



EXPLORING THE FACTORS AFFECTING GRADUATE SUPPORT SYSTEM AND
ENGAGEMENT LEVEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION DEGREE AWARD AT SIAM
UNIVERSITY, BANGKOK THAILAND

2019

Thematic Certificate

To

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This Independent Study has been approved as a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of Masters of Business Administration in International Business Management

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Graduate Support and Engagement

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Siam University Bangkok, Thailand

Title of Research: Exploring the Factors Affecting Graduate Support System and Engagement Level in Higher Education

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Date 25 / May / 2019

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ABSTRACT

Students in this rapidly changing world need a reliable support system to enable the intended educational outcomes. However, on the other hand, many institutions of higher learning, globally are perceived to lack a comprehensive student support system that effectively and efficiently cater for graduate students in higher education. This study utilized the Documentary Research Methodology (DRM) to explore the perceived factors affecting the graduates' support system (GSS) and the engagement level of graduate students in higher education. The DRM tool was used to systematically select and review 63 of peer-reviewed articles on student support-system and engagement. Reviewed articles were retrieved from the Wiley online Library, Siam Library, ResearchGate Library, and Scientific Research Library, to generate the Graduate Support System and Engagement Model (GSS-EM) for use by the institutions. The paper argues that since the landscape of higher education is changing rapidly, the overall commitment of the graduate students to engage and to succeed will factor on a comprehensive support system implemented by relevant and useful management. The Model generated from this study may serve as a tool for future empirical studies on the topic or related areas of academic research. Recommendations were offered to relevant management bodies in higher learning institutions to adopt support systems that meet both local and international best practices.

KEYWORDS

Student support, International Graduates, Engagement, Student-engagement.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My special gratitude goes to my family and friends, and to everyone whose kind, moral and financial supports have brought me to this stage of my academic endeavor. I will not hesitate to mention my dearest mom, Margaret, for her constant love and prayers, and my senior brothers, Wilfred Okenna and Franklin Azubike, for their immense supports. I also owe immense gratitude to my dear friend from Nairobi Kenya, Daniel O. Adipo, for always standing by my side, providing me with enough academic guidance and psychological supports to keep going and to my dearly beloved Titilope Thomas and Stella Agaga all the way from my undergraduate days till present. I also acknowledge my good friend from the United States, Bob M. Russell, for his financial supports. My gratitude also goes to my supervisor, Associate Dr. Om Huvanand and my favorite lecturers and friends Dr. Frank Faulkner, whose flexibility and liberal teaching style always uplifted the spirit. I will also not forget the positive effects of Dr. Alex Igundunasse and Dr. Akintayo from the Department of Psychology, faculty of the social sciences University of Lagos, Nigeria.

