Towards a Synthesis of the Perspectives on Student Dropouts in Oman

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Abstract

The development and growth of any emerging economy rests on the shoulders of the youth of that nation. The countries in various parts of the world are experiencing alarming rate of drop-outs of students from the education system. It is of paramount importance that the reasons are identified and addressed. This is of greater importance to the various economies in the Middle East and GCC who aim to diversify by creating a knowledge economy. This paper attempts to identify the macro and the micro perspectives behind student drop-outs from the tertiary education and endeavors to suggest some intervention strategies to address this phenomenon. The methodology involved collection and analysis of the secondary data available followed by a qualitative research at a private educational institution in Oman. The findings were analyzed using Gilbert’s Behavioral Engineering Model. The results indicate that personal, academic and financial reasons contribute to the majority of student dropouts. These can be effectively detected, measured and addressed by putting in place proper institution-wide systems and partnerships and by offering contextually relevant academic and student support services.

Keywords: Student dropout, higher education, Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Non-completion of upper secondary education has immense consequences not only for the individuals concerned but for the societies they live in. Youth who drop out of upper secondary education have difficulty in not only securing and maintaining stable employment and growth but also earn far less (Bradshaw et al., 2008). Coming to the effects on the society, completing upper secondary is a necessity to ensure full participation in civic life and to ensure better chances in the labor market (Lyche, 2010). The phenomenon of students dropping out of upper secondary education is prevalent all around the world, but seems to be severe in the Middle East. This cannot be ignored especially considering the focus of the government on diversification and sustainable development in this part of the world. This paper aims to research and further understand the reasons behind students dropping out of higher education institutes. Due to the importance of this stage in an individual’s education since it sets the career path, it is extremely important to research and analyze the reasons behind students making the decision to drop out and try to keep the numbers at a minimum by designing suitable strategies. The research starts by looking at the larger scope of statistics in Oman, and then focuses on the statistics of a private higher education institution - Modern College of Business and Science.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The predominant cause of student dropouts in USA and other parts of the world has been found to be Social reasons like racial and ethnic differences followed by financial reasons (Davalos, Chavez and Guordiola, 1999 and Chen and DesJardins, 2010 etc.). However, in the Middle East where most of the students are sponsored by the Government through scholarships, the reasons are very different.

Abdulla and Ridge (2011) in their research in UAE regarding young Emirate men found that they drop out of school at year 10 and comprise of almost 13% of drop-outs around different cities in UAE. Also, those who do continue to pursue further education have poor quality of English speaking skills and are poor in learning the language instructions. In particular, it means that they are ill-prepared for the switch to a full English medium institution. This further intensifies the problem and leads to greater male attrition rates in higher education. With regard to socio-economic
stratification, it was clear that young men in the northern emirates have higher drop-out and university no-show rates than those in Abu Dhabi or Dubai. Same findings are echoed by the subsequent article by Chaudhary (2013). However, the effect of the economic incentives that could have resulted in low higher education participation by males was not explored in the study. Socio-economic status and its differences across the whole geography of UAE was not considered.

Al Ghanboosi and Al Qahtani (2011) conducted a comparative study of Student Drop-Out Trends at Sultan Qaboos University and Kuwait University. The study shows that in SQU, the male students have a higher tendency of dropping-out of their studies, than the female students. At colleges that are scientifically oriented, the drop-out numbers are even higher. Even the students with higher school GPA have a large drop-out rate. In Kuwait University, freshmen and sophomores tend to have higher drop-out rate than the other students, while at SQU the rates are higher in senior and junior years. However, the reasons that cause students with higher GPA to drop-out, as well as the reasons behind the higher male students’ drop-out numbers were not included.

According to Ghafour (2010) a big number of Saudi students, approximately 88,000, were studying abroad under the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program. About 30% of the students drop out of foreign universities mainly because of family reasons and an inability to cope with studies.

Several reports and articles in the newspaper and magazines - Times of Oman, Muscat Daily, Y magazine-- over the past two years have been bringing out the phenomenon of high student drop-outs in Oman. They cover various aspects from the effect on the economy to the probable causes for giving up education. The economic effects include the considerable financial pressure on the government’s scholarship system, loss of potential knowledge pool from the private sector, lost opportunity for students who failed to receive the scholarship etc.

Some causes that lead to abandoning the studies range from personal reasons, academic, to financial reasons. These include emotional turmoil, getting married, lack of motivation, flaw in education system, time required to finish the studies, poor level of English, the huge cost etc. However, the details were not captured.

