



Postgraduate Studies: Ambition, Self-achievement and Reality: Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the reasons why Libyan students decide to pursue postgraduate studies. In this study, the factors that motivate them to pursue their studies both at university and The Libyan Academy are investigated to create a broader understanding of their purposes in enhancing their academic career and social status as well. The sample consists of 82 students (female = 70 (85.4%) and male = 12 (14.6%)) who are master/PhD degree students studying in different fields at the Libyan Academy and university. The data are obtained from a close-ended questionnaire in a Likert type scale with adequate validity and reliability and a semi-structured interview. The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically and the quantitative data were analyzed employing percentages. The results reveal that there are no differences in motivating factors for having degrees between male and female students. However, the motives for pursuing postgraduate studies vary displaying ambition and reality of doing these studies. The results also show the reality of doing postgraduate studies locally and the associated barriers.

الدراسات العليا: الطموح، وتحقيق الذات والواقع: وجهات نظر الطلاب

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الكلمات المفتاحية:

الطموح
الأحلام
العوامل
الإحباط
الدوافع

المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة تستكشف الأسباب التي تحفز الطلاب الليبيين لمواصلة الدراسات العليا وذلك من خلال كشف العوامل المحفزة من أجل فهم أوسع لطلاب الأكاديمية وجامعة طرابلس علي مستوي الماجستير والدكتوراه شملت العينه 82 طالب وطالبة بينهم 12 ذكور ونسبته 14.6% و70 اناث ونسبته 85.4% في تخصصات متعددة. جمعت معلومات الدراسة من توزيع استبيان وإجراء مقابلات مع الطلاب في كل من الأكاديمية وجامعة طرابلس. وظهرت النتائج عدم اختلاف في العوامل المحفزة لمواصلة الدراسات العليا بين الجنسين ومع ذلك هناك تنوع في الدوافع والطموح. كذلك أظهرت النتائج واقع الدراسات العليا محليا والعواقب المرتبطة بها

1. Introduction

Embarking on postgraduate studies is a significant decision, often driven by a blend of personal, social and professional aspirations. For many, the quest for deeper knowledge and academic passion propels them into advanced studies. For others, the need for specialization or advanced qualifications to achieve professional goals is another essential reason behind pursuing postgraduate studies. Thus, the motivation for pursuing a postgraduate studies can be categorized as either extrinsic (related to job issues, mentors and peers and social prestige) [1]; [2] or intrinsic motivation as the primary impetus for graduates (personal interest, dream -self achievement [3].

Doing Postgraduate Studies

Doing postgraduate studies seems to be a dream that might not come to reality one day. To the contrary, this dream turns to be a reality when these intentions are fed with ambition and tenacity, career development, fulfilling an academic requirement and self-achievement.

In the Libyan context, embarking postgraduate studies has not been a dream anymore because of localization of such studies. Such a decision has taken the dormant dreams and hundreds of students have started their long journeys towards obtaining masters or PhD degrees in a variety of fields. The reasons or factors that compel these students to think and pursue postgraduate may vary. In the Libyan context, more people than ever before decide to pursue postgraduate studies after completing their undergraduate degrees. Such increase of postgraduate students has lead the Ministry of Higher Education, universities and the Libyan Academy to establish branches and centres for postgraduate studies covering almost all the country.

Diverse motives and interest trigger students to join postgraduate studies despite the age and distance. This paper aims to explore the motives, interests and reasons of postgraduate students who pursue their study currently. Thus, this paper aims to empirically delve into

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the impetus that trigger the intent to pursue postgraduate degrees from the participants' perspectives.

2. Factors of Pursuing Postgraduate Studies

The reasons or factors that trigger these people to think and pursue postgraduate may vary from one context to another influenced by various factors starting from the family to the friends and so on. These reasons might exist in one case or many. At the same time, certain individual reasons might spring differently.

3. Family and Friends

An important motivation for undertaking postgraduate studies is the encouragement of family and friends, including peers who are already engaged in postgraduate programmes [4]. While the family encouragement might be interpreted as family expectations of high levels of educational achievement, this is stated explicitly in the current research. Hence, advice and encouragement from the people around students can be expected to play an important role in making decisions about study choices at this level. For instance, parents' desire and socioeconomic status of a family may support students and make them think of having academic degrees depending on the unique conditions of the families and the students respectively ([5]; [6]) Friends/peers can also play a great role in stimulating students' intention to pursue postgraduate studies ([7]; [8]; [9] [10]).