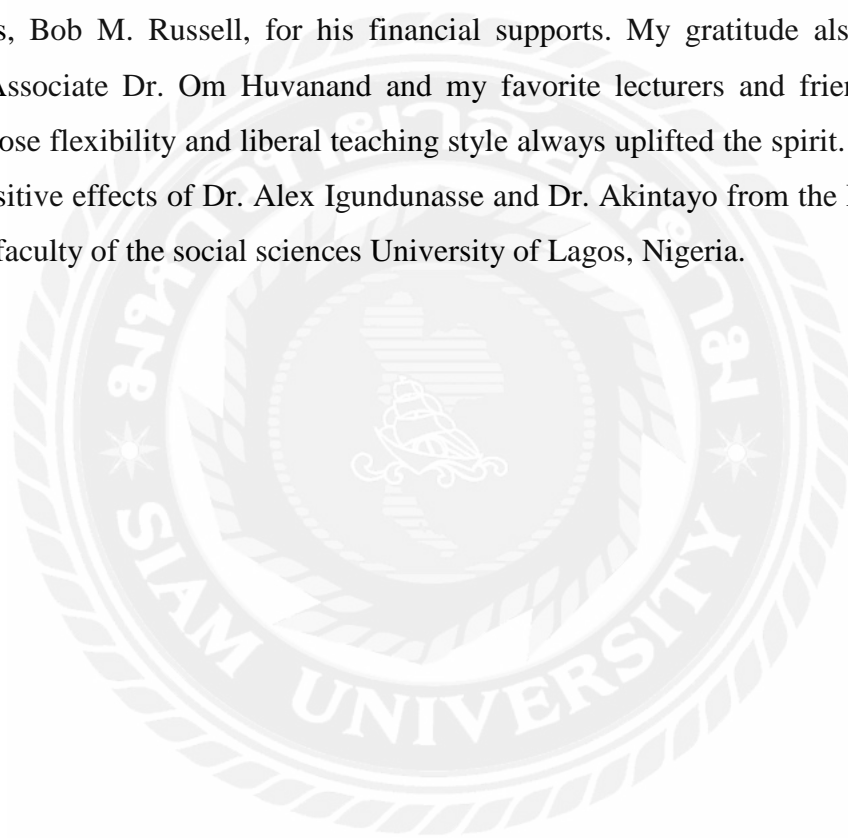


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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Study Background

Although the student support system is not a newcomer in the higher education setting, there is still insufficient data addressing relationships between students of higher education and their institutions (Tett et al. 2017), and its overall impact on engagement. Hence the need to continually scan and evaluate student support system outcomes (Burch et al., 2015) to catch up with the rapid changes that take place in higher education across the globe today (Ngamkamollert & Ruangkanjanases, 2015). On the other hand, the rate of students' withdrawal from university education, and the impact made by the increasing diversity of students on university campuses across the globe are as the two main concerns in higher education that trigger the need for improved student support services, and students' education experiences. (Dhillon, 2019).

It is also true that making meaning and purpose clear for the choice of programs (Schneider and Preckel, 2017)) is not only for the adult students who chose the programs, but also for the educators whom the students see as role models, and as more experienced. Family involvement is also implicated in student support services (Cummins, 2014). In designing the policies for efficient and effective student services, factors such as values and beliefs of the employed staff, policy formation and implementation, services and curriculum designing, practical students' assessment methods within and outside the school environment may be considered as indispensable as well.

Under the literature review section, the study examined previous studies on the distinctive factors (Buasuwan & Jones, 2016) that affect international graduate students ranging from the

students' personal needs, and the demands due to the place they, management and interventions (Hatch and Bohlig, 2016), and their overall impact on engagement.

In line with the above, the study has identified three principal factors as instrumental in designing a comprehensive student support framework: the student-teacher responsibility, the student-institution responsibility, and the student-family responsibility. This study aims at finding out how these three principal factors may be deployed in designing a comprehensive student support system model that will boost student engagement.

1.2. Research Problem

The need to advance student engagement in business schools is receiving academic attention due to its close association with learning outcomes (Magni et al., 2013), with evidential challenges encountered when applying the student support interventions that work becoming more ambiguous than ever. In order to have a gestalt knowledge on graduates' support, it is pertinent to explore the relationships that are created by the emergence of marketization of education in recent times, and to channel interventions through effective support services which will aid international students to cope with the challenges they face in higher education (Rhein, 2017; Rhein 2016).

Douglas Rhein also argued that the increasing demand for English Graduate programs is posing a significant challenge both for the competing higher institutions and the students whose first language is not English, especially today when speaking English is perceived to aid business activities in Thailand (Franco & Roach, 2018). Another perspective needing urgent answer is why in spite of the hype in education over the past decades, student retention and enrollment still remain a general problem (Australian Government 2015; National Center for Education Statistics 2015), with perceived and factual multiple adverse effects on the

students, the institution, the families, and the society at large (Crosling, 2017; Aljahani, 2016)?

What strategic plans are being implemented to address the external challenges such as rigid immigration policies, language barriers, coping and surviving (Coertjens et al. 2017) with no possibility of working during the period of study? What about the internal issues within the institutions that bother on high tuition fees, curriculum planning, and designing, information and communication flow between the students and the management? And how do these factors influence the engagement level of the students? Apart from bridging the existing knowledge gap in student support and graduates' engagement level in literature, this study submits that understanding the factors affecting the students' support system and the international graduates' engagement level would be the primary objective of institutions of higher learning today's globalized and fiercely competitive world.

