

Coping Strategies of Graduate Students in Public Universities of Ethiopia and Support System in the Graduate Program

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Abstract: The major objective of this study was to assess coping strategies of adult learners in the graduate program in six public universities of Ethiopia using a three-dimensional model which included positive interpretation and growth, use of instrumental support, and use of emotional support seeking strategies. The research further attempted to identify factors in the graduate program that threatened adult learners and the support system in the graduate program. The research design involved a blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches which employed non-experimental factorial design and socio-phenomenological design. Results showed that graduate students mainly used strategies pertaining to positive appraisal of the graduate program and emotional support they received from friends and their families. Teaching-learning process, availability of facilities and resources, support network, individual learner's characteristics, and favorable learning environment were found to have a capacitating effect to meet curricula demands and adult life tasks. Finally, implications to improve the learning environment of adult learners in the context of graduate program are forwarded.

Key words: Coping, Enhancing, Threatening, Adult learners, Graduate program, Support system

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Introduction

Research indicates that college students, including graduate and distance learning students are prone to stress. A study by Ramos and Borte (2012 cited in D'Zurilla and Sheedy, 1991) indicated that students entering graduate programs need to adjust to time management demands and higher academic expectations than they dealt with during their undergraduate study. Studies that have examined stress in graduate students demonstrated that these students report stress related to role conflict, time constraint, financial pressure, and lack of family or program support. Similar to graduate students, non-traditional students report that the challenge of multiple roles often contributes to their stress (Dill and Henley, 1998; Hudd, et al., 2000 cited in Oswald and Riddock, 2007). Oswald and Riddock (2007) reported that loneliness and adjustment to new surroundings, time management and multi-tasking, departmental and university related issues, health issues, and international events were listed as threatening factors during their stay in the graduate program. Students also identified lack of office space with internet and network access and study locations as additional concerns.

Research by Oswald and Riddock (2007) found that the most common coping strategies used by adult learners in higher education institutions to manage stress was talking with friends (69.5%, $n = 155$) followed by eating comfort foods (68.2%, $n = 152$). When asked about specific issues that impacted them, respondents rated school work as having the most impact with a mean of 4.26 on a 5 point scale and $SD = 1.02$.

A study by Huang and Klinger (2006) on Learning Challenges and Coping strategies of Chinese Graduate Students at two North American Universities found that financial difficulties were ranked as one of the top-three factors that negatively affected academic study for these students. Insufficient financial support from both universities created great challenge for them to complete their graduate studies. In

response, these students found it necessary to find extra work within their academic institutions.

A theme that came out from analysis of open ended items showed that graduate students would benefit from an academic environment with improved communication, less bureaucracy and more respect for their contributions to the university community. Students felt that faculty members were not sensitive to the stress they experienced and that excessive paperwork and lengthy university procedures were overly demanding problems. In addition, communicating clearer expectations to the students regarding program of study requirements and assistantship duties were found to enhance their adjustment to the demands of the graduate program (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007)

Recognizing the well being of adult learners as part and parcel of the overall graduate program, and as an integral part of the whole professional practice in higher education institutions and establishing support systems are essential undertakings to promote quality education at tertiary level. Tinto (1993), cited in Huang & Klinger (2006), underlined the importance of social and academic integration of graduate students into higher education institutions for knowledge and skill retention. Demographic characteristics, academic strength and healthy relationships with the university community and more over the reciprocal relationships with the social and academic environment in the university campuses are important factors that determine the level and quality of achievement of graduate students. Huang and Klinger (2006) stated that knowledge and skill retention are related to how well students are socially and academically integrated into the institution.

Commitment to institutional goals is a determinant factor for the effectiveness of graduate programs and for social and academic integration of a graduate student into the various programs in higher education institutions. The institutions and graduate students enrolled in the programs need to show commitment to the vision, missions and goals set and need to work hard towards these ends.

