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Title: Alienation at the Open University of Mauritius: A conceptual framework for interpretation of learner feelings and emotions

1.0 Abstract

There is a growing focus on how to widen access and inclusion in higher education, however there is a strong link between alienation and attrition. This study aimed at understanding distance learners' experiences of alienation at the Open University of Mauritius. A qualitative research design was adopted. Focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews were conducted with distance learners both in the system and those who had left. The findings indicate that several factors including isolation, inadequate learner support and institutional presence generate negative feelings and emotions that lead distance learners to experience alienation and to suspend or abandon their studies. The study recommends among other things; learner friendly policies, strategies, a robust learner-centred support system with a strong focus on retention and well-being of distance learners and a deeper understanding of the alienation phenomenon by ODL managers and practitioners.

2.0 Introduction

Higher education is a sine-qua-non in this era of 'survival of the fittest'. However, institutions providing higher-education, mostly universities are faced by unprecedented challenges such as the sweeping pace of globalisation, and pressures for widening access to deliver quality education to all learners from any part of the world. Furthermore, the new generation of students entering the education system, referred to as digital natives', or the 'net generation', coupled with the technological revolution, create a challenge for the digitization of learning and teaching. All this has resulted in new trends such as use of Open Educational Resources, Open and Distance learning and Online learning, Massive Open Online Courses, etc.

However, one of the realities of these new forms of learning is that a high registration rate is very often followed by a large attrition rate. The reasons attributed to drop-outs are many but one of the prominent features is that of the alienation phenomenon. Eventually while ensuring greater access to higher education, it remains imperative to focus on retention and well-being of learners and gain insights into the alienation and explore the possible links between alienation and attrition.

The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the extent to which the alienation exists at the Open University of Mauritius;
- To assess the causes of alienation;
- To explore relationships between alienation and attrition

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Alienation and its Definitions

Johnson (1973) refers to alienation as a "panchreston" which indicates the vagueness around its concept and its common use as a general term, popular expression or a scientific term. Past literature demonstrates that despite the wide use of alienation as a term across various disciplines, the concept of alienation has

hardly been defined, leaving researchers facing a lot of confusion over its meanings, usage and measurement.

As stipulated by Redden, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Thorpe, 2003, alienation can be a valuable construct which can largely help to understand the mechanisms associated with undesirable learner outcomes and come forward with strategies to prevent student academic failure. Kaçire (2016) states that it is important to devise ways to help reduce alienation especially within university campuses.

Alienation has been viewed by Fromm (1955) as the way in which an individual experiences him/herself as an alien; becoming estranged from his self. According to Horowitz (1966), alienation involves a deep separation from the following: objects of the world, other individuals and ideas that other individuals hold about the world.

For Marx (1844), alienation emerged under the capitalist system since employees were required to surrender control over their labour, leading the workers to experience three types of alienation: alienation from the product of work, alienation from oneself and alienation from others and society at large. According to Gerth and Mills (1946), Weber also perceived alienation to emerge from the absence of freedom and control over the work in the same veins whereby Marx stated that further to the mechanization of production and specialization of the division of labor (Bottomore, 1963), the employee is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object (Finifter, 1972).

Kanungo (1979) and Overend (1975) recognized that the essence of alienation rests with the cognitive sense of separation experienced by the individual in relation to some other element in his or her environment.

Scholars went on to debate whether alienation was unidimensional (separation) or multidimensional. Seeman (1959, 1975) stipulated that alienation consisted of the following dimensions:

- i. Powerlessness (as a result of being controlled by others in an impersonal system);
- ii. Meaninglessness (due to lack of sense of how the individual contributes to the whole);
- iii. Normlessness (feeling of separation from the group standards and feeling of pointlessness or that no certain goals exist);
- iv. Isolation (loss of the sense of community membership) and
- v. Self-estrangement (no sense of personal fulfilment, loss of identity)

Various empirical studies use this conceptualization (Blauner, 1964; Dean, 1961; Seeman, 1967; Shepard, 1977). However, opponents have challenged the adequacy of the dimensions and their interrelations to be able to fully explain alienation (Kanungo, 1979; Mottaz, 1981; Overend, 1975). Some critics go as far as condemning the substantial overlap between the concept and its antecedents and consequences. For instance, dimensions such as powerlessness and meaninglessness can be argued to be antecedents or even consequences of alienation, rather than being descriptive of alienation per se.