Through the review of literature, it has been found out that some of the main reasons which forced college students to give up on their education before receiving their degree are personal issues, academic issues and financial issues. However, the objective of this study is to find out the specific concerns in the various categories and thereby identify suitable intervention strategies to overcome this phenomena in the higher education institutions.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research aiming to find the reasons and numbers behind drop-outs had two research phases: first, a secondary research which was done through gathering existing information from the Ministry of Higher Education to further understand the numbers and analyze the gathered information. Second, a micro study with a focus on the Modern College of Business and Science alone was undertaken using qualitative research method. All data is analyzed, and conclusions and recommendation are made.
Findings

Macro Study: Secondary Research

The secondary research to this project was through checking and analysing statistical data about drop-outs from the Ministry of Higher Education for the years 2010/2011 and up to 2013/2014.

Fig 1 demonstrates the number of total dropouts from both private and public educational institutions throughout the four academic years being studied. It shows a stable increase in the number of dropouts per year.

Fig 2: Total Number of Dropouts per Academic Year from 2010 to 2014 (by Gender)

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

Fig 2 shows the numbers of drop-outs in total and in both genders. This data proves that although more females are known to getting scholarships, more males drop-out of college.

Fig 3: Reasons given by students for Dropping Out

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

In general, Fig 3 indicates some of the key reasons students claimed by students for dropping out of college. The chart shows that the majority describe their reasons for dropping out as personal. Which means that they are either too shy to pick an answer or the reasons could be family related or they could even be unspecific which would lead many to pick the answer: Personal Reasons. Other major reasons are - being expelled, academic failure and financial reasons. Unlike personal reasons, other reasons such as these are easier to find solutions for.

To go in-depth with the numbers even further, the tables below show the exact statistics of reasons behind dropping out of college as well as gender and sector (Private or Public) for each Academic Year:
Statistics of the Academic year of 2010/2011 show most students having personal reasons, unknown or other reasons to describe why they have dropped out. As presented by the numbers, most drop-outs come from Public Higher Education Institutes by males. However, it is important to note that the Public sector does take a larger number of students and initially, if it were to be calculated in percentages, the difference gap wouldn't be as large.

“Unknown” reasons were a sizable number in the private institutions and “other” was significant in public educational institutions. These two categories are however vague.

The following year, 2011/2012, most drop-outs are males (as they are in all years investigated) however, most males through this year have dropped from Private Higher Education Institutes. This is due to personal reasons, financial reasons and their education being interrupted. The same is shown in 2012/2013 report in the next page. Though the predominant reasons for drop-outs remain the same, however, more females were found to drop-out from private institutions.
As for the final year of our studies, 2013/2014, the majority goes back to males from Public Higher Education Institutes as shown on the below table. The trend is similar to the previous year.

Table 4: Reasons for dropping out by HEI type and gender in the academic year in the academic year 2013/2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for leaving HEIs</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>HEI</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expelled</td>
<td>1045</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic failure/not permitted to continue</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of desire to continue study</td>
<td>1706</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>1036</td>
<td>1304</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other personal reasons</td>
<td>2253</td>
<td>976</td>
<td>1277</td>
<td>1405</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interruption of study</td>
<td>1513</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>1004</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial reasons</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health reasons</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete program</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceeded the allocated time limit of study</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td>7716</td>
<td>2559</td>
<td>5157</td>
<td>4044</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>3672</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Higher Education Admission Center 2017

It is interesting to note that there are a lot of personal reasons among the list in the table, which cover almost all the possible personal reasons. However, the high proportion of selection of this category could either include difficulties of living outside their home towns or lack of motivation to keep up with the academic rigor, which is not explicitly mentioned or documented. Considering that the students are allowed to choose their higher education institutions, the former reason may not be highly prevalent. So, the difficulty in facing the academic rigor could be cited as the predominant cause. This calls for more and better academic and student support services like advising, peer tutoring, counseling etc. from the higher education institutions.

Micro-study:
Data collected over the last five years by MCBS about the students dropping from the institution is as follows.

![Fig 4: Number of Student Drop-outs from MCBS](image_url)

Among the reasons for drop-outs as captured by MCBS, the split up is as follows: completion of study; left study; current study; postponed; transferred; withdrawn.

The major proportion of the student drop-outs could be categorized under “left study”. As the reasons were not evident from the title, a qualitative research was undertaken using the in-depth interview method with the major touch-points of student drop-out information like the Registration department and the Student Affairs department. From the several interviews conducted with the staff in the two departments, the reason for drop-outs could be summarized as: personal reasons, academic reason, financial reasons etc.
Personal reasons include: 1. distance from their hometown and difficulties living in Muscat; 2. getting married; 3. child rearing duties; 3. found employment; 4. not willing to continue studies; 5. poor health etc. Academic reasons found are: 1. Difficulty in acquiring the required level of English; 2. Academic failure; 3. Difficulty level of college courses etc. Financial reasons found are: 1. Expiry of sponsorship period; 2. Inability of parents to continue sponsoring studies;

The majority of the drop-outs were found to fall under the “Personal Reasons” in line with the statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education followed by academic reasons.

