An Investigation of Self-determination Factors among Postgraduate Students

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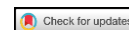
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ABSTRACT

The influx of adult students furthering their studies in universities as postgraduate learners have created more issues on learning and learners. Learning has taken many forms- full-time, part-time, online, distance learning and many more. Learners can be fresh school leavers or even working adult adults. Learners can be pursuing certificates, diploma, bachelor degree or even postgraduate studies. There are also studies conducted to understand self-determination factors of these learners. This qualitative explores the pushing factors that influence students to embark on postgraduate studies. This study also looks into factors that retain as well as demotivate the students in the study programme. A purposive sample of nineteen students narrated their first-semester learning experience in log entries. Data from the entries were analysed and coded to reveal pushing, retaining as well as demotivating factors among postgraduate adult learners. Results of the findings have an interesting implication on demotivational factors of adult, postgraduate learners.

Keywords: Adult learners, Learning, Postgraduate, Pushing factors, Retaining factors, Demotivational factors.

Highlights of this paper

- The influx of adult students furthering their studies in universities as postgraduate learners have created more issues on learning and learners.
- Learners can be fresh school leavers or even working adult adults.
- The findings have an interesting implication on demotivational factors of an adult, postgraduate learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of Study

More and more students choose to further their studies after completing their undergraduate degree. While they are some who chose to study full time, many have chosen to study part-time or through distance learning. By the time a student completes his/her undergraduate studies, he or she is already considered as an adult learner because (a) he then becomes a working adult, and (b) he becomes an adult learner the moment he/she embarks on graduate studies.

With the influx of postgraduate admissions in universities, comes a new problem. The problem is; postgraduate students either (a) could not sustain the motivation and quit halfway, or (b)they take a longer time to finish than the initial plan.

1.2. Statement of Problem

The study by Sogunro (2015) reported eight factors that are critical in sustaining the motivation of postgraduate students to complete their studies. These factors include learning environment as well as students' personal traits. Why do these factors contribute to students' successful learning?

Next, one of the main factors that influence rankings of universities is the number of students who graduated on time (GOT). The perseverance of graduates to sustain their studies until they graduate is influenced by many factors.

1.3. Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to look into the factors that influence motivation of postgraduate students. Specifically, this study is guided by the research questions below;

Research Question 1: How do the pushing factors influence postgraduate students?

Research Question 2: How do the retaining factors influence postgraduate students?

Research Question 3: What are the demotivating factors postgraduate students face?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Psychology of Adult Learning

In order to understand the psychology of adult learning, one needs to be aware to some principles that form the roots of adult learning. According to Chen (2014) there are three tenets that form the foundation for adult learning.

2.1.1. Adult Learners are Self-Directed

First of all, adult learners are self-directed. They are known to have an innate desire to learn. With this desire, these learners actively plan and execute their own learning. They value opportunities for relevant problem-solving learning. As such, adult learners no longer view the teacher as the gatekeeper of knowledge. They view the teacher

as facilitator and collaborator of knowledge who continuously guides the learner and facilitates to create an environment for self-directed learning to take place.

2.1.2. Adult Learners See Learning as Transformative

Secondly, adult learners look at learning as transformative that leads to personal development. Transformative learning takes place when long-standing beliefs are being challenged. This transformation enables the learner to be more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change. Mezirow (2009) presented four levels of transformative learning. Based on Figure 1 , the four phases are (a) having experiences, (b) making assumptions, (c) challenging perspectives and (4) experiencing transformative learning.
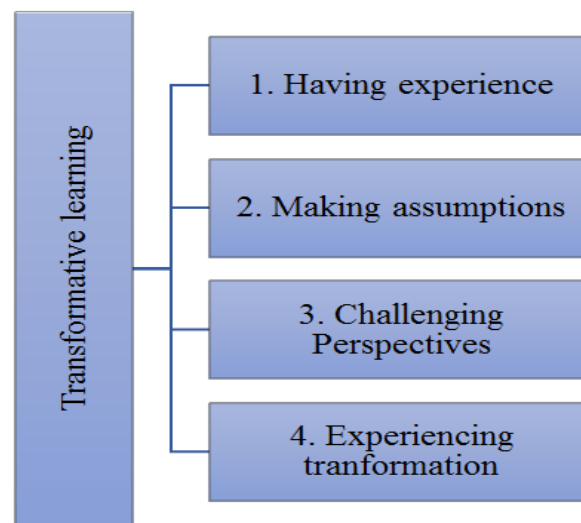

Figure-1. Four levels of Transformative Learning.
Source: Mezirow (2009).