1.3. Research Objective

This study, therefore, aims at achieving the following specific objectives:

- 1) To identify some underlying factors that affect graduates' support system and their engagement level in higher education.
- 2) To evaluate outcomes based on the existing relationships between graduate support and engagement.
- 3) To generate a comprehensive graduate' support system and engagement model (GSS-EM) that is suitable for application in Thailand's higher education, and across other countries.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study set off by exploring the background of student support and engagement variables vis-à-vis their perceived impacts respectively. Research problems and objectives were examined and identified, leading to the exploration and review of previous studies on student support interventions and its relationship with student engagement. Understanding the students' unique needs and applying interventions tailored to those needs were instrumental in designing the comprehensive student support system proffered in the study based on the theories that apply. Since the study aims to generate an efficient student support system (CSSS) model that is both effective and efficient in boosting the engagement level of international students, the researchers utilized the Documentary Research Methodology (DRM) to access and evaluate previous data on student support and engagement. Journals articles were retrieved from the Siam Library, Wiley Online Library, Scientific Research, and Research Gate academic search engines. Over 68 materials were extracted from the different journals while about 40 were assessed and cited based on their validity, authenticity, and relevance to the topic, and referenced accordingly in APA format. The study culminated in generating a conceptual framework model based on the reviewed studies and offered recommendations on how to implement comprehensive and useful student support services for international students.

1.5. Significance of the Study

There are many reasons why this study is necessary apart from closing the knowledge gaps created by the perceived sparse data on the student support system for the grads and post-grads in higher education. Erstwhile data on graduate studies in Thailand and Malaysia focused mainly on the economic benefits and the prided status accorded to institutions who

offer international programs (Chapman & Chien, 2015). While it may be argued that student support system has longstanding traditional expediency in higher education, there is no clear-cut general modus operandi for its operationalization as every institution will most likely adapt SSS policies that best work for them in their different countries and cultures.

There is also the need to differentiate between the challenges faced by local students and the international students, and to meet the needs accordingly (Roberts et al., 2015). This study is also relevant in today's competitive higher education industry especially in Thailand where even though there is an ongoing surge in the internationalization of education, student retention and enrolment seem asymmetrical. Perceived lack of comprehensive student support system and management could lead to student disengagement and consequently to dropouts which are often correlated with the retention issues.

1.6.Operational Definition of Terms

Student Support- involves any activities designed to lessen or remove the challenges students in higher education encounter in school to achieve their academic goals, and maximize their unique potentials.

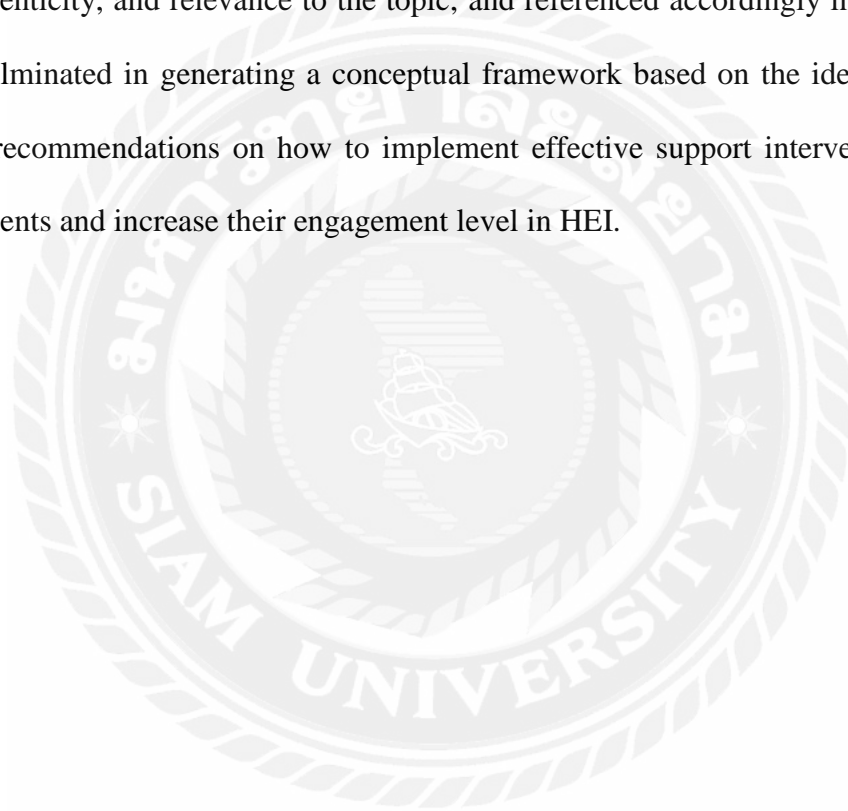
Engagement- involves the act of being physically, cognitively and emotionally absorbed in any activity. Engaged persons are happy, productive and satisfied.

