my lack of experience to conduct my proposed study was another main reason for me to drop out.” – Informant 1

“The reason I quit was more towards personal issues and health problems. However, the rapid evolution of technology has also made me feel depressed and thinking to quit my study.” – Informant 4

“The reason I withdrew my PhD study was due to my inability to juggle my work and study that mostly led me to the decision to drop out. Other than that, the panel members during my DRP session were not supportive of my intended research and kept on suggesting that I should do on other area that was not of my interest.” – Informant 5

“During data collection, it was hard to travel from one school to another. My motorcycle was stolen, and schools were closed due to the pandemic. Hence, the process became extremely difficult. Undeniably, my financial and personal problems have made me decided to drop out and I know that it was not due to my achievement potential.” – Informant 3

“I dropped out from my study during the data collection stage. I was very depressed during pandemic time because I have a big problem to collect data. All the schools were closed, and

I felt very helpless, demotivated and not able to collect data from teacher informants during MCO. However, I admitted that I also have problems in time management and personal issues. I didn't have the urgency to complete my thesis because I always felt demotivated. Furthermore, I was also diagnosed with mood disorder and Adult ADHD. Therefore, I better focus on my health issues than my study.” – **Informant 6**

“The program chosen is the reason for my decision to drop out as the PhD in the Education Department focuses more on education aspects, but my study intended to focus more on art and design.” – **Informant 2**

“I dropped out just before my DRP, that was my third semester in the program. I quit my PhD study because I worry my PhD degree might not be recognised by some universities if I want to become a lecturer in the field of management. Hence, I am thinking to do a DBA instead of PhD in Education that might give me better prospect.” – **Informant 8**

Overall, the interview findings showed that the candidates were facing various personal problems such as financial crisis, family member's or personal health issue, obstacles to collect data during pandemic and entering the wrong programme. These factors had led them to quit. Further queries revealed that these informants found their academic experience to be very stressful when they had to meet deadlines for assignments or complete progress reports in addition to encountering many personal challenges. Hence increased stress may be attributed to work overload and short durations given to complete a specific task (Baqutayan, Abd Ghafar & Gul, 2017). In this case, the requirement to pass their DRP or complete their data collection for their thesis imposed more challenges. Hence, time constraint is indeed an issue to the PhD candidates as they continue to engage with their professional lives and have less time for completing the courses. Not surprisingly, they are driven to drop out of the course (Chopra & Syazwani, 2020). Some battle personal problems such as caring for a bedridden parent, or other family commitments (Mohd Isa & Ahmad, 2018).

Moreover, financial difficulty was still the major factor that demotivated them in completing their doctoral programme (Shariff, 2015) and this could be concurred with the instance where some sought information on financial assistance from the support staff as reported earlier. Overall, most of the students interviewed in this study reported that they have good writing skills, and they had the confidence to complete their study. In fact, the postgraduate candidates from another local university, Universiti Utara Malaysia, also believed they have to possess several research skills to complete their studies on time for instance thinking skills, research methodology skills, independent working skills, decision making skills and technical writing skills (Shaarif, 2015). However, the current study revealed that more than half of the informants did not have the 'academic writing' problem as the main challenge identified in the previous study conducted by Mohd Isa and Ahmad (2018). What posed risks to their candidature was the DRP phase where their proposals were rejected, or their ideas were not taken into consideration as in the case of Informant 2 who became frustrated and eventually quit.

A question that raises at this point of discussion is the role of the DRP in the candidature of the students. This is because it is a check point to not only discuss the progress of the research but also to ensure the rigours of research is complied. Going beyond that point means candidates are ready for data collection and so forth. At times, candidates may have to attempt DRP several times before they succeed, which means they need to withstand the demands of the process like completing multiple revisions, addressing comments from several experts, and attending to formalities. Hence it is not surprising that battling *problems in time management and personal issues*, manifestations like not feeling *the urgency to complete my thesis because I always felt demotivated* (Informant 6) prompt many to end the arduous journey.