The cause analysis was done using Gilbert’s BEM Model provides insights on the intervention strategies that can be adopted to check and minimize the student drop-out problem.

To address the information factor across the individual and environmental level (college level), the academic support services can be enhanced by providing mentoring, academic advising, student tutorials etc. The instrumentation factors can be address across both the levels by forging alliances with organizations providing the required services. Eg. Financial institutions to provide student loans, child care services, organizations to provide reliable and hygienic living conditions and food etc. Student support services like personal counselling can help in addressing the student personal issues and suggest them the best alternatives considering their present and future needs.

Lyche 2010 emphasizes on the preventive measures for early drop-out by strengthening academic support services. Considering that the public schooling system involves Arabic as the predominant language of instruction, the major higher education institutions have ‘foundation programs’ in place to supplement student needs. Also, mentoring and tutoring has been suggested for those not picked by earlier intervention. Providing sports activities are also being emphasized as a vital measure.

Lack of motivation has been cited in most research around the world as the primary cause for dropouts (Markussen, 2010). It can easily be measured by absenteeism (Hernes, 2010). This could mainly be addressed by providing appropriate academic and student support services like effective academic advising, student-peer tutoring, counseling etc. These services must be provided both at the HEI level and at the Ministry of Higher Education who are the sponsors of majority of the students coming to the various educational institutions in Oman. This would help prevent students from leaving their studies, especially those who leave for vague reasons.

Monitoring of student disengagement and individualized intervention through effective advising and mentoring program is being recommended by Hammond et al., 2007. Further, considering the cultural and the academic context in Oman, it is suggested that the academic advising be made more effective using multi-tiered advising which involves academic advisors apart from personal mentors speaking the local language, who could provide psychological support and guidance to students to overcome their specific challenges.

Instrumentation factors which include capacity, support, tools and resources can be effectively addressed by forging partnerships with organizations providing the right type of services like financial support, child care support, personal support services like transportation and food. These can also be powerful grounds for industry-academia partnerships.

Student support services such as faculty monitored student peer-tutoring provides the endangered students to have open communication thereby helping them to seek clarifications openly and thereby instill academic confidence. Also, it helps the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFORMATION</th>
<th>INSTRUMENTATION</th>
<th>MOTIVATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ENVIROMENT</td>
<td>Difficulty level of courses</td>
<td>Difficult living conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expiry of govt. sponsorship</td>
<td>Inability of Parents' sponsorships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL</td>
<td>Inadequate proficiency in English</td>
<td>Getting married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child rearing duties</td>
<td>Academic failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poor health</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Gilbert’s Behavioural Engineering Model for Student Dropouts
student tutors to keep in touch with the current contents and concepts thereby improving their self-efficacy. Overall, the student peer tutoring program can lead to high academic and social engagement.

Effective student counselling through trained and experienced clinical psychologists helps the students to vent their difficulties and frustrations and further seek psychological help. It would greatly enhance the effectiveness if the counselling is provided in the native language to create cordial relationship and understanding.

For the aforesaid intervention to be put into action, the study suggests the following:
• Transition support should be provided by the Higher Education Institution when the students move to the college environment. The same should be pursued when they move between levels within the HEI e.g. from the foundation to the credit courses and then to the senior courses or internships and finally while trying to seek employment and further studies.
• Propensity to drop-out should be identified early by implementing an effective advising and mentoring system. This should then be followed by intervention measures to address those specific issues.
• Effective deployment of resources towards the identified intervention measures can be achieved by undertaking appropriate risk analysis. Sharing of the generated information between the transition phases and industry partnerships would help to put in preventive measures and need specific interventions.

The above-mentioned measures such as institution-industry partnership systems, academic and student support services etc. can prove to be significant considering the huge investment by government in scholarships to students and the educational system especially with the aim is to develop knowledge economy for sustained development.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has offered analysis and insights into student drop-outs in the Sultanate of Oman, using secondary data and qualitative study thereby integrating macro and micro perspectives. The research study attempts to identify the major reasons behind students dropping out of colleges and suggest suitable strategies to control the phenomenon. Personal, Academic and Financial reasons were found to be the major causes for student dropouts. Personal reasons were found to be the predominant reasons, followed by Academic reasons followed by Financial reasons. Using Gilbert’s Behavioural Engineering Model and synthesizing the various perspectives, it is evident that providing effective academic support services, student support services and key alliances with external organizations can help in improving the student retention and graduation rates.

REFERENCES