The large majority of the definitions of alienation indicate the sense of separation (Fromm, 1955; Horowitz, 1966; Kanungo, 1979) or dissociative state (Schacht, 1970) or disengagement from work (Hirschfeld and Feild, 2000). The recurring theme in most conceptualizations of alienation is the notion of

estrangement or separation which seems to be central for understanding the phenomenon of alienation. Hence, alienation hereon will be explored from this standpoint.

3.2 Alienation in Education

Mann (2001) defines the experience of alienation within the learning environment as “the estrangement of the learner from what they should be engaged in, namely the subject and the process of study itself.” Brown, Higgins & Paulsen (2003) also refer to alienation as student estrangement in the learning process. Mann (2005) further explains that alienation is about the inability of the learner to engage or contribute in meaningful and productive ways to realise their own potential.

With the growth in ‘non-traditional’ learners such as the aging groups, the working people and commuting learners, as well as the emerging trends in instructional strategies including online learning and distance education, there is a tendency for universities and other higher education providers to become more decentralised. This eventually impedes on the learners’ perceptions of belonging with the campus.

According to Johnson (2005), although Marx’s theory of alienation is often discussed in light of factory-based work, alienation also arises in intellectual work as well. The three forms of alienation are:

- (i) Alienation of the learner from himself/herself;
- (ii) Alienation of the learner from others;
- (iii) Alienation of the learner from the school; the world

Moreover, as per the Theory of Alienation predicts that commodification/greater exchange value given to the product (student achievement as evidenced by test scores for federal funding) versus the use value or “intrinsic value” given to the process of becoming educated will alienate those doing the major work in the system—teachers and students.

Newmann (1981) stipulated that student alienation consisted of the four dimensions: powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and social isolation. While powerlessness relates to the lack of perceived personal control over the learning process, normlessness can be associated with the absence of proper rule-governed behaviour. On the other hand, social isolation here relates mostly to loneliness and separation from other learners, tutors and the institution and meaninglessness may indicate that learners perceive their curriculum as irrelevant to their current and future needs.

3.3 Attrition in Distance Education

As stated by Wilging and Johnson (2004), that there is little knowledge in general about attrition in graduate programs and even less about attrition in distance education graduate programs. According to Phipps and Merisotis (1999), research on distance education research is mostly geared towards single courses rather than programs and cannot effectively explain the attrition rates for online learners.

Lorenzetti (2002) claims that dropout rates can be as high as 50% across distance education programs worldwide. As stated by Wilging and Johnson (2004), that there is little knowledge in general about

attrition in graduate programs and even less about attrition in distance education graduate programs. According to Phipps and Merisotis (1999), research on distance education research is mostly geared towards single courses rather than programs and cannot effectively explain the attrition rates for online learners.

Carr (2000) states that there is anecdotal evidence and research based on single institutions which indicate that attrition rates are usually higher in distance education courses as compared to traditional ones. Moreover, as stipulated by Kember (1995) in (Chyung, 2001), the attrition rate tends to be higher at the start of beginning of a course rather than towards its end.

For Stover (2001), attrition is due to various reasons such as technological failure, omissions and misunderstandings from management.

Galusha, 1997, McGivney, 2004 and Moody, 2004 proved through their studies that attrition in distance education can be due to feedback and teacher content, student support and services, alienation and isolation, lack of technical skills, loss of interaction, distance learning pressure, gender differences, inadequate pre-course information and guidance amongst others.