Study Motivation

The success or failure of the DRP phase also influenced the informants' level of motivation. Motivation was noted in many of their responses. Hence it was deemed important to further delve into the informants' primary reasons for enrolling into the PhD programme. Six of the eight informants shared their perspectives as follow:

"My parents encouraged me to further my PhD study." – **Informant 1**

"I wanted to improve myself." – **Informant 4**

"I believe enrolling in the education department would have no differences from the art and design department." – **Informant 2**

"To get a PhD degree will ensure a better life in future." – **Informant 3**

"It was my relationship with my supervisors during my master's education that has motivated me to enrol in my PhD study. Besides, my spouse and sons were always encouraging me to further my study." – **Informant 5**

"I was not sure with my future so enrolling into PhD was supposed to be my safety-net." – **Informant 6**

"Mostly coming from my family members as they motivated me to pursue PhD." – **Informant 7**

"I trust it was solely due to my ambition to become a lecturer that has motivated me to enrol in PhD study" – **Informant 8**

However, the informants' level of motivation fluctuated from highly motivated to demotivated throughout their semesters of PhD study, revealing a pattern among the six participants that their motivation gradually decreased by the end of their third semester. This motion could be interpreted as the point where they gave up after failing their defence. In fact, motivational factors are seen as contributing to one's diligence in completing PhD in time (Shariff et al., 2015).

The excerpts below indicate informants' views on their motivation level throughout their study.

"I was highly motivated each time when I have any consultation sessions with my supervisors as well as when I got any feedback from them over my writing. It was truly enlightening." – **Informant 5**

"It was exciting to talk to my supervisors." – **Informant 7**

"I have a high motivation during the first semester, however, my motivation declined when I failed in my DRP and got no response from my supervisor." – **Informant 1**

"At first, I have very high motivation, but my motivation dropped after DRP was due to different opinions given by my supervisors on my research design." – **Informant 2**

"My motivation was quite high, but it declined later when I encountered many personal problems." – **Informant 3**

“Initially I was high in learning spirit, but it became low as I realised that I could not cope with the ever-changing technology.” – Informant 4

“My motivation fluctuated, and I was really down when all the schools were closed down during pandemic time” – Informant 6

“My motivation went up and down” – Informant 8

However, the level of motivation could easily be affected by personal factors such as financial problem, health problem, environmental factors, and lack of support from supervisors and the university. In addition, there were other relevant aspects that de-motivated candidates from completing their PhD studies. For example, many candidates in a previous study perceived a lack of interest (32.5%), low confidence (30.0%), health problems (30.0%), emotional stress (25.0%), commuting distance (22.5%) and burnout (20.0%) as de-motivational predictors of timely PhD completion (Shariff, 2015). Shariff (2015) underlined that personal factors can influence the study motivation of the students to continue with their study.

Study Conditions

Most of the informants stated that the environment of their university campus during their PhD study did not influence their decision to drop out. It was shown that seven of the eight informants shared their positive views of their university campus, and many expressed that the university environment encourages them to study better. However, there was an informant who was forced to study at home due to the Coronavirus outbreak and therefore did not experience learning on campus. Overall, the informants' views towards university campus conditions differ from one to another.

“I seldom did my study at the campus because my faculty was far from my house. Furthermore, the new faculty did not have a proper place to sit down to do my study and writing for the proposal. The ideal place was the library at the earlier campus at Section 17 before we moved to the current location.” – Informant 1

“I have not had the chance to experience studying at campus due to MCO. Therefore, the environment on campus does not influence my decision to drop out.” – Informant 2

“Yes, I like to study at the university campus. The study environment on campus did not influence my decision to drop out but in fact, it helped me to study better.” – Informant 3

“Yes, I just like studying in the earlier campus, but in a way when the campus changed its location from Section 17 to the current location as I lost the sense of belonging perhaps.” – Informant 4

“No, because I did not know anyone at the campus and that was very constraining to my mental health. Nevertheless, the study environment does not influence my decision to drop out.” – Informant 6

“I like studying on campus because of its environment. Thus, the environment did not influence my decision to drop out.” – Informant 7

Yes, sometimes. However, the environment was not the reason I dropped out as the campus was good in general and I did my work at the student area in the faculty. Some lecturers even came by to motivate me to continue to pursue my PhD.” – Informant 8

Overall, the interview findings indicated that some candidates (e.g., Informants 3, 7 and 8) were content studying at the university (*..it helped me to study better*). They may have otherwise mentioned being stressful if the environment was not conducive. It seems like location and natural environment have strong relationship in determining the timely completion of PhD among the candidates (Shaarif, 2015). This has been indicated in past research on communities of practice (e.g., Supramaniam, Razak & Arumugam, 2020) that the university environment/ climate does influence individuals’ learning experience and well-being. It was reported in Supramaniam et. al ’s study that even experienced teaching staff, i.e. Gina and René, were influenced by institutional “changing climate” and eventually their social identities. This shows that the students’ opinion as stakeholders must be taken into consideration when major decisions like moving operations to a different location is made as this could have adverse impact as evidenced: *“The ideal place was the library at the earlier campus”, “I lost the sense of belonging perhaps”*.