Student Engagement- involves the extent to which a graduate student is attentive, curious, interested, optimistic, and passionate about their academic business and how motivated he or she is in the process of learning and acquisition.

International Graduates- involves graduate students in higher learning institutions who are domiciled in countries other than their home country for academic reasons.

1.7. Methodology

The study aims to identify some root factors affecting the graduates' support system (GSS) and the graduates' engagement level (GEL) to generate a comprehensive graduate's support system model (GSSM) that is both effective and efficient. The researchers had utilized the Documentary Research Methodology (DRM) to access and evaluate previous data on student support and engagements. Journal articles and relevant past studies were retrieved from the Siam Library, Wiley Online Library, Scientific Research, and Research Gate academic search engines. Over 80 peer review articles were retrieved while 63 were cited based on their validity, authenticity, and relevance to the topic, and referenced accordingly in APA format. The study culminated in generating a conceptual framework based on the identified factors and offered recommendations on how to implement effective support interventions for the graduate students and increase their engagement level in HEI.



CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

2.1. Student Support

Simpson (2016), described student support as the cognitive (or academic), organizational and emotional (or non-academic) supports that come as packaged services (Dassanayake & Busige, 2018) to enhance student involvement (Dassanayake et. al., 2017), which consequently results in positive outcomes in a long run (Arinto, 2016). Also, questions have been asked on when, how and why student support intervention is crucial given the challenges that go with the transitioning from secondary education to higher education (Sanne et al., 2019).

Sibley et al., (2017) viewed the comprehensive student support system as a structured intervention that addresses the in-school and out-school factors that may impede the students' optimization and success. Christie et al. (2016) have linked students' academic succession and stabilization to pleasant experiences. In a sample to determine the topmost stressors encountered by the students from the teachers' perspective, 76% of teachers cited family stress, 62% cited poverty, followed by learning and psychological problems (52%) as the most occurring decimal in the outside factors affecting student's overall optimization and success (Sibley et al., 2017)

Meanwhile Tett, Lyn & Cree et. al. (2017) through a longitudinal study have observed a paradox among the perceived increase in higher education marketization, seen increase in student support activities and perceived decline on global student enrollment even though student support appears to be on a steady rise in place and time when neoliberal managerialism is everywhere (Venugopal, 2015). The emergence of neo-managerialism and masculinity in higher education may be affecting the student support initiatives in diverse

ways, with a possible change on outcomes possible when the gender status quo in higher education is challenged (O'Connor, 2018).

Other emerging studies have linked the uniqueness of student's needs with students support in higher education. For example, being first in the family and attending the university share correlations in specific ways (Wilson and Linda, 2018). They found existing relationships between the first in family students and cultural mismatch- an indicator that students who are first in a family may have unique challenges different from the other students in higher education (Banks-Santilli, 2014; O'Shea, 2016).

Further research defined a comprehensive student support system as a complete system that offers solid supports to all students based on their strengths and needs for their success (Hawaii, 2016). Van Rooij et al. (2018) also identified a lack of motivation and dissatisfaction with support services as some of the factors that affect retention even when a student's GPA is high. The early evolution of the student support system operated on a simplistic model with management and instruction placed over the students' needs, hence the need for more research on student support and engagement (Van Herpen, 2019).

2.2.Engagement

Even though the term engagement has no generally accepted definition it may be described as both active and passive ((Azevedo, 2015; Sinatra et al., 2015) depending on the context of an application. Active engagement is usually visible to an observer like when a teacher observes her students' attentiveness and body language in the classroom while passive engagement describes the students' interest and participation in extra-curricular activities (Nguyen, 2016). Meanwhile, other researchers have inter-used the construct with motivation and flow (Christenson et al., 2012).

Previous studies described engagement as a combination of three perspectives namely: cognitive, behavioral and emotional (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012). Cooper described cognitive engagement as the intrinsic drives that propel one towards excellence while Shernoff (2013) described it as the hidden traits that increase the drive to learn, understand and master knowledge or skills. Emotional engagement is associated with feelings of belongingness in a setting and with others (Renninger & Bachrach, 2015). It also has a social dimension outlook that combines or attaches wellbeing and success to external bodies, institutions or others. Nguyen (2016) further viewed engagement from three dimensions: conduct in a setting, participation in activities, and interest in set objectives.