The steady expansion of the post graduate program in Ethiopia is emanated from the country's need for highly qualified man power that could enhance development endeavors and meet the various needs of the nation (Transitional Government of Ethiopia, 1994). The tertiary level which has been fettered for decades by organizational and logistical problems embarked into a new chapter of expansion which of course opened opportunity for adults to pursue their studies. Indeed, it has created an inspiration among adults to get high level training at MA/MSC and PhD levels.

The total number of students enrolled in post graduate programs in government and non-government institutions increased from 14,272 in 2009/10 to 33,882 in 2013/14 at both MA/MSC and PhD levels. In 2013/14 total enrollment for masters was 26,117 and 3,294 for PhD programs in government higher education institutions alone. Post graduate program enrollment soared up for the last five years (MoE, 2013/14). Although the nation needed high level professionals, it cannot accommodate interests of all graduate program applicants. Logistical constraints coupled with lack of experience in managing and administering higher education institutions especially graduate programs are still daunting challenges in the sector.

The graduate program scheme exerts pressure on resource allocation and requires flexibility in modes of study and life style to meet age-graded adult life tasks and curriculum demands. The additional challenges graduate students face in combination with typical every day hassles could threaten them. Furthermore, learners might face multiple daily life events such as specific to being an adult learner, systems in the family, lack of educational resources, time shortage to complete assignments, and attachment problems in due course of their stay in the graduate program.

Results of coping studies and support systems in higher education institutions would help to provide evidence to the universities on the trends and directions of the postgraduate program. In line with this, this

study examined the coping strategies of adult learners enrolled in the graduate program of public universities and explored factors that enhanced and/ or threatened their capacity to meet the demands of the graduate program.

The major objective of this study was to assess coping strategies of self and government sponsored adult learners enrolled in the graduate program at public universities of Ethiopia using a three-dimensional model which included positive interpretation and growth, use of instrumental support, and use of emotional support seeking strategies. The research further aimed at the identification of enhancing and/ or threatening factors and explored the support system in the program.

Accordingly, the study explored the following issues:

- Factors in the graduate program that threatened adult learners enrolled in public universities;
- Coping strategies graduate students in public universities employ to meet the demands of the graduate program and adult responsibilities;
- Factors that enhanced coping capacities of adult learners in the graduate programs; and,
- Support systems available in the graduate program that enhanced coping capacities of adult learners.

Conceptual framework of the research

Recently there has been a rapid growth of curiosity and concern among researchers about coping and adaptation. Popularity of the field can be seen by the relatively abundant theoretical and empirical evidences in the psychological literature (Muller & Spitz, 2003). In its general sense the term coping can be conceptualized as cognitive and behavioral efforts to withstand conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available (Folkman,

& Lazarus, 1980; Muller & Spitz, 2003). Here, environmental demands that could possibly entail disequilibrium in the functioning of the individual must be harnessed before they escalate to a greater extent and jeopardize the well being of the individual. Hence, the term coping refers to adaptation under relatively difficult conditions.

Not all situational factors result in non-homeostatic relationship between the individual and the environment. The expectation and appraisal of the threatening situation play a moderating role in the coping process. One might conclude then that anticipation of success or failure may be an important dimension in counteracting these undesirable life events (Huang & Klinger, 2006).

The concept of adult life tasks in the course of adult development in this research is understood as cognitive component leading to the evaluation of post graduate program not as something that causes disturbance of normal functioning or something that could bring disruption of the social milieu of graduate students. Hence, coping strategy of adult learners takes the palliative mode in which the goal is to get relief from the emotional or psychological impact of the challenges of graduate studies. The goal of these coping strategies, therefore, is not to alter the program situation but make the adult learner feel better and fit to the environment so that he/she can meet the demands of the curriculum in his/her area of study (Folkman, & Lazarus, 1980; Wachs, 2005; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). To operationally understand the study, this research adapted the conceptualization forwarded by Chaturvedi (1983):