In addition to that, there are there common themes to Mezirow's theory. The themes are; the (a) centrality of experience, (b)critical reflection, and (c) rational discourse in the process of meaning structure transformation. Actually, it is the learner's experience that serves aa a starting point for transformative learning. The experience will then lead to critical reflection on the part of the learners.

2.1.3. Adult Learners are Able to Make Critical Reflection

The third tenet of adult education is critical reflection. What makes reflection critical is its focus on understanding and uncovering power dynamics. Transformational learning takes place when the learner's own knowledge is challenged. The process of winning the challenge would lead to critical reflection on the part of the learner.

2.2. Theories Related to Adult Learning

Although adult learners can be considered as having genuine intrinsic motives for embarking on their postgraduate studies, their motivation can be influenced by different circumstances. According to Taylor (2017) adult learners are influenced by internal (motivation) and external (social dimensions, job status, feedback, long-term consistency) factors when they are making decisions to further their studies. Taylor and Hamdy (2013) summarized several theories related to adult learning. The theories are instrumental, humanistic

2.2.1. Instrumental learning Theories

Instrumental learning theories focus on individual experience and include behaviourist and cognitive and experiential learning theories. Firstly, for the behaviourist believes that a stimulus in the environment leads to a change in behavior. Next, cognitive theory focus learning on the mental and psychological processes of the mind of the learner. This also includes the perception and the processing information by the learners. Experiential learning is used by instructors to create learning experiences to facilitate maximum learning.

2.2.2. Humanistic Theories

These theories promote individual development. They are also learner-centred. The theories of motivation suggest that context and social factors influence adult learners' motivation to study. Next, adult learners are also known to be self-directed and this facilitates learning.

2.2.3. Transformative Learning Theory

Based on this theory, transformation takes place when learners make a critical reflection when their beliefs and assumptions are challenged. This transformation includes (a) a disorientating dilemma faced by the learner. This dilemma is a catalyst for the learner to review his/her own perspectives. Next, transformation takes place in (b) the context and this includes personal, professional and social factors of the learner.

2.2.4. Social Theories of Learning

The two elements that are crucial to social theories of learning are context and community. Learners experience is shaped by their context and the community they live in. In addition to that, learning takes place based on three assumptions;

(a) learning and thinking are social activities,

(b) thinking and learning are structured by the tools available in specific situations, and

(c)Thinking is influenced by the setting in which learning

2.2.5. Motivational Models

Any theoretical model that attempts to explain and relates adult learning to an educational theory must have two critical elements – motivation and reflection. The self-determination theory by Gagné and Deci (2005) recognises the importance of intrinsic motivation, and considers that three basic needs must be fulfilled to sustain it: Autonomy, Competence, and a feeling of belonging – or Relatedness.

Autonomy

Involves self-initiation and self-regulation of one-s own behaviour

- Affirm dignity
- Identity as rising self-advocate
- Learn and use person-centred language
- Set own goals
- Set own tasks
- Decide when to practice new skills

Competence

Ability to interact proficiently or effectively with the environment

- Learn skills
- Practice skills
- Share and receive feedback
- Time to develop skills
- Understand and use elevator speech templates

Relatedness

feelings of closeness and belonging to a social group

- Trainer rapport
- Professional rapport
- Internalized frames of reference
- Group dynamics
- Person support network
- Common framework for collaboration among team

