A Quantitative Study on Sense of Belonging among Distance Learners in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper discusses the sense of belonging of distance learners at Institute of Education Development. One hundred and eighty four students returned the complete self constructed questionnaire, which has been analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-test and Pearson Correlation. The result showed the distance learners indicated low level of sense of belonging. ‘Membership’ was found to be the most dominant aspect of sense of belonging as compared to other aspects. The middle-aged students showed the highest sense of belonging compared to other age group. The sense of belongings also was found different between genders. However, sense of belongings did not show any significant correlation with the students’ academic achievement. The Students’ program of studies also did not show any differences in the sense of belonging among students.

Keywords: Sense of belonging, Membership, Influence, Integration, Emotion

Introduction

National unity is a vital issue in Malaysia. Due to its significance, it has become a main foundation in Malaysian Development Plan. In order to build a success society, one of the most important steps is to develop strength within the society itself. The main element needed in order to build strength is through unity. Unity could be possibly achieved through the sense of belonging owned by individuals towards their community.

In a society, a strong sense of belonging brings a lot of positive impact towards the individuals and the society itself. People who possess that feeling would feel like a part of the society that they are living in. They are willing to put aside their differences for the sake of the society. In Malaysia, in order to create a nation, the citizens acknowledge themselves as Malaysian and felt that they belonged to their mother land regardless of their races, religion, and different cultural background.

The term bonding or sense of belonging can be express or interpret as a positive commitment from a person towards another person or towards an activity (Kuh and Vesper, 1997). However the term also carries emotional feelings, commitment and cohere ness between things, human and experience in an association. The multidimensional perspective of sense of belonging is an important value for students to carry especially whom in the higher learning institution since the group is mostly adult that has already understand the concept of unity. However sense of belonging
would not always be positive where there is a possibility of conflicts. Nonetheless, the main aspect here is the existence of commitment in activities and shared values. (McInnis, 2002).

Educational institution regardless whether exist physically or virtually is a place where students tie a bond with their peers and supporting each other whether academically or socially (Tinto, Love, Russo, 1993 as cited by Beck & Malley, 2003). Peer interaction is a key success factor in an education community. Psychological feelings of securing in a community or school ambience need to be first felt by students before they could embrace the educational and learning experience. (Beck & Melley, 2003). The question is, does a student capable of being success if he/she does not have the feeling of pride and belonging towards the education community they are in?

There are connection between social interaction and achievement, students’ progression and academic satisfaction in the university context. (McInnis & James, 1995). There is also an argument that claims social integration gives a bigger influence to students’ study focus compared to academic integration (Miller & Berger, 1997). Students who fail to find their own space in the social and academic surroundings in the university tend to have a low commitment towards their institution and will have low interest to complete their studies (Astin, 1993). In order to instill sense of belonging especially for the first year students is through peer bonding (Kantanis, 2000).

The issue on sense of belonging does not only reside to a certain group of community but also within every layer of group in different levels and stages. From a small basketball team to a large community residing a country, sense of belonging need to be cultivated because the immensity of its need is still not recognize by the community. Nonetheless, the awareness of sense of community seems to arise where in United States the awareness emerge by the realization that sense of belonging in the society is very lacking and there is a dire need to instill it to ensure all the citizens could unite and cooperate with each other for the sake of the nation. (Etzioni, 1993).

This sentiment has also been voiced out by John Goodland (Rovai, 2002) the Chief Institute of Educational Reformation from Washington University. He quoted from Holistic Education Review 1990 edition that state “our culture does not cultivate the very best for human spiritual sense. It does not foster vision, imagination, beauty or spiritual enhancement. It does not immerse oneself to gentleness, benevolence and the feeling of care towards each other. In this 20th century, the world gives too much focus on technology advancement and economic prosperity that it has destroy the feeling of love and moral virtues that should be existed in every human soul.

For the purpose of this study, greater concentration is given towards the educational ambience where students are the member of the community. However to cultivate and instill sense of belonging it must be noted that a different approach need to be use depending on the community itself.