3.4 Exploring the Causes and Effects of Alienation

As outlined by Trusty & Dooley-Dickey(1993), Brown et al.(2003), Huffman (2001), Taylor (2001), Redden (2002) and Rokach, Bauer, & Oreck (2003) the causes of student alienation can be manifold.

Mann (2001) stipulates that in a teaching-learning process which is mostly of compliant nature and does not allow for opportunities to express creativity, alienation is likely to be triggered. Hence, in most cases in higher education where the learner is disconnected from the learning contents and where no value is placed on the learner's opinion rather on that of the tutor or institution, there are high probabilities of alienation.

Frosh (1991) claims that the very ethos of universities and colleges emphasising extensively on on utilitarianism, instrumentalism, measurable performance indicators and standardized competencies' is sure to lead to student alienation.

Finifter (1972) stipulates that when there is incongruity between strongly internalized aspirations, norms and values on one side and the prospects perceived by the individual for fulfilment of same on the other side, alienation is very likely to be caused. In the same veins, Case (2008) conceptualized a framework based on Mann's (2001) consisting of the following three categories: evaluating learners' reasons for participating in higher education (for 'Entering in the higher education community'), the experiences of learners post entry in higher education ('Fitting into the higher education community') and their efforts to succeed in difficult assessment systems ('Staying in the higher education community'). Hence if we consider the first category, significant divergence between the reasons for joining higher education and what is actually experienced can lead to alienation.

Lang (1985) found that individuals having high socio economic status were more likely to experience alienation when they experienced a lack of fulfillment.

Durkheim (1947) states the alienation is a consequence of the condition of 'anomie'. The latter has been defined by the The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Edition as follows:

- 'Social instability caused by erosion of standards and values';

-‘Alienation and purposelessness experienced by a person or a class as a result of a lack of standards, values, or ideals’

Seeman (1967) discusses the consequences of work alienation in terms of anomia, withdrawal, status seeking, intergroup hostility and a sense of powerlessness. When work becomes meaningless in itself, people substitute extrinsic ends as important goals, or simply lower their expectations from work.

4.0 Research methodology

Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub (1996) stipulate that focus groups are significant in conducting educational research. Through such group discussions, people’s knowledge and experiences can be explored along with what people think, how they think and why they think that way.

Sekaran & Bougie (2009) state that focus groups usually consist of around 8 to 10 informants to debate on an issue and led by a moderator. Due to time and budget constraints, a group of 8 participants were selected and discussions were done for one hour. The moderator for the session was myself while there was one facilitator who wrote down the points, ideas, opinions at the session. Non-probability sampling was used whereby judgement sampling was used to choose the participants and there were two requirements. The first requirement was that the participants be studying through distance education mode while the second one requirement was that those learners be chosen who dropped out.

The various causes which could lead to alienation were discussed, as well as the possible effects and links to drop-outs.

Some of the leading questions that fuelled the discussion included:

- *The factors influencing student satisfaction at the OU;*
- *The role of student support in student integration;*
- *The effect of technological support;*
- *How students conceptualise the experience of alienation in higher education;*
- *The feelings of isolation experienced while learning in the ODL mode;*
- *The inability to feel connected to the course materials, programmes and the university;*
- *The possible links between attrition and alienation experienced*

From indepth discussions, a list of themes for understanding the alienation experience emerged. The results tallied with the literature review and will be discussed in the next sections.

5.0 DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results show that the alienation experience can be due to factors such as isolation, inadequate learner support and institutional presence which in turn generate negative feelings and emotions in learners and triggers drop-out from their studies.

To further validate the findings, in-depth interviews were carried out with 5 identified learners who dropped out from their courses. Judgemental sampling was used.

The following were some of the questions discussed:

- *Describe the difficulties experienced when studying through the ODL mode.*
- *What were the main reasons leading you to abandon your studies?*
- *How often did you feel isolated when studying through the ODL mode?*
- *Did you ever feel 'powerless' in trying to cope with your studies*
- *Did you feel disconnected from your peers during your study?*
- *What are the main factors leading you experience a feeling of isolation during your studies?*

Addressing the Research Objectives

1. *To explore the extent to which the alienation exists at the Open University of Mauritius;*
2. *To assess the causes of alienation*
3. *To explore relationships between alienation and attrition*

The participants' definitions of alienation were somewhat vague with some students admitting that the term 'alienation' was new to them. The students' interpretations ranged from feeling isolated from the rest of world when studying through distance learning to feeling loss and powerless trying to cope with studies all by themselves.