2.3. Motivating and Demotivating Factors

Figure 2. shows the self-determination continuum proposed by Gagné and Deci (2005).The lowest level of self-determination is amotivation. This is when the person does not pursue behavior because success is unlikely or impossible. The next level is external regulation. This s when the person pursues behavior for pay or reward. A higher level from external regulation is introjected regulation and this is when the person pursues behaviour because of internalized guild. Next is identified regulation where the person pursues beaviour because the outcomes are valued as important. Next is integrated regulation. At this stage, the person pursues behavior because the behaviour symbolizes what is important to the person's sense of worth. The highest level is true intrinsic motivation where the person pursues behavior for the pleasure of knowing and also the pleasure of accomplishment.
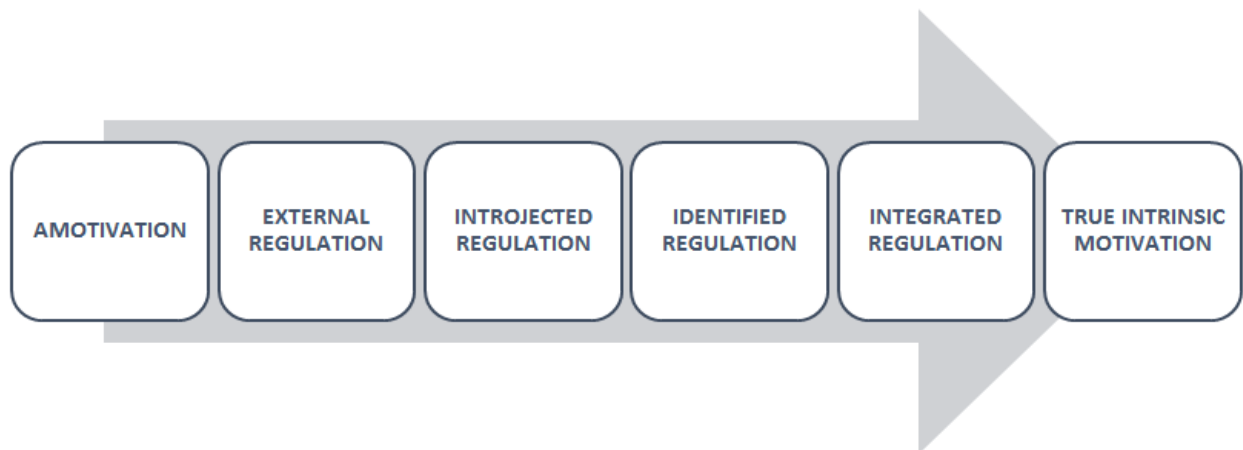

Figure-2. Continuum of Self-Determination.

Source: Gagné and Deci (2005).

2.4. Past Studies

2.4.1. Motivation

Several studies reported motivating factors of adult learners. The study by Sogunro (2015) looked into motivating factors for adult learners.203 university students participated in the study. The factors include quality of instruction; quality of curriculum; relevance and pragmatism; interactive classrooms and effective management practices; progressive assessment and timely feedback; self-directedness; conducive learning environment; and effective academic advising practices. The study by Sogunro (2015) concludes that these eight factors are critical to eliciting or enhancing the will power in students in higher education toward successful learning. The implications for practice and further research are also discussed.

Next, Rothes et al. (2017) investigated profiles of autonomous and controlled motivation and their effects in a sample of 188 adult learners from two Portuguese urban areas. Results of the study revealed of cluster analysis and multivariate analysis of covariance revealed four motivational groups with different effects in self-efficacy, engagement, and learning. The study showed that groups of learners who have high autonomous motivation in the beginning of a course score higher in self-efficacy and later on in behavioral engagement and use of deep-learning strategies, whereas those who have controlled motivation alone or low levels of both types of motivation have worse results. Additionally, the study showed motivational differences according to adult learners' gender, educational level, and occupational status.

Another study by Rahmat et al. (2014) look at the influence of student' motivational factors and institutional characteristics on postgraduate enrolment decision.31 respondents were chosen for the study. This research will also investigated the relationship among socio-demographic factors, motivational factors, and perceived institutional characteristics. This descriptive research unraveled the factors that influence adult learners to pursue post graduate studies.

2.4.2. Learning Approach

Next, there are numerous studies on the learning approaches of adult learners. The study by Hee (2014) identified the learning approach of the Malaysian adult students. The findings of this study indicated that the adult students adopted deep learning approach in their learning process. Test of significant differences revealed that there were no significant group differences in the mean scores of deep learning approach among gender, age group and years of work experience of the respondents. The use of flexible learning and problem-based learning methods were suggested in this study to provide more opportunities to the students to interact with the lecturers on the course material in a more practical and analytical manner. The combination of both flexible learning and problem-based learning method may encourage deep learning approach and most importantly able to transform those adopting surface learning approach to deep learning orientation.