On the contrary, five informants said that the home environment during their PhD studies did not affect their academic performance. The excerpts below reflect their voices providing evidence that the environment did not have a role in the decision for informants to drop out.

“My home environment did not influence my decision to drop out.” – Informant 2

“The environment at home did not influence my decision at all, I have good support from my family and colleagues.” – Informant 5

“Home environment was not the reason because I was just demotivated by my own personal problem.” – Informant 6

“No, home environment was not the reason for me to drop out. I even have a nice corner in my house for studying that helped me a lot.” – Informant 7

“Not really because I used to work and study at the library. However, during the pandemic, studying at home was stressful. However, it could be a minor reason only.” – Informant 8

Although most of the informants shared that the study condition either in the university or at home did not influence much their decision to drop out but may not be the case. Earlier excerpts and discussion do show that elements of the environment (library, distance to home, new place, study area, online/ face to face) as influencing their learning experience.

5. Conclusion

This research contributes to the literature by proposing a unique model of student satisfaction, retention, and supportive behaviour. The model emphasizes the role and importance of organizational identification, and institutional reputation in obtaining student satisfaction and staying intentions. The informants’ feedback clearly underlined the importance of identifying with the university, i.e., organizational identification, although this remains a fuzzy concept as it is difficult to delineate what aspects or when exactly an individual negotiates their personal identity to overlap with the organisation/ university’s. In the case of Informant 1, it was obvious that he reminisced the experience of being at the former space before the faculty was relocated further. Places like the library or student study area are spaces where students spent long periods of time carrying out their work. These are not merely infrastructure that accommodate to their needs but also on an abstraction level, accord opportunities for learning and cognising

which creates the scholarly identity. This aptly reflects instances of changing identities (Supramaniam et al., 2020) that is cut short due to other social factors. Arguably, the findings also seem to indicate that the personal experience (especially disappointment, dissatisfaction, lack of motivation) sometimes supersedes the institutional reputation and intention to continue candidature. Beyond their academic selves, learners have their personal lives that pose various challenges (e.g., caring for others, marriage). It is not common for university staff and administrators to tread this domain, but this forms the “bigger picture” in which individuals come from and live in. Naturally, not being able to deal with personal issues could put learners at risk of dropping out. Ultimately, institutional supporting behaviour needs to be forged closely with the scholars at risk at different levels of their candidature. Taking cue from Lave and Wenger (1990)’s work on communities of practice, support could be given at the point of entry especially when students seek support. Avenues of opportunities could be offered clearly right at the service counters handled by support staff and administrators. The entry point is also the beginning of the academic socialisation process where the PhD that is purportedly a lonely journey need not be so. At this point, subtle support could be offered by through arranged ice-breaking sessions to the course, supervisors, and course- mates that may impact the students’ satisfaction. In fact, peer support could possibly counter the “constraints to mental health” as experienced by an informant and provide a supportive network during stressful events like the DRP.

As with all research, there are some limitations to acknowledge. The data was obtained from a public university, so the findings may not be generalizable globally. Also, service quality, facilities, and organizational culture in public and private universities may be different, influencing students differently especially in terms of finance and environment. The study focused on informants who had already dropped out of their postgraduate programme in social science. Future research could be conducted in different contexts, with students from undergraduate and Master levels in different disciplines as the risk of dropping out cuts across these factors. As organizational identification strengthens over time, a longitudinal research design may capture how students’ satisfaction, staying, and supportive intentions change over time. Finally, the conceptual model may be reconfigured, perhaps with organizational identification or institution reputation as moderating constructs. It would be interesting to discover whether institution reputation is able to compensate for low service quality in teaching or support services in maintaining overall satisfaction. Nevertheless, students remain the most important customer for the university and their needs must be addressed with urgency should retention and success are to be attained. Complaints of distance, finance, space, location and supervisors cannot be ignored as these seemingly minor issues may affect the well-being of the learner.

We will end this paper with Tinto’s statement about the importance of “implementation for effective action towards dropout in higher education”, meaning that if we want to be successful, we need targeted well-designed research, improved state with each university department (including teaching staff and student organisations) engagement towards prevention, as well as continuous monitoring and evaluation of implemented measures.

6. Acknowledgement

The research was conducted based on a research grant funded by Universiti Teknologi MARA under the project code: 100-TNCPI/GOV 16/6/2 (029/2022).

7. Co-author contributions

Author 1 and 2 were responsible in the research conceptualization; literature review, writing and data analysis; Author 3 and 4 were responsible in data collection and author 5 and 6 were responsible for literature review and instrumentation.

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