2.3.Student Engagement

It has been wondered if the emerging customer-identity ascribed to the students (Rhein, 2017) on the premise of the new managerialism in the higher education setting will factor in the overall ambiguity in student engagements. Van Herpen et al., (2019) has found positive relationships existing among the student-institution interactions, student–peer interactions, sense of belonging, and first-year academic performance. Also, productive interactions between faculty management and international students have been associated with a definite sense of belonging (Kim and Lundberg, 2016). A 2015 Gallup-Purdue has also reported a positive relationship between high tuition fees and high engagement level (Gallup, 2015)

In another study investigating how student engagement in school is associated with grade, gender, and contextual factors across 12 countries, and whether these associations vary across countries with different levels of individualism and socioeconomic development, results revealed the female students reporting higher engagement than males. And it was also found that family-student support is stronger in countries where collectivism is a prevalent culture (Lam et al., 2015). Lietaert et al., (2015) also found a difference in engagement gender-factor, with teacher and structure (institution) effects on student engagement level. Woodard &

Fatzinger, (2018) has also found that supporting collegiate activities are linked with students' success beyond the university experience.

2.4.International Graduates

The growing number of international students across the globe has led to the adoption of internationalization as a means for sustainability in higher institutions (Smith, 2016). Apart from the multiculturalism and global outlook, this trend attracts to host countries; Smith also argued that the internalization of students in higher education contributes to the economic growth of the host countries. The United States and Canada, for example, top the list of choice destination for international students especially from China, India, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that by 2020, the number of international students across the globe will be twice more than what is known presently (OECD, 2014).

International graduate students who are satisfied with their university management and student-oriented activities will most likely recommend their school to their friends (Garret, 2014), which will, in turn, improve the university's competitive marketing advantage. Also, determining international students' learning experiences, satisfaction, and general well-being through a survey (Golding et al., 2016) requires an institution to integrate student-care dimension in their management scheme to boost students' satisfaction and productivity level. Integration should be devised to extend beyond the faculty or institution. Relevant studies found that one of the integration challenges faced by international students is lack of close friendship with students or non-students who are citizens of the host country (CBIE, 2014; Gareis, 2012).

Other studies have identified factors affecting international students in higher education. In a survey among international students in Malaysia, Joseph (2017) identified a need for

achievement, subjective norms, economic situations, and entrepreneurial training as factors predicting entrepreneurial intention among international students. Another study identified homesickness, culture shock, the local language, financial constraints and discrimination as stress inducers among international students in China (Gebregergis, 2018). Zavrel, (2015) also submitted that Graduate students in foreign countries should be given roles higher than just academic support to best equip them to confront and find solutions to global challenges.

PAST RESEARCHES

Factor affecting Graduates Support System

a. Information Quality

Gürkut and Nat, (2018) have found that Information Quality has a direct effect on how satisfied students of higher education generally feel during their programme. Gürkut and Nat argued that student support system aids the management in decision-making, and also satisfies the students' different needs. It is also true that creativity and learning will improve when information is well integrated and exchanged between the management and the students (Abubakar et al. 2017).

b. Management Decision/Influence

The management of higher institutions makes decisions that directly or indirectly affect the students. Decision making is the nucleus of an organization's success. Bayangan-Cosidon (2016) submitted that to better implement ideas that will serve both the students' and the management's best interests with regards to academic activities; the management needs to work with the student support systems. Ciobanu, (2013) also observed that when it comes to students' affairs, the management is very often laden with decision challenges.

c. Student Perception/Attitude

How the students feel, and their attitudes toward the student support system (SSS) play a vital role in the effectiveness of SSS in higher institutions. Alzahrani et al., (2017) found a positive relationship among information quality, system quality, and service quality, and satisfaction with the student information system (SIS) positively correlates with increased frequency of user-behavior and confidence in the GSS.

d. System Quality/Innovation

Upgrading the SSS from the traditional modus operandi in higher education to the changing landscape in modern tech-innovation also improves students' confidence and engagement. Mir and Mehmood (2016) investigated the effectiveness of an online student support system. Results indicated that more students were satisfied with the upgrade and functionality of the SSS. Sherifi (2015) also found that students of higher education were happy with improved internet-enabled SSS.

