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THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ON STUDENTS' CHOICE OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the factors influencing on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka. The main objective of the present study is to identify the factors influencing on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka. This study has adopted a qualitative research strategy and convenience sampling method is used to select students from each university. Accordingly, 34 students contributed to this study. Primary data were collected using focus group discussions followed by a structured questionnaire. The first phase of this study was conducted in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka (USJ), a sample representing USJ. After that, the same research was expanded island wide covering all the state sector universities in Sri Lanka to fill the research gap which was realized in the same study. To ensure reliability, the current study has followed a different research methodology than the previous study. The findings of this study show that influencing on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka self-efficacy, future ambition on career, consciousness, proficiency in English, ability to manage the time and the availability of resources and issues with mentoring. The results were almost the same as what the researchers derived previously attached to the case study conducted at USJ. Some implications for the decision-making bodies to improve the research choice among undergraduate students have also been proposed by the current study.

Key Words: research, mentoring, self-efficacy, undergraduates

1. Introduction

Research is "creative and systematic work undertaken to increase the stock of knowledge". It involves the collection, organization, and analysis of information to increase understanding of a topic or issue. A research project may be an expansion on past work in the field. Undergraduates have been given the opportunity of enhancing their reading, writing, analysing, and sharing valuable information by engaging in a research study in the university. Majority of the state universities in Sri Lanka have made it compulsory for all students conducting the research as a requirement of partial completion of their degree programs considering the benefits gained by a student by conducting research throughout their lifetime.

University student's and the academics have a comprehensive understanding regarding the importance of researching. However, there is a question that the general public have the understanding of the importance of doing research. In that case, the university students can contribute more to disseminate this research findings to the public in an appropriate method. Firstly, undergraduate students should be motivated to conduct research by the academics. The most of the intellectuals are the product of universities worldwide and if they reluctant or demotivate to continue the research interest the whole process may be revised negatively. As per the literature review it was witnessed that the studies related to investigate the research interest is at a low level. Therefore, the current study has been conducted to examine the factors influencing on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka. Although the research component is compulsory in several degree programs to fulfil the undergraduate degree, research has not been made compulsory for several degree programs in both public and private sector universities in Sri Lanka. In that sense the undergraduate students who are not select to conduct research will lose the opportunity of learning the way of continuing a research project. It is a huge opportunity cost while it realises in the perception of the academics who possess with a clear knowledge of the importance of conducting research.

2. Literature Review

Undergraduate Research

According to Andresen (2000), research is the process of arriving at dependable solutions for problems through planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Undergraduate research is the exploration of a specific topic within a field by an undergraduate student that makes an original contribution to the discipline. As Thiry et al. (2011) described, the undergraduate research experience may be the epitome of engaged learning.

factors influencing on Students' choice of researching

In terms of choices, there was generally very close agreement between the factors that students rated as highly important and those that the staff expected to be influencing students. This is in line with work by Dohn and Wagner (1999), which demonstrated agreement between staff and student expectations of teaching in the context of lectures

and seminars, and indicated that academic staff do generally know their student body quite well. However, there were some aspects where there were statistically significant differences. These results support findings in other areas, for example, Gabb. (1981) who demonstrated differences between staff and students in a department of education concerning their perceptions about assessment, and Dickie & Kato. (1996), who found differences between staff and students' perceptions of learning tasks in physics. Hollingsworth et al. (2004) found several differences between staff and students in different aspects of project work in similar subject areas to those in the current case study. Interest in the subject was the most important factor in choice, as has been demonstrated elsewhere in a variety of subjects (Lightbody et al., 1997).

3. Methodology

This study has adopted a qualitative research strategy and convenience sampling method is used to select students from each university. Accordingly, 34 students contributed to this study. Primary data were collected using focus group discussions followed by a structured questionnaire. Gathered data has been analysed and presented descriptively in order to have better understanding for the audience.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This study was conducted to identify the factors influencing on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka. Self-confidence and proficiency in English language were identified as the most influencing factors for conducting research by undergraduates.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy was recognized as another important factor which influence on Students' choice of the undergraduate research project in Sri Lanka. Self-efficacy refers to the belief of an individual regarding his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to control over his/her own motivation, behaviour, and social environment. Students which have a strong sense of efficacy are more towards challenging themselves with difficult tasks and are intrinsically motivated.

Future Ambition on career

The current study revealed that the students who have an ambition to be an academic member or related career are more likely to take the decision to conduct undergraduate research. Other students who have no interest in academic related careers or study further in future like Masters or PHD studies just ignore the research component and they feel it would be easy to complete several subjects and face the examination instead of conducting research.

Consciousness

Another factor the researchers observed among the respondents is consciousness. However, none of the previous studies or the literature did not identify consciousness as a crucial factor which influences the research interest of undergraduates. According to the factors revealed by the respondents and observing their characteristics, behaviours and academic performance, researchers were able to come to a conclusion that the students who possess a conscious mind can manage everything nicely without getting confused. The following idea was shared by the respondents to confirm the identified factor.

“If an undergraduate cannot concentrate on what he/she is doing, the research would be very difficult. They will end up with a failure grade and in progress meetings they would suffer more. When such students choose to conduct research with the experience, they receive during the time which they are conducting the research they would lose the interest in researching forever.”

Proficiency in English

According to the respondents' view, another important factor which affects for the choice of conduct of research is proficiency in English. The students who have an average knowledge in English seem to struggle and hesitate to take the risk of starting research as they have to take much effort on reading and understanding research papers and also writing the research report.

Cost Component

Most of the respondents stated that they have problems in incurring the cost of conducting research. The cost component was more related to the students representing Science related subjects and medical and engineering degrees. Although some students have the interest in conducting research and English language proficiency, they have to step back with the cost constraints.

Time Management ability

Ability to manage the time is also identified as a crucial factor that influences research. Some students were unable to manage their time to conduct research with their busy academic schedules. Considerable number of students representing the sample stated that researching consumes more time and energy. Research needs lots of readings and some undergraduate students fail to have time to commit to reading for research while reading other subject related materials.

Issues with Supervision

Considerable number of respondents suffered because of poor supervision as well. This factor was identified in the case study which was done previously with a sample from USJ as well. Respondents revealed that the supervisors are demotivated due to some behaviours of undergraduate as well. The allocated time missed by the undergraduates purposefully and its hider the contribution from supervisors as the lecturers are busy with their academic schedules. Some highly performing students have failed to complete their research because of the absence of proper guidance on research. Therefore, the assigned research supervisors by the university should sacrifice additional time for the

betterment of the students and supervisors should be responsible for the quality of the research work of the undergraduates whom they have supervised.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study revealed that the factors affecting the conduct of research by undergraduates were self-efficacy, future ambition on career, consciousness, proficiency in English, ability to manage the time and the availability of resources and issues with the supervision. To improve the choice of research project by undergraduates some strategic actions are able to implement. Awareness programs, workshops, covarying the benefits of researching, Aware the undergraduates regarding the importance and the other benefits which they can privilege from researching, the social influence which they can do via researching and the satisfaction, application for patent rights etc. Further, as one of the strategies researching can be made compulsory to fulfil their respective degree. Then all the undergraduates will possess the knowledge of researching when they pass out from the university. Some times although some undergraduates reluctant to researching due to some reasons they will be able o continue in future when they feel to conduct research. The authorized decision-making bodies are able to realize the fact revealed through this study and make arrangements to make reality the proposed strategic actions.

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