Another study was done by Rabourn et al. (2015) whoused data from the 2013 and 2014 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement to identify the characteristics of adult learners. The study also assessed the students' engagement. Findings revealed that adult learners are more likely to take all of their classes online, begin their education at another institution, and enroll part-time. Compared to their traditional-aged peers, adult learners are more engaged academically, interact less with their peers and faculty, have positive perceptions of teaching practices and interactions with others, and find their campus to be less supportive .

A qualitative study was carried out by Nerstrom (2014) to reveal The Nerstrom Transformative Learning Model . Six adult learners in graduate programme were chosen. The participants were interviewed. In addition , they were also asked to create artwork to depict their transformative learning experience. The participants were

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also asked write about their past learning experiences. Five major themes emerged from this research: (a) examined prejudices—biases, stereotypes, and learned beliefs; (b) incidental experiences, with subthemes of increased self-confidence, renewed personal values, cultivated social involvement, and lasting friendships; (c) program structure fostering transformative learning, with subthemes of cohort and residential learning and traditional learning models; (d) reconceptualization of learning; and (e) transformed personhood.
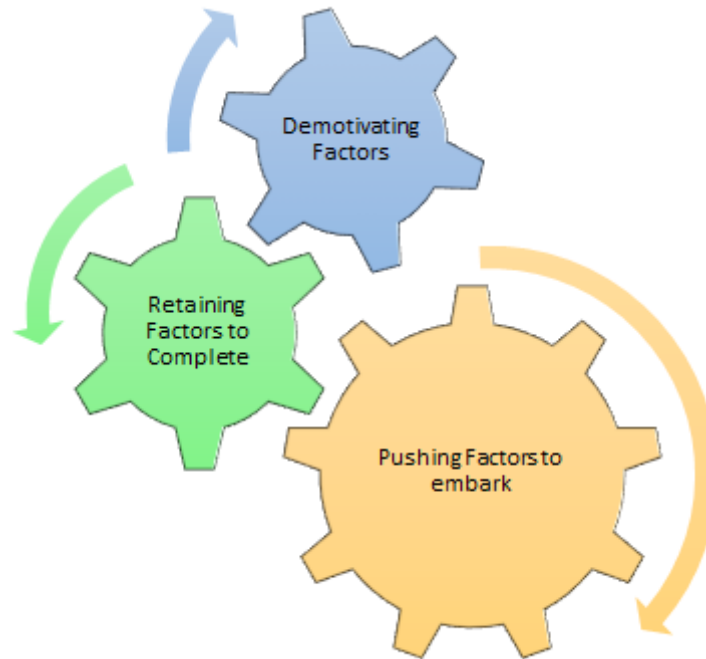
2.5. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Figure-3. Theoretical Framework of the Study.
Source: Adapted from Gagné and Deci (2005) & Rahmat *et al.* (2014).

Figure 3 shows the theoretical Framework of the study. According to Northouse (2007) determination is the desire to do something. This desire includes having characteristics such as initiative, persistence, dominance and drive. Hence, this study is rooted from the belief that postgraduates' self-determination in their studies can be categorized into their (a) pushing factors, (b) retaining factors as well as (c) demotivation issues. This study explores the pushing factors that cause postgraduates students to embark on their studies. Next, this study also looks at the possible factors that cause the postgraduates to stay in the postgraduate programmes. Finally, this research explores the demotivating factors that can influence postgraduate students' motivation to complete their journey.

Pushing Factors

Pushing factors refer to the reasons for the learner to decide on beginning the studies. These factors can stem from several causes. Are the students' reasons to study considered as;

(a)   True Intrinsic Motivation

They pursue behaviour for the pleasure of knowing, the pleasure of accomplishment or the pleasure of stimulation.