- the adult learner behaves in a socio-cultural environment;
- the graduate program and the life style of the individual adult learner set demands on the adult learner;
- the graduate student cognizes the demands made upon him and the resources available to him/her in terms of the consequences of failure or success vis-à-vis the demand; and

- the adult learner is capable and resourceful to meet the curricula and other demands so that he/she may not face unpleasant consequences. Schematic representation of the research process is shown below:

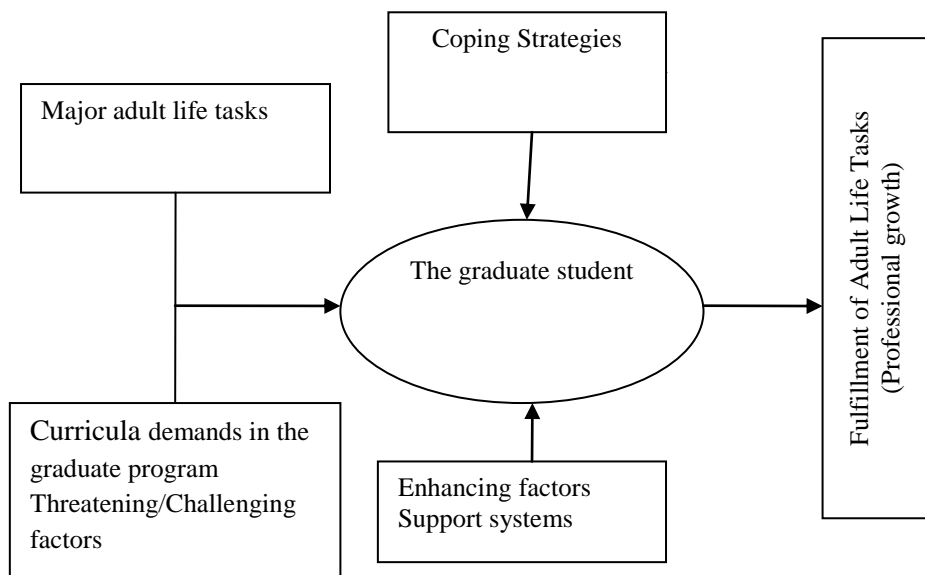


Figure 1: Schematic presentation of the conceptual framework of the research process

Method

Research design

The research design was a blend of qualitative and quantitative approaches in which non-experimental factorial design and socio-phenomenological design types were employed (Creswel, 2009). The non-experimental factorial design was chosen to identify the most salient coping strategies of graduate students. The Socio-

Phenomenological approach helps to capture meanings adults attach to life events in the micro systems and how these meanings differ across universities and contexts. This specific technique was chosen to understand how adult learners' life in the graduate program change in due course of their graduate study and how they interpret events encountered in the programs they enrolled in. As is the case in adult development and aging studies (Cavanaugh, & Fields, 2002; Miller, 1998), in addition to age effects, cohort and time of measurement effects as well are essential components in research designs. Hence, participants of this study are graduate students drawn from public universities to scale up the profile of university teaching staff at MA/MSc and PhD levels to meet the strategic goal set by the Ministry of Education to produce 20,000 MA and 5,000 PhD graduates in the near future. This mission to be accomplished by higher education institutions coupled with individual characteristics and challenges to attend graduate programs uniquely influence and shape experiences of this cohort group in the graduate program.

Sampling procedures

In order to capture reliable and valid data on the coping strategies of adult learners and support systems in the graduate program, sample faculties and schools in the respective universities were considered. Respondents were drawn from different bands of study involving Engineering and Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities, Natural and Computational Sciences and Business and Economics. Availability sampling technique was used to reach research participants in their specific areas of study. Since the academic calendar for graduate programs varied across universities and due to high mobility of graduate students, it was not possible to use proportionate random sampling technique. Graduate students that met the criterion of at least one year stay in the program they enrolled was considered on availability during data collection period. Sampling distribution of respondents from the six universities is shown in Table1.