**Statement of Problem**
The distance-learners are always presumed as low achiever with a low sense of belonging towards the institutions that they are studying. This is based on the low response that these students give toward students’ activities organized by their institution that they are in. The Institute of Educational Development, MARA
University of Technology is one of the leading institutions in Malaysia that provide distance programs for higher-level education. Prior research has not examined sense of belonging in higher education. Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to examine the level of sense of belonging in distance learners and how does it differ between male and female students, diploma and bachelor and also the interrelation between sense of belonging and students’ academic achievement.

The Objective of the Study
Generally, the main objective of this study is to examine the level of the Sense of Belonging among the distance learners of MARA University of Technology (UiTM). Specifically the objectives of this study are:

i. To identify the sense of belonging possessed by the distance learners towards the Institute of Educational Development (InED);
ii. To identify any differences of the sense of belonging that may exist between male and female students;
iii. To identify the differences of the sense of belonging between the diploma and bachelor degree students;
iv. To determine the relationship between the sense of belonging and students’ academic achievement.

Definitions of Term

- Sense Of Belonging - refers to the sense of belonging, commitment, love and pride toward (InED) and (UiTM)
- Academic Achievement - refers to students' CGPA.
- Students - distance learners in the diploma and bachelor degree level
- The Sense of Belonging Membership - refers to the sense of membership in a community or society.
- The Sense of Belonging Influence - a feeling that a person inside a community has the capability of influencing the behavior and actions of his or her group or community they are in (the nonexistence of this feeling may cause them to refuse from participating and be a part of the group.)
- The Sense of Belonging Integration - the need to be interdependent, a feeling that members matter to one another and the willingness to maintain this situation through shared values that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.
- The Sense of Belonging Emotion – a tie binding relationship that is created by high frequency of interaction.

Research Methodology
This study adopted descriptive method. Ary (1991) defines descriptive method as obtaining information concerning the current status of a phenomenon. Based on the formula by Cohen (2001), 322 students were randomly selected. The stratified sampling method was used to select students from diploma and degree level. 184 students completed the research questionnaire.
The research instrument was constructed based on the model by McMillan & Chavis (1986). Based on the model, the sense of belonging is measured through 4 variables which are membership, influence, integration, fulfilling basic needs and a shared emotional connection. There are 40 items available (10 items for each variable) in order to identify the students' sense to each variables.

The Cronbach’s Alpha value showed high reliability. The validity was approved by the experts as it has fulfilled the criteria needed.

**Table 1: The Reliability of Variables of the Sense of Belonging**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Integration</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.7747</td>
<td>.7788</td>
<td>.6484</td>
<td>.6996</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents’ sense of belonging was determined by adding all the senses into one domain and then the differences were measured. The variable with a higher score shows the respondents' favour towards that senses. The data was analyzed by using SPSS. The descriptive analysis such as percentage and mean were used. T-test was done to analyze the differences between male and female students and the differences between program levels. Pearson correlation was executed to identify the correlation between the academic achievement and the sense of belonging.

**The Results**

From 322 questionnaires that had been distributed, 184 respondents had returned the complete form. This consisted of 40% male and 60% female students.

Majority of the respondents were within 20 to 30 years of age that was 63.2%. Twenty nine percent within 31 to 40 years, 6.3% were within 41 to 50 years and 0.06% above 51 years old.

The majority of the respondents were involved in administrative work while the rest in financial and professional sectors.

Sixty one percent of the respondents were studying at diploma level and 39% were at first-degree level. Sixty four percent of the students were 2.55 of CGPA and above.

**a. General Sense of Belonging**

**Table 2: General Sense of Belonging**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>40.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>39.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>37.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>35.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above mean scores showed that the 'membership' variable was the most dominant followed by 'influence', 'emotion' and 'integration'. These results indicated that the students more emphasized towards attach to a group member. This could be a result of labelling them according to their program of studies. As a consequence sense of integration among students were found low.
The above mean scores also showed low Sense of belonging among the distance learners. The phenomenon could be due to the fact that students are doing their study part time and with other responsibilities such as their career and family.

b. Sense of Belonging by Age

The 'membership' sense of belonging was found the most dominant for the students within 31 to 40 years old with the mean of 41.68. It was also dominant among students within 41 to 50 years old and 21 to 30 years. While, the students above 51 years old showed low sense of belonging.