4. University/Institution Academic Rank

The prestige of the university can also play a great role in stimulating students' intention to do postgraduate studies ([7]; [8]; [9]; [10]). For instance, [11]s study found out that students from more prestigious universities are more motivated to do postgraduate studies than those from less prestigious ones. In such universities the study is more competitive and thus students think of having such chances especially if they can get scholarships.

[12] conducted qualitative research and studied the motivation of Tanzanian students for postgraduate study. The findings revealed that the main reasons were getting promotions, and better salaries, making progress or changes in their careers, developing themselves to gain prestige and achieve self-realization. Similar findings have been confirmed in other studies by ([13]; [14] [15]; and [16]).

5. Teachers/ Supervisors

Other studies mentioned that mentors, teachers or supervisors can play an important role in inspiring students' interest to pursue graduate studies ([17]; [18]; [19]; and [20]). In such cases, the motivators trigger the intention and stimulate the tenacity of the students. Furthermore, mentors can stimulate students' interest in conducting scientific research and encourage them to have higher education.

[21] found that lecturers/teachers/doctors briefly mentioning postgraduate studies appears to have effects on persuading students to take up this possibility. They play a valuable role in influencing the decision-making of embarking postgraduate studies. Lecturers/teachers/doctors/professors also influence students as role models who are passionate about their research and share that excitement during lectures [22]. This exists particularly if there is close relationship between these and their students.

In the Arab countries, [23] also conducted a study to find out the students' motives to join graduate studies in Palestinian universities: Birzeit, Al Najah National University, and University of Jerusalem through a distributed questionnaire to investigate the motives behind their decisions. The results of study showed that the motives of joining the master programmes were arranged by their strength as follows: professional, scientific, psychological, economic, unemployment, and social motives

[24] also has conducted a study aimed to identify Jordanian male and female students' motives to enroll in the graduate studies at three universities: the University of Jordan, Yarmouk University, and Mutah University. The results revealed that the motives to join the graduate studies were as follows: psychological motive, cultural motive, scientific motive, economic motive, and social motive which similar to [23] study .

For instance, in South Korean, [25] explored the factors that influence South Korean university graduates to pursue postgraduate studies and found that gender and age had an impact on students' decisions. [26] investigated American engineering undergraduates' view regarding doing graduate studies. They found that the inherent

background characteristics of individuals, such as gender and race, had little impact on their intent to pursue graduate study.

In the Libyan context, embarking postgraduate studies has not been a dream anymore because of the localization of such studies in several institutions across the country. Such a decision has woken the dormant dreams and hundreds of students start their long journeys towards masters or PhD degrees in varieties of fields. The enthusiasm, diverse motives and interest trigger students to join postgraduate studies despite the age, distance, and other obstacles [27]. This paper aims to explore the motives, interests and reasons of postgraduate students who pursue their study currently. The existing literature on motivations to undertake higher education has worked mostly from qualitative data gathered from interviews, focus groups and open-ended a questionnaire. This study aims to empirically delve into the impetus that trigger the intent to pursue a postgraduate degree from the participants perspectives.

Moreover, despite the fact that research method and design performed within the current study are not suitable for the generalization of the research findings, the findings obtained may be expected to constitute a reference source for further studies to be realized in this regard.

6. Methodology

The study is a mixed methods approach with an exploratory design [28] combining both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the motives for joining postgraduate studies and the factors that trigger many people to embark these studies despite many hurdles. The approach enabled the researcher to reveal the reality of the phenomenon based on participants' lived experiences [29]. Since, the researcher is involved in postgraduate studies, this situation enabled her to gain deep understanding of the reasons behind enrollment in postgraduate studies by asking the "how" "why" and "what" questions.

The participants are postgraduate students who have started their studies at the Libyan Academy and University of Tripoli recruited from the fields of Natural Sciences, Engineering, Law, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Languages. They are at different stages of their studies. Two types of sampling were employed: a random sample for the questionnaire and a convenient sampling for the semi-structured interviews. Since the researcher is a staff member teaching at the mentioned institutions, it was easier to have a sample including both males and female Libyan students though female students were the majority compared to male ones.

Before the process of data collection started, issues of ethical considerations were adhered through obtaining oral informed consent from all participants. Maintaining confidentiality throughout the research process was assured to all of them. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with postgraduate students as well as focused groups at different times. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis [30] through reducing, organizing and synthesizing the data, and searching for common patterns/themes. The codes emerged were chosen and used to illustrate the key issues emerging from the interviews and focus group. Issues of ethics were adhered to prior to data collection processes.

7. The Findings

Analyzing the data obtained from both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups demonstrates the factors that motivate many students to enroll in graduate studies despite the diverse barriers. Some of these factors are similar to what exists in the literature though new issues are raised by the participants of this study.

