The straw that broke the camel’s back: Reducing Attrition in Higher Degree by Research Candidature

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A quantitative and qualitative investigation across disciplines at a large research university sought to identify patterns and facilitate a richer appreciation of issues in students’ decisions to withdraw from candidature. Strategies are proposed to address some of the identified institutional issues and thereby reduce attrition.

This paper discusses the qualitative phase of the study which comprised semi-structured interviews with a sample of PhD candidates who had withdrawn. Additionally a consultation process was conducted with the postgraduate association president and advocates, student services staff, international officers, research graduate studies officers, and departmental administrative staff, who liaise with research degree students.

Considerable commonality of themes emerged from the data sets. Interview data may be appreciated within the framework of attribution theory and also adult learning theory.

Findings indicate that in general and consistent with the literature students’ premature departure from candidature occurred as a result of the convergence of factors, often both personal and institutional. The present study highlights the notion that generally some particular factor made the process suddenly untenable.

The underlying critical determinant appeared to be the students’ realization that the research project was poorly structured and unpromising. This reflected a student’s partial acceptance of responsibility and partial attribution of blame to inadequate project direction.

Financial difficulties, limited scholarships, and the need for full time work outside of the university seemed to jeopardise the completion of an extended project.

Life factors extraneous to the university were apparent major disruptions to an individual’s ability and desire to pursue serious study.

Strategies are suggested to increase students’ satisfaction with research candidature, to feel more included within the department, more immersed in the disciplinary culture and thereby reduce attrition.