Factors affecting graduates' Engagement

a. Student/Teacher Relationship

Student retention and student engagement issues had been a topical area of research in higher education (Groves et al., 2015). Findings indicate that apart from social factors (peers, family backgrounds, and others' influence), educators such as teachers and course advisors, institution policymakers, and the research community affect students' engagement level in a higher education setting (Jung-Sook, 2014). Students see their teachers as models and as more experienced (Dhillon, 2016).

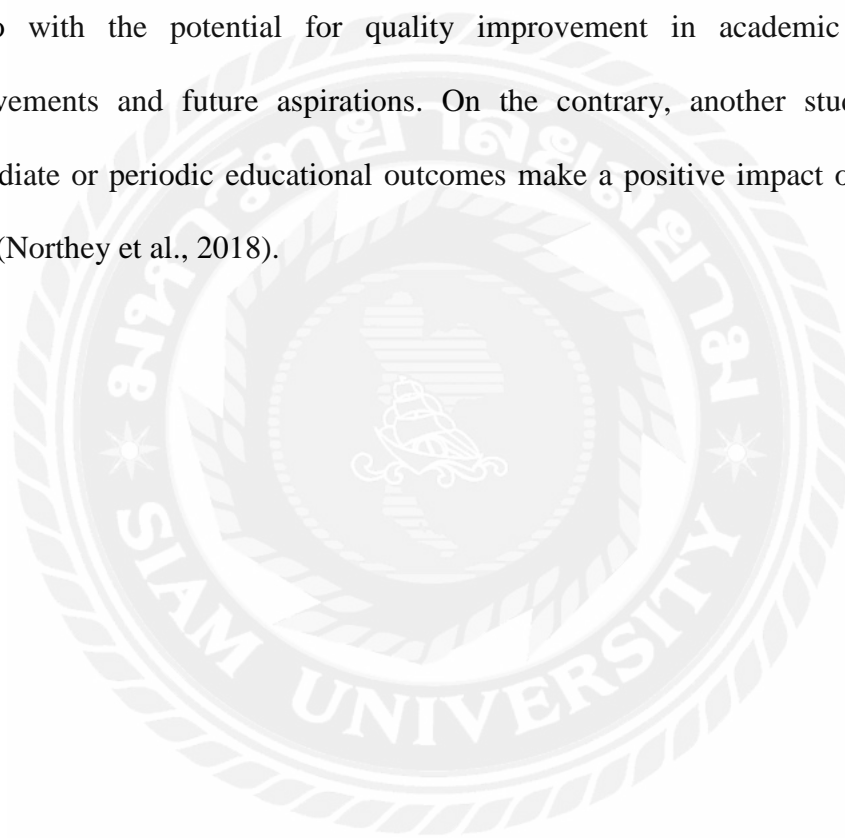
b. Quality of Management

In designing the policies for efficient and effective student services, factors such as values and beliefs of the employed staff, policy formation and implementation, services and curriculum designing, practical students' assessment methods within and outside the school environment are considered as important student engagement

(Ciobanu, 2013). Student-faculty interaction also indicated a significant positive correlation with students' engagement and performance (Hu et al., 2014).

c. Student Academic Performance

Student academic performance is generally the outcome of many interactive variables in higher education. Some researchers who share a holistic view on engagement believe that student engagement is a process of quality development and therefore should not be measured by periodic evaluation or assessment (Ella, 2013). It has more to do with the potential for quality improvement in academic performance, achievements and future aspirations. On the contrary, another study found that immediate or periodic educational outcomes make a positive impact on engagement level (Northey et al., 2018).