c. Sense of Belonging by Gender

Based on gender, the 'membership' sense of belonging was the most dominant as compared to others with a mean of 40.95 for male and 39.36 for female. The result showed that the male students had a higher sense of belonging than female students. This may be due to some of the female students in InED are married and have to devote their energy and time as a wife, mother and also subordinate.

d. Sense of Belonging by Program of Studies

The 'membership' factor also had the highest mean that was 40.76 for the students in the bachelor degree and 39.67 for the students in the diploma level. This showed that the diploma students have a lower sense of belonging as compared to the degree students.

e. Sense of Belonging by Academic Achievement (CGPA)

Based on the students CGPA, the 'membership' was found higher among students with 0.00 to 1.99 CGPA. This followed by students with 3.0 to 3.49 of CGPA. Surprisingly, the achievers showed low sense of belonging as compared to the others.

1. The Differences of the Sense of Belonging between Male and Female students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Difference in Sense of Belonging by Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Categories of Sense of Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The T-test results showed that the Membership, Integration and Emotion sense of belonging were found significantly different between male and female students. This concludes that male and female students have a different sense of Belonging which is in line with Gurian’s (2001) theory who states that male and female has a different brain structures and functions.
2. The Difference of the Sense of Belonging by Program of Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Significance Values (2-Tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>0.138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>0.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>0.482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>0.721</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results showed that only the Influence sense of belonging had a significant difference between Diploma and Degree students. Other variables did not show any significant difference for the program level.

3. The Correlation between Sense of Belonging and Academic Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Significance Values (2-Tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
<td>0.770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>0.630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>0.794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>0.649</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Correlation did not show any significant relationship between students’ achievements and the Sense of Belonging.

Conclusion

Based on the research, six conclusions can be made as follow:-

1. The Sense of Belonging among InED students is considered low. The nature of the students’ learning environment such as not staying in one place as full time students do and less number of face to face meeting could contribute to this result. Another possible factor is the students background itself. Most of the students are working at public and private sectors. Thus, most of their times are at work place which shaped their thinking and behaviour. Therefore sense of belonging towards university becomes a secondary agenda.

2. The most dominant sense of belonging among the distance learners is ‘membership’. As stated in the research, membership is based on the feeling of common values, emotional security, a shared symbol and the feeling to be belonged in the community. In this contact the Membership aspect means that the distance learners are exclusively a different group from the full timers where the different lies on the fact that they are “e-learners” which make they belonged to each other.

3. The middle-aged students in the age group of 31 to 40 years old have the highest sense of belonging compared to other age groups. This probably due to the age factor where students at this stage have a clear understanding on integration since mostly everybody has a working experience that thought them on the important of
relationship in a community. Student in this age also is in the stage of settling down (Asker & Moore, 1980) thus they have ample time to connect themselves to the community and be more focus in their study.

4. Gender too has effects on the Sense of Belonging. As claimed by the psychologist, male and female have differences in many aspects. Gurian (2001) explains that male and female has a different brain structures and functions. The research shows that the male has significant differences in the sense of belonging as compared to female with the exception on the ‘influence factor’.

5. The Sense of Belonging does not have a significant relationship with the students’ academic achievement. The previous research had showed that students with a higher sense of belonging have a greater tendency in completing their studies as compared to students with a lower sense. However, in this study, there is no correlation between the sense of belonging and the students’ academic achievement. In fact, the students with a lower CGPA have a higher sense of belonging than the higher achiever.

6. The students’ program of studies does not bring any significant difference in the sense of belonging except the ‘influence factor’ has a significant difference.

Recommendations

Based on the research, the recommendations are as follow:

a. Recommendation for Practice

1. To constantly organize activities that can increase the students' sense of belonging towards MARA University of Technology. It should involve student at all levels and emphasis should be given towards female students who have lower sense of belonging than the male students

b. Future Research

1. To conduct a more comprehensive research that will also involve the branch campuses in UiTM that have e-learning program. The result would be more thorough and complete.

2. To conduct a comparative research between other universities that provides e-learning programs. The comparisons may lead to more positive input in order to understand the effects of different educational surroundings on the sense of belonging.

3. To involve multi-ethnics students in Malaysia who follow the e-learning program. The finding will inform us the effect of cultural and social background differences towards the students’ sense of belonging.

4. To conduct a comparative research between the full time and distance learners. The finding will inform us the effect of students’ program of studies towards the sense of belonging.

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