7.1. Improving Financial Situations

With reference to this point, 70% of the participants consider having a degree as a means to improve their financial situations. There was no difference between male and female students. With regard to salary increase two postgraduate students comprehensively summarized the views of the participants.

After being employed, I realised that there was a big disparity between the salary of Bachelor degree holders and those holding a Master's degree in the same field. This motivated me to go for further studies in order to raise my salary (Master's student7).

In the same line student 5 stated *I was motivated to join the postgraduate programme to develop my career and get a higher salary (Master's student5)* and PhD student3 asserted the same idea *having a new degree certainly changes my financial situation and opens new channels for work.*

7.2. Promotions

Promotion is considered another motive for graduate students on international level and Libyan are not exception. In the questionnaire, 50% of the participants think that holding a new degree is the key to a promotion and take up more responsibilities. However, male students represented 35% of this category. This is related to the idea that holding higher academic degrees qualify people and give them the priority to have higher positions. This is also known that males seek higher positions more than females for many social considerations. In the interviews, the participants confirmed the findings of the questionnaire. A master student stated;

I am an employee and if I have a master degree, I will be promoted to a higher position than the one which I am in. In this case I have a new position, a new status and my salary increase (Master's Student 4).

Another summarised the words of most of the students stating;

I look forward to having a higher position, but these needs having a certificate, I mean having a new degree. The company will send me for training. Thus I have to work hard and finish and my place is waiting for me (Master's Student 6).

7.3. Academic status

Some postgraduate students presenting (50%) thought that it was essential to upgrade their qualifications to enable them take up more responsibilities as academicians in their fields. There were no differences in terms of gender. This factor is different from what exist in the literature. In these studies, it comes earlier than the other factors. Social and economic conditions might be related to this option. During the interview such views were similar despite the different specializations among the participants. Some stated;

I believe that having a PhD would increase my salary, but more importantly it would build my capacity to execute the main duties of an academician like doing research, becoming a consultant and research supervisor. To do these, I would need a PhD, which is the appropriate qualification (PhD student1).

Having a PhD is a milestone, it gives you prestige, and people trust you in many undertakings. So, this is something that I have been dreaming of for quite some time (PhD student 5).

With a master degree I can teach at universities, public and private. This will change my academic situation (Master's Student1).

7.4. Better Jobs

Postgraduate studies offer better chances for better jobs despite the specialization sometimes. The results reveal that 70% of the participants expressed their intention of enrolling in such process with the aim of finding better jobs. Some of the participants mentioned;

I came to realise that with a Bachelor degree, it is very hard to compete in the labour market. Nowadays, a lot of graduates are unemployed, and so having a Master's degree will increase my chances of getting a good job (Master's student 6).

A higher degree gives you chances for better jobs with many employers. You can find part time jobs in many places (Master's student 1).

7.5. Social Prestige

The results show that a considerable number of the participants representing 50% regard having a graduate degree as a means of gaining a new social status. This also was noticed during the interview where only females students asserted on the social status more than male students in many instances.

I want people to call me Dr, why not. I am going to be Dr...and this is a big achievement for me (PhD student 2).

I spent years looking forward to gain this. I Like people to call me Dr instead of Miss, I deserve that (Master's student4).

It has been my dream to be called Dr wherever I go. Therefore I started my postgraduate study towards making this dream real Dr...

7.6. Self-Achievement

Some postgraduate students representing (30%) think that they are seeking self-achievement. There are differences between males and

females students who constitute 20% of the group. This might be related to other social factors. When they were interviewed, they commented:

I graduated 4 years ago and started working. I am dissatisfied with my job. I could not find myself; I feel it is not my place here. I have to look for myself and having a new degree is the answer (Master's student1).

Doing graduate study is a chance for me to fulfil my dreams and finding myself in the position I have always dreamed (Master's student3).

7.7. Having a New Network

Surprisingly, some postgraduate (female) students chose this item and they represent 10% of the participants. During the interviews, this issue was discussed further. One of the participants claimed that:

I have a lot of free time but I do not have much contacts and connection with different types of people. When I embarked my study, I began a new new work in which I discuss and talk about new things. This changes many things in my life and believe me, even in my way of dealing with people. This is itself an achievement (Master's student3).

Now I have a new group in which we discuss, listen and arrange things together at home or the Academy. The study offers me this (Master's student2).

7.8. Frustration and Despair

The results show that a considerable number of the participants representing 40% were frustrated with current situations of graduate studies and associated decisions. There was no difference between male and female students concerning this feeling.

I began my study and I was full of hope to have a chance and get a scholarship to pursue my PhD journey as I have planned. I have known and seen what happened to scholarship programme. This kills all my hope. I feel as if I have done nothings, what I can say...(Master's student5).