Table 1: Sampling distribution of respondents from six public universities

Universities	Freq.	Percent	Valid Percent
Adama	28	11.6	11.6
Addis Ababa	62	25.7	25.7
Arbaminch	18	7.5	7.5
Awassa	45	18.7	18.7
Bahirdar	49	20.3	20.3
Jimma	39	16.2	16.2
Total	241	100.0	100.0

Data collection instrument

The instrument for data collection was organized in four sections. Section one was about demographic information of respondents. Respondents were asked to provide information about the department or faculty in which they enrolled, whether or not they were living with their family or attending programs away in other universities, and the status of their enrollment (government vs self sponsored). In section two respondents were asked to list down things about their respective universities that threatened/challenged them in the graduate program.

The modified version of the brief COPE inventory developed by Carver, Schere, and Weintraub (1989) was adapted and used to assess the particular ways adult students used to cope with the demands of graduate program and daily hassles they encountered as adult learners. The items were framed on a four point Likert-type scale ranging from 1; "I haven't been doing this at all" to 4 "I have been doing this a lot". Validation studies on the COPE instrument were carried out in other parts of the world. The alpha reliability of the different scales for the population involved in the validation studies ranged from 0.45 to 0.92 (Muller & Spitz, 2003). In this study, an overall Alpha of 0.815 was found indicating a strong internal consistency of the items. In section four respondents were asked to list down enhancing factors and support systems available at advisor and department levels that

promoted their coping abilities to meet the demands of the graduate program.

Results

Demographic characteristics of respondents

Full time sponsored students were drawn from public higher education institutions and other ministries. They were paid their monthly salaries by their respective institutions and organizations. They were beneficiaries of free scholarship. Self-sponsored students on the other hand were employees of government, non- government organizations or working in the private sector. About 72% of the respondents were government sponsored students.

Living arrangement of graduate students was not similar across universities. Some lived and attended programs in their home universities. Others had to leave their residential and working places and were enrolled in other universities which offered programs in their areas of specialization. These variations in living arrangement would obviously entail a challenge. For graduate students enrolled in universities that provided dormitories and apartments were considered an opportunity. Otherwise, they were forced to reside in rented houses located around their respective universities. Accordingly, the majority (77.6%) of respondents enrolled in universities located away from their home universities or at least different from faculties in which they were affiliated with.

Respondents were asked to report on their marital status. The variable was leveled into three: "married", "bachelor" and "others." About 56% of the respondents reported that they were bachelors. The remaining 39% and 5% were married and in the "Other" category respectively. Table two shows distribution of the marital status of respondents.

Table 2: Marital status of research participants

Marital status	Frequency	Valid Percent
Married	94	39.3
Bachelor	134	56.1
Other	11	4.6
Total	239	100.0

Data pertaining to adult learners' response to open ended items to enhancing and threatening factors and support systems at their respective universities were collected concurrently with the quantitative data. Data collected through these open ended items were reduced and classified under the six universities with respect to issues raised. Essential issues raised by the graduate learners that came out from the open ended items were analyzed following the steps suggested by Grenewold (2004). Since the general purpose of the questionnaire was to capture the lived experiences of graduate learners; the researcher read the responses in each university to have a holistic understanding of the phenomenology of the issue. Statements, catching words and phrases that would illuminate the crux of enhancing factors, threatening factors, and support systems available to adult learners in the context of graduate program were exhaustively listed under each university. The third step taken was to form cluster of non-overlapping words and phrases to surface the essential points raised by graduate students. Themes were formed from those words and phrases. This step is bracketing of the content within the ambit of the research questions relevant to each section. The next data analysis step taken was to incorporate and assemble the themes and essentials bracketed along the research questions to have a holistic understanding and communalities across the universities. As a final step, general summary of all qualitative data on common themes that reflect contexts featuring each university were put in matrices.