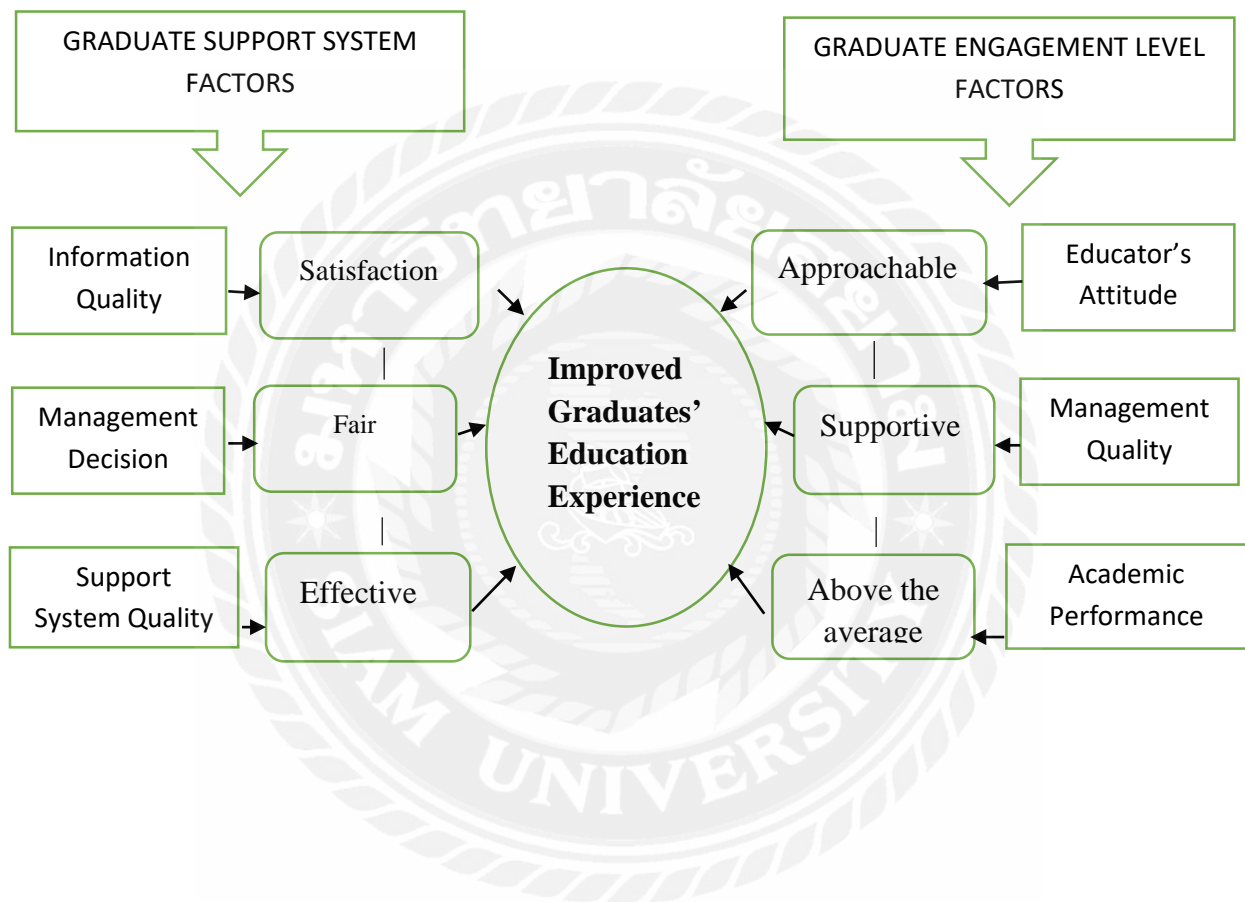


CHAPTER 3

Findings

Established framework

FIGURE 1: Graduate Support System and the Graduate Engagement Model



CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Graduate students of HEIs across the world continue to face myriads of challenges especially today when it's almost impossible to catch up with the changing landscapes in the business of management. Little or no time is allocated to think about the graduates' welfare in a way that would make meaningful impacts and help them cope with disruptive circumstances and events. Emphasis is placed more on the marketization of HEIs and profit-making. The latter is a common trend today and may be attributed to the 'rush-hour' situations orchestrated by the emergence of new managerialism in higher education institutions (HEIs).

This study was aimed at identifying some root factors affecting the graduates' support system (GSS) and the graduates' engagement level (GEL) to generate a comprehensive graduates support system and engagement model (GSS-EM) that is both effective and efficient. The logic behind this inquiry is that most of the available data and recent academic literature had focused mainly on the student support interventions offered by the students' families and schools from the nursery education up to the undergraduate level. Lack of sufficient data on graduates' support system (GSS) and their engagement level creates a massive gap in the literature.