(b)   Integrated Regulation

Pursues behavior because they symbolize what is important to the person's sense of worth

(c)   Identified Regulation

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Pursues behavior because the outcomes are valued as important to the person's personal goals

(d) Introjected Regulation

Pursues behavior because of an internalized guilt-related sense of ought or should

(e) External Regulation

Pursues behavior for pay or reward or because of coercion

Retaining Factors

Next, once the students have already enrolled in the programme, what made them stay? Do the students feel the course gives them;(a) Autonomy, (b) Competence, and (c) Relatedness

Demotivation Factors

However, while many learners completed their studies, some felt demotivated and may not complete their studies. These demotivating factors can be (a) Personal, (b peer influence and (c) institutional reasons.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative study investigates the factors that causes postgraduate students to begin their studies, remain in their course as well as factors that demotivates them throughout their course of study.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population of the study is postgraduate students who enrolled in a course in their first semester of their study. A convenience sample is taken from a class of nineteen postgraduate students. They were asked to write a personal, self-review log about their journey for the whole semester.

3.3. Instrument

The instrument is presented in table 1. Data collected will be coded based on (a) pushing factors, (b) retaining factors as well as (c) demotivating factors.

Table-1. Instrument for the study.

Pushing Factors Gagné and Deci (2005)	Retaining Factors Gagné and Deci (2005)	Demotivating Factors Rahmat *et al.* (2014)
True Intrinsic Motivation -pursues behaviour for the pleasure of knowing, the pleasure of accomplishment or the pleasure of stimulation	AUTONOMY Involves self-initiation and self-regulation of one-s own behaviour	Personal Factors
Integrated Regulation -Pursues behavior because they symbolize what is important to the person's sense of worth	COMPETENCE Ability to interact proficiently or effectively with the environment	Peers' Influence
Identified Regulation -Pursues behavior because the outcomes are valued as important to the person's personal goals	RELATEDNESS feelings of closeness and belonging to a social group	Institutional factors
Introjected Regulation -Pursues behavior because of an internalized guilt-related sense of ought or should		
External Regulation -Pursues behavior for pay or reward or because of coercion		

Source: Adapted from Gagné and Deci (2005) & Rahmat *et al.* (2014).

3.4. Method of Data Collection

Firstly, the postgraduate students are asked to write a narrative of their experience learning throughout the semester. Prompt topics were given; (a)what made them embark on the postgraduate study, (b) what made them stay as they progressed in the semester and (c) what demotivates them.

3.5. Method of Data Analysis

The students' entries in their personal log is coded into categories and sub-categories mentioned in Table 1. Findings are presented in descriptive form.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

A total of nineteen students participated in the study. Their entries in the form of narrative were analysed collectively and the findings are presented in descriptive form in response to the research questions.

4.2. Research Question 1: How do the pushing factors influence postgraduate students?

Findings from this study revealed interesting discovery factors such as true intrinsic motivation, integrated regulation, identified regulation and introjected regulation.

True Intrinsic Motivation

A person is said to be intrinsically motivated when he/she pursues a behaviour for the pleasure of behaviour, the pleasure of accomplishment or the pleasure of simulation. In this study, many of the respondents began the postgraduate on a positive start. They were intrinsically motivated at the start. Comment such as "wants to improve", "excited", "learn something new", " and "curious" are good positive vibes to embark on a new goal.

Integrated Regulation

People who has integrated regulation, pursues behaviour because they symbolizes what is important to his/her self-worth. The respondents reported that the enrolled in the course on their "own free will". Some respondents also wanted to "gain knowledge", "enhance communication skills, to become more confident" and also "enhance expertise and credibility". They also said that they could "use knowledge at work" as they felt that "knowledge can be applied wen facing real life problems" as well as "gain knowledge to make better decisions".

Identified Regulation

Individuals with identified regulation would pursue a behaviour because the outcomes are valued as important to his/her personal goals. Findings for this study revealed that, some respondents started this programme because they have prepared themselves psychologically ("mindset ready"). Some even said that they wanted to "become organised", "learn something new", and they also have "reserved time" to begin their study. Respondents were also found to report many identified regulation factors. The comments were "to expand capacity", "help in future", to do proper research", to gain knowledge for professional field", "to gain experience", gain knowledge for better future", "improve language and teaching skills"., to gain knowledge and prepare for work", "expand knowledge and broaden skills", and "equip with better undersatding of knowledge".

Introjected Regulation

People who have introjected regulation pursue behavior because of an internalized guilt-related sense of ought or should. Participants were reported to start the studies because they felt compelled to although they were " not ready but determined", and "not ready , not fair to job and studies". This is not a positive mindset and students might feel "forced" to further their studies for reasons only they could understand.