Themes developed from list of factors that threatened adult learners in the graduate program

Teaching and learning

A number of factors featuring the teaching and learning process had negative impact on students' learning and life styles in the universities. In general two sub-themes could be identified from the list of threatening factors under the rubric teaching and learning process. Some of the issues can be recoded under the sub-theme "Teachers' Profile" and the other under "Teachers' Teaching Styles". Shortage of engineering teachers is a threat reported by graduate students. A case at Adama University, for example, showed that one-third of thirteen courses was offered at Addis Ababa University, hundred kilometers away which incurred additional living costs to students. Poor academic knowledge of instructors (instructors that bless ignorance; a remark by a graduate student), gap in knowledge between instructors and students, lack of competent and committed advisors, lack of experienced instructors are challenges encountered by graduate students. In some programs, for example it was reported that teachers' qualification is below PhD and at times 60% of the instructors do not fulfill the academic rank requirement to teach at post graduate level. Under the sub-theme "Teachers' Teaching Styles", mismatch between learning style of students and teachers teaching style, inappropriate assessment methods, lengthy theoretical sessions due to lack of lab equipment (some teachers rush, damping power points: remark by a respondent) were mentioned as challenges adult students faced in due course of their graduate study.

Facilities and resources

Two sub-categories of events that are perceived as threats can be formed from list of factors under the theme facilities and resources. Some of the factors appraised as threats are related to shortage of learning facilities. These include: shortage of laboratory and learning materials, shortage of ICT materials in the department (computers and

LCDs not functioning), lack of up to date reference materials (books are on catalogues but not found on shelves), lack of health services, absence of separate library and facilities for MSC programs, misuse of resource materials by learners and instructors. The other sub-category is related to logistics problem. Problem of finding houses (unprecedented increase in housing rent around university campuses), absence of dormitory service (hence forced to study till mid night in the university library), insufficient space in the libraries, lack of office or working space for PhD students, lack of transport service from town to university campuses, physical distance between classrooms, departments, and library , noise pollution around classrooms especially by undergraduate students, lack of special provisions for learners with disabilities, unbearable tuition fee for self sponsored adult learners, and inadequate ear-marked budget for research were threats reported by graduate students.

Relational

Relational was the third theme identified to represent relationships between students, instructors, support staff and relationships within students themselves. Intimacies, respect, helping relationship are hallmarks of healthy adult relationship. This does not mean there are no exceptions. There were extreme cases in which instructors and students seemed to be detached from each other. The following excerpts taken from participants responses describe the unhealthy relationships between students, instructors and support staff.

- Misunderstanding by peers about the meaning of competition (*Respondent from Arbaminch University*)
- No positive thing among support staff (*Respondent from Adama University*)
- The psychology of attending in the graduate program is all about unconditional regard to the professor (*Respondent from Addis Ababa University*)

- Instructors are not well organized in practical sense and I feel I am always lost by hiding myself behind grades (*Respondent from Addis Ababa University*)

Governance problem, poor planning, and work load are the three themes formed from responses to threatening factors at university level. These three themes are not equally applicable or important across all universities. For example, governance problem seems to be a threatening problem at Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar universities. Problems related to planning are evident at Addis Ababa, Awassa, and Jimma Universities. The problem of work load in its various forms was mentioned as a threat by graduate students enrolled at Adama and Jimma Universities.

Table 3: Matrix of threatening factors across the universities

Themes	Universities					
	Adama	Addis Ababa	Arbaminch	Awassa	Bahir Dar	Jimma
Teaching and learning	√	√	√	√	√	√
Facilities and resources	√	√	√	√	√	√
Relational process	√	√	√		√	
Governance		√			√	
Planning		√		√		√
Workload	√					√

Rank ordering of factors that threatened adult learners in the graduate program

A list of factors composed of personal characteristics of adult learners and ecological variables in the graduate program setting were set and respondents were asked to rank order these factors to the extent they negatively affected their stay in the graduate program. A rank of 1 for a factor is strong impact and 7 minimal effects. The seven factors were: Cognitive strength, Marital status, Living arrangement, Ministry of