Meaningful Insights on factors affecting Graduate Support System in HEIs

Under the Graduate Support System (GSS) three primary factors were identified from the reviewed articles- Information Quality, Management Decision, and Support System Quality. The information Quality is practical and useful when the content of the information is explicit, firm, reliable, and dissemination prompt and tightly targeted. The paper argues that quality information would lead to student's satisfaction.

The second factor that affects the GSS is Management Decision-making processes. If it is true, as it seems in today's rapidly changing management philosophy, that students of higher education are customers, then it is fair that the students be treated with care. The institutions' management decision should primarily be concerned with how to retain their customers (students). The paper submits that appropriate management decision on student welfares will increase retention and students' loyalty.

The third primary factor identified under the GSS is support system quality. It is the submission of this paper that improved student intervention strategies will boost graduates effectiveness and increase their trust and confidence level on the entire management system of the institution.

Meaningful insights on factors affecting Graduates' Engagement in HEIs

Three primary factors were identified in the above model. First is the educators' attitude or behavior towards their students, their institutions and their work itself. Educators are perceived as role models by their students, and as experienced and competent in their teaching occupation. This paper proposes that the positive attitude of educators toward their occupation (through commitment, punctuality, dedication and emotional presence {availability and approachability for example} will boost their students' confidence, trust, commitment or engagement level.

The second identified factor under the Graduates Engagement is Management Quality. Management quality deals with how HEIs package and brand their services to meet objectives and goals. In designing the policies or strategies for active graduates' support interventions, the paper argues that outcomes must meet students' expectations. Expected positive outcomes would lead to graduate students' engagement and retention.

The third factor identified under the Graduate Engagement is the academic performance of the student. It is perceived that students whose academic performance is above the average may want to keep it that way by engaging more of their time in educational activities. The drive may come from the inner motivation to achieve excellence and from the external motivators such as praise and recognition. The paper argues that above the average score or high performance will lead to engagement and satisfaction ultimately.



CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The paper explored and identified six primary factors that affect graduates' support system and graduates' engagement respectively in higher education settings. The Documentary Research Methodology (DRM) tool was used to extract peer-reviewed literature on student support and commitment. The identified factors were categorized as two distinct variables under the Graduate Support System, and Graduate Engagement Model (GSS-EM) established in the conceptual framework generated by the study.

This paper may be considered as a tentative milestone that could usher in more academic inquiries into the student support system with a particular focus on the graduates of HEIs. The paper admits limitations due to the methodology applied. Important variables from the research topic should be subjected to statistical manipulations and quantitative analyses by future researchers who might be interested in digging deep into the subject matter.

Research Methodology Justification and Limitation

Even though the Documentary Research (DRM) approach is still an essential research tool in academic settings, especially among the social scientists (Ahmed, 2010), its usability has always been undermined by the frontline academic researchers. The argument is often based on the fact that DRM does not cover research objectivity (numbers and figures analyses) as the quantitative method does. Lack of quantitative analysis of variables with statistical tools such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for example, has been the greatest weakness of DRM. However, the latter remains a valid tool in an academic discipline, mainly because it aids in literature review analysis, theoretical and conceptual formulations. Results from this study may be considered as tentative, and therefore lacks generalizability due to the method used. However, further

research into the subject matter may find the conceptual framework established in the study useful in other ways.

Recommendation

The management of higher education institutions in ASEAN communities, higher education institutions in Africa and other developing regions with distinct values, languages, and cultures may find the contents of this article useful. For example, Douglas Rhein (2017) argued that the increasing demand for English Graduate programs is posing a big challenge for both the competing higher institutions and the students whose first language is not English, especially today when speaking English is perceived to aid business activities in Thailand (Franco & Roach, 2018). How this trend affects graduate students may be considered with keen attention by the management of research institutes in the country, to see how to best tap from the opportunities offered by the availability of international graduate students whose first language is English. For instance, Institutions of higher learning in Thailand may push for more relaxed visa policies that will allow the visiting exchange students or the full-time students to share their wealth of English Language knowledge in the transactional agreement form.

Meanwhile, the current policy on education visa (Ed) does not allow international graduates to work; not even on a part-time basis. Management of HEIs in the country may also utilize such opportunities in ways that could benefit both the graduate students and their host institutions in a win-win situation, by implementing strategic policies that will ensure a strong student support network that meets international best practices as more and more students from across the globe, enjoy visiting Thailand for education-tourism, medical tourism and etc.

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