It was my dream to be a staff member at my university. Look every day we find a new decision as if they don't want us to study. They impose the age as a factor of not accepting new teachers after a certain age, why we are different from the other countries. I could not find answers (Master's student4).

7.9. Enrolling in Postgraduate Study as a Trend

Although, the number of the participants is small, doing a graduate study has become a trend and particularly among female students. This finding is a new surprise and there was no reference to such idea in the literature.

I began my study because some of my friends registered in the Academy and they called me to do the same. I was hesitant at the beginning and when I started my lectures, I found some cases like mine (Master's student7).

To be honest, I have not thought of enrolling in any graduate studies and neither my cousins nor other relatives seem to pay attention to it. Suddenly one of my first cousins registered and my mother was there. As soon as she came back, she called and told me to do the same saying "why not you" "is she better than you?" (Master's student8).

7.10. Challenges/Hurdles

During the interviews, the participants referred to various challenges /hurdles they encounter in their studies not only at the Academy but also at university as well. These challenges are similar since they are connected to essential issues to graduate studies. They mentioned Lack of facilities, lack of libraries and update sources, lack of training/seminars and conferences, shortage of staff members and no activities.

It seems that the Academy doesn't pay attention to make the library the most visited place when it is updated with sources students need. I thought this is in the Academy only. My friends told me; the university is worse (PhD student3).

The students also claimed that they could not find special training that they could not be offered outside.

It is rare to hear about a workshop or a conference to attend. I want to learn and improve myself, but there is no chance (PhD student1). Even seminars are few and sometimes we could not attend for many reasons. We want to learn but how? (Master degree student 4).

7.11. Looking for Supervisors

Many students have serious worry concerning finding supervisors. Although it is a current issue, it represents an important problem to which many expressed their confusing views.

We have serious problems; we could not find supervisors. I do not know people from out the university, I have no information about them. I don't know who to ask and where to go. I come from a very far place and each time, I couldn't find someone to ask and time is running (Master's student3).

7.12..Lack of Activities

Many students referred to the lack of having activities for graduate students which contribute their academic development. One student gave a comprehensive view of what students feel.

I come to the lectures and I leave; I couldn't find any activity to participate with others. I thought it is only me, but now I know many students have the same feeling.

8.Discussion

The findings of the current study demonstrate some similarities with the previous studies. For instance, as a priority, improving financial situations and getting better jobs came first among the factors that motivate many students to enroll in postgraduate studies at both the master and PhD degrees. This is line with [12]who found increasing salaries is an important reason for doing graduate studies. Similar findings have been confirmed in other studies ([13];[13];[14]and [16]. In the Libyan context, doing graduate studies is motivated by the desire to get promotion (better jobs) and have new social or professional status (social prestige). As one student mentioned “*I want people to call me Dr, why not. I am going to be Dr...and this is a big achievement for me (PhD student 2)*”. This is connected with changes occurring in the society which still regards having academic degrees qualifies a person to have new position. This also corresponds with the findings of ([24]; [23]and [12]).

Unlike other contexts, improving the academic status comes third in the reasons of enrolling in graduate studies. Moreover, this choice is connected with family's desire especially when the parents are academic staff working at university or other institutions. The family, teachers/supervisors' encouragement and expectations of high levels of education play a central role in on persuading students to make this decision. The current study is line with ([4];[5];[6]and [21]). The sample of this study included some students whose parents are academic staff at universities, which confirms the views of the participants.

Friends/peers can also play a great role in stimulating students' intention to pursue postgraduate studies. The findings of this studies are similar to ([7] ;[8]; [9] ; [10]).

Doing graduate studies as self-achievement received only (30%) which is different in order compared to the existing literature. However, this is similar to ([12]; [13]; [13]; [14];and [16]).

The surprising finding is pursuing postgraduate studies as a trend; something has not been dealt in previous studies. This is influenced by drastic social changes in all sectors of life and the impact of ongoing conflict affecting life in the Libyan context. The findings of the current study also highlight some challenges to which the participants referred such as frustration and despair, Lack of facilities, lack of libraries and update sources, lack of training/seminars and conferences, shortage of staff members and no activities. Such findings are the context-connected. There were no references to such in the previous study.

9.Conclusion

This paper investigated students' perspectives of embarking postgraduate studies at both University of Tripoli and the Libyan Academy. It also explored the reasons /factors that trigger them to do so. A questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were used and they revealed that Libyan students share views mentioned in the literature though they vary in some factors. However the findings also show some challenges/hurdles related only to the Libyan context.

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