Education Policy, University policy, Mismatch between learning and teaching styles and Economic status. These seven issues were not considered mutually exclusive and exhaustive; rather they were selected based on current literature and from responses to open-ended items presented to graduate students in this research. Frequency distributions, percentages and rankings with regard to their magnitude as threats are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Ranking of individual and ecological variables that threatened graduate students in the program

Items	Rank1	Rank2	Rank3	Rank4	Rank5	Rank6	Rank7	Overall Ranking
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	
Cognitive strength	55 (22.8)	12(5)	13(5.4)	20(8.3)	19(7.9)	26(10.8)	88 (36.5)	4
Marital status	33(13.7)	11(4.6)	17(7.1)	11(4.6)	8(3.3)	22(9.1)	132 (54.8)	6
Living arrangement	85(35.3)	35(14.5)	17(7.1)	18(7.5)	22(9.1)	10(4.1)	49 (20.3)	2
MoE Policy	62(25.7)	18(7.5)	24(10)	20(8.3)	23(9.5)	12(5)	74(30.7)	3
University policy	57(23.7)	22(9.1)	20(8.3)	18(7.5)	24(10)	22(9.1)	72(29.9)	5
Economic status	130(53.9)	20(8.3)	16(6.6)	14(5.8)	14(5.8)	7(2.9)	35(14.5)	1
Mismatch b/n learning and teaching styles	73(30.3)	11(4.6)	23(9.5)	19(7.9)	16(6.6)	15(6.2)	79(32.8)	7

As shown in Table 4 most respondents 130(54%) rated economic related factor as the most threatening factor. The second and third important factors were found to be living arrangement 35 (15%) and MoE policy 24 (10%) respectively. The least threatening factors as rated by respondents were marital status 22(9.1%) and mismatch b/n learning and teaching styles 79(32.8).

Coping strategies of graduate students

A three dimensional instrument was adapted to explore the strategies used by graduate students to cope with the demands of the graduate program. The first dimension was composed of items exploring learners' potentials and capabilities to cope with challenges of the graduate program. The second dimension was about the instrumental support graduate learners obtained from their respective departments,

faculties, advisors, and friends who passed through similar life experiences. The third dimension attempted to find out the emotional support obtained through discussing problems with friends and relatives who could share feelings with them. The overall instrument was composed of ten items framed along a four point scale: I usually don't do (1); I usually do (2); I usually do this medium (3), and I usually do this a lot (4). In view of the above threatening factors and other adult responsibilities, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they used the listed coping strategies. A close inspection of the frequency distribution of the responses showed that graduate students tend to rate the listed strategies toward the upper end of the scale. Except in two items, "I talk to the department chairperson or faculty dean who could do something concrete about the problems I face in the program" and "I get sympathy and understanding from the university with regard to my problems in the graduate program", the rest of the items seem to be frequently practiced coping strategies by most graduate learners. These two items had the lowest mean values i.e. $M=2.19$ and $M=2.22$ respectively. The first three most used strategies were "I try to see the graduate program as an opportunity to make it seem more positive" (Mean=3.28); "I learn something from the day-to-day experience in the graduate program" (Mean=3.26); and, "I discuss my feelings with colleagues in the program" (M=3.19). Graduate students positive interpretation of the program and emotional support they get from someone are the two broader areas of coping strategies used by the majority of the respondents. Table 5 shows item statistics of the coping strategy scale.

Table 5: Item statistics for the coping strategy scale

	Mean	Std. Deviation
I try to grow as a graduate student as a result of the experience in the graduate program.	3.07	.8969
I try to see the graduate program as opportunity to make it seem more positive.	3.27	.8477
I see something good in what is happening in the graduate program.	3.02	.8608
I learn something from the day-to-day experience in the graduate program.	3.25	.9640
I try to get advice from my advisor about what to do in the graduate program.	2.65	1.0702
I talk to the department chairperson or faculty dean who could do something concrete about the problems I face in the program.	2.22	.9945
I ask senior students who have had similar experiences.	2.88