Most of the them identified a lack of integration with their peers and a loss of sense of belonging to the university as one of the most recurring aspects. The learners revealed that these factors made them feel a lack of commitment to both their studies and the university itself. The whole process of learning made them feel they were 'drowning alone'. These led them to experience several states of alienation such as *powerlessness, isolation and meaninglessness*. Due to these, the learners displayed apathy in the learning process, poor engagement and poor performance leading them to finally abandon their studies. One learner even stated that "this sense of isolation experienced makes them feel so lost that they even lose all meaning of life.." Others mentioned experiencing high levels of frustration due to inability to cope.

Other factors cited by the students, making them experience lower levels of satisfaction and disengagement with their studies are difficulty level of courses, inability to cope by themselves and a lack of teacher-student interaction. The students also indicated that a proper student support system making

them feel integrated with the university at whole and with other students may play a key role in helping to alleviate alienation experienced.

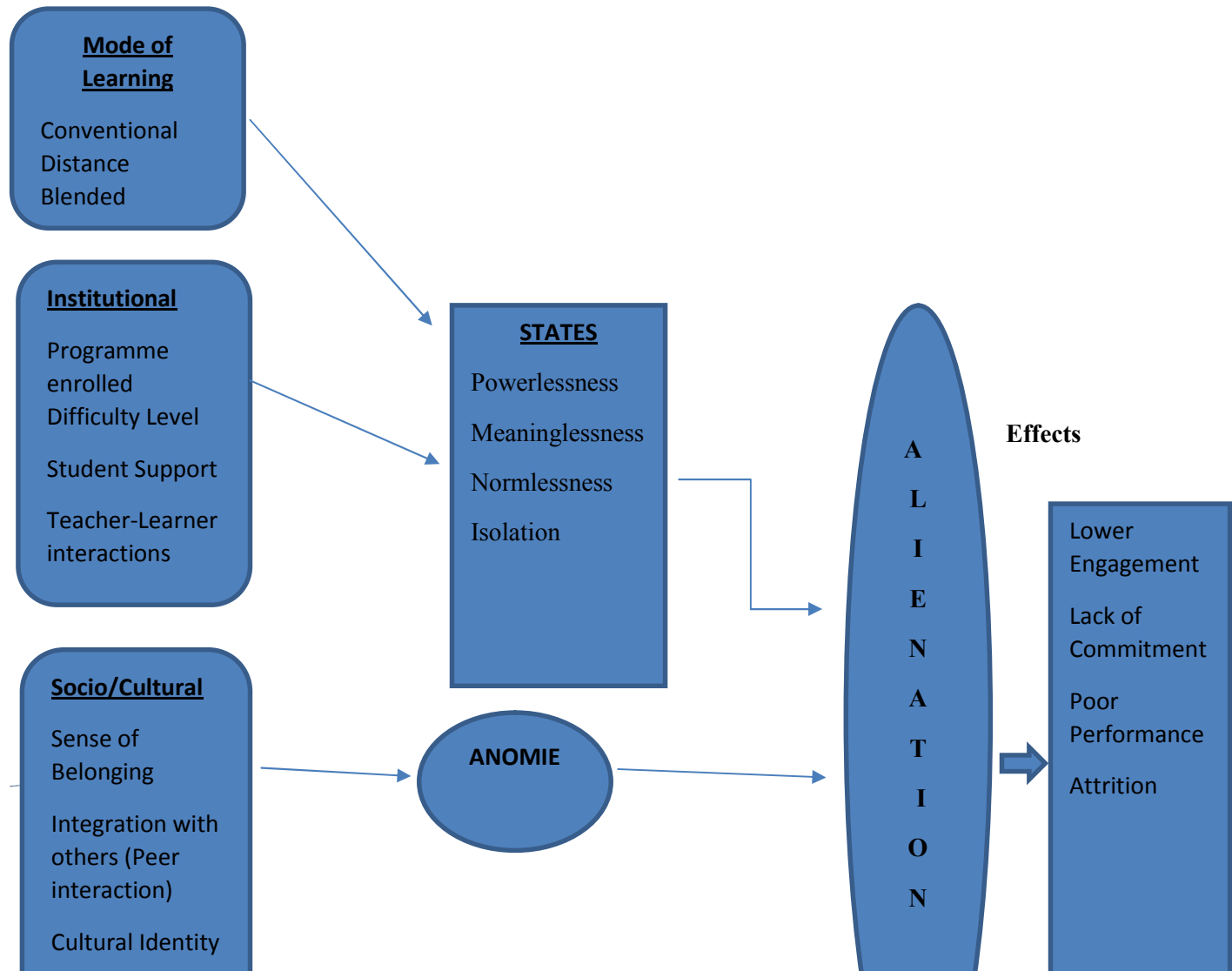
5.1 IMPLICATIONS

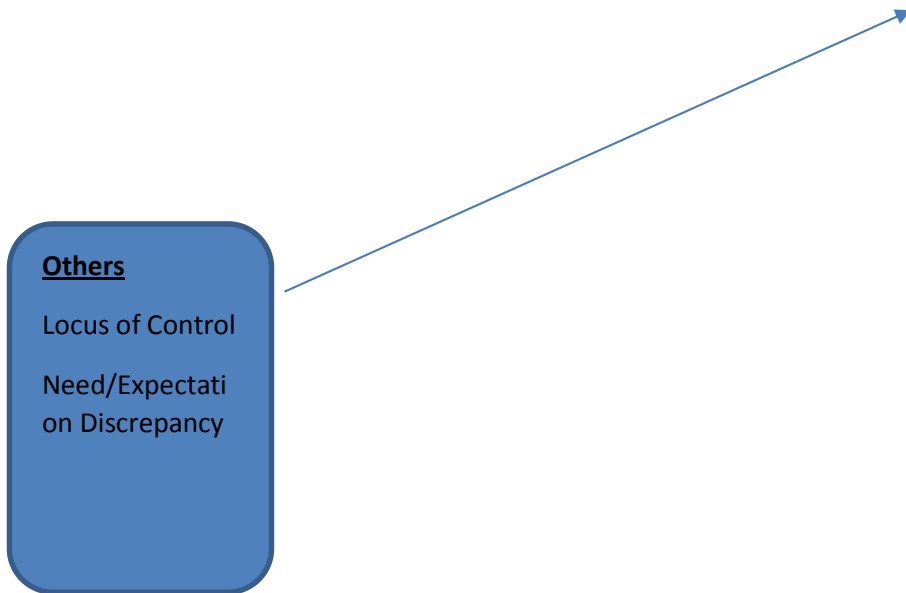
The findings of the study have implications for various constituencies, including higher education specialists, student affairs professionals, aspiring students, faculty and institution administrators, amongst others.

Hence the proposed conceptual model built from existing literature and this study, as illustrated hereunder allows to elucidate the concept of alienation and have a deep understanding of its causes and effects and hence to try to come up with appropriate means to counter its emergence and tamper its effects where it has already started to permeate in higher education.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Antecedents





6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study confirms that alienation is an existing ‘evil’ acting like a parasite on the learning process at the Open University of Mauritius. The links between attrition and alienation are existent. Hence, the urgency for ODL practitioners and higher education specialists to have a thorough understanding of the alienation phenomenon.

While the study recommends among other things; learner friendly policies, strategies, a robust learner-centred support system with a strong focus on retention and well-being of distance learners, there is a strong indication for future research on the possible ways to alleviate alienation from the learning process in higher education.

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