External Regulation

External regulation refers to the behaviour of pursuing something for pay or reward or because of coercion. A few of the respondents reported that they took the course as it "helps in profession as a lecturer" and that the "knowledge is useful for current work". One respondent was a part-time lecturer and hoped to "be equipped with knowledge to teach the new generation".

4.3. Research Question 2: How Do the Retaining Factors Influence Postgraduate Students?

There are some known factors that can actually make the students remain in the programme no matter how tough they felt it actually was. Factors like autonomy, competence and also relatedness can be considered ad retaining factors.

Autonomy

One of the main reasons for students to remain in the programme is when they feel they have autonomy over their learning. This involves self-initiation and self-regulation of their own behaviour. Participants were reported to gain knowledge of "perceptiveness", and "time management" while they studied. Some felt that besides learning to. "work while study", they also gained "knowledge on language studies", they gained" confidence in writing and also confidence to "present at conference".

Competence

Another reason why people stayed in study programmes is because they gained competence. Competence is ability to interact proficiently or effectively with the environment. Participants reported to gain knowledge on "research skills", "writing skills", professional writing skills", "different way of learning", "theories", "transcribing interview", "collect and analyse data", 'write business documents", and also "analyse business documents". They also said they "gained new knowledge and information". They learnt to "critically examine articles", "collect data" and also "conduct interview".

Relatedness

Relatedness is the feelings of closeness and belonging to a social group. Students stayed in the programme as they learnt more when they had the opportunity to "meet people from different areas", "make friends from different areas". They also reported that "team work" made them enjoyed being in the learning environment.

4.4. Research Question 3: What are the demotivating factors postgraduates face?

Postgraduate students can be motivated by factors such as personal, peer's influence and also institutional.

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Personal factors

Findings in this study showed personal factors such as "lack of language skills" and "low confidence" can demotivate learners. In addition to that, they also reported that "time" (lack of time management skills), lack of learning skills, and also misunderstanding to complete the tasks. Some also blamed their "health" issues as demotivating factor.

Peers' Influence

Next, respondents reported that "lack of cooperation from classmates" demotivates them from studying. They also felt that "anxiety-surrounded with good students" demotivated them in the course of their study.

Institutional factors

Finally, institutional factors can also lead to demotivation on the students. The "environment, facilities" can demotivate students from learning. Participants reported that "deadlines", "due dates", and even "number of assignments" are also contributing factors towards demotivation. Some also said that "not enough information" on the assignment is a demotivation factor. Participants also blamed lecturers' "dull teaching style" for their demotivation.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary of Findings

This study has revealed that postgraduate students are "pushed" into their studies by several factors. Some are intrinsically motivated. However, some are motivated by integrated gelation, while other are motivated by identified regulation. There are also some who are pushed by introjected as well as external regulation.

Next, once the students have begun their studies, some "retaining" factors determine whether the student will complete their studies. Students retained in the programme because (a) they have autonomy over their own learning. They also stayed because they are aware they would gain competence throughout the duration of the study. Some learners retained in their studies because they could see increases in their competence. There are also some learners who stayed on in their studies because they could feel "relatedness" towards the learning experience. Lastly,

5.2. Discussion

The findings of this study are in accordance with the study by Rahmat *et al.* (2014) who also reported that the decision to pursue postgraduate studies is dependent of the motivational factors.

This study is in accordance with the study by Rothes *et al.* (2017) who revealed that the group of learners who have high autonomous motivation at the beginning of the course have high tendency to retain in the programme. In addition to that, the study by Hee (2014) showed that learners need engagement as they pursued their studies.

5.3. Implications

The results of this study have revealed that embarking on postgraduate studies are not uncommon these days. Although, learners need a "push" to begin his/her studies, some motivating factors have more influence than others. Once the students have begun their studies, the "retaining" factors play important role to "keep" the students in the programme.

5.4. Suggestion for Future Research

This qualitative study is done as a pilot study on first semester postgraduate students. Future researchers could follow through the students and trace their pushing, retaining and demotivation factors over the whole course of their study. Future researchers could also conduct a quantitative study on the same issues among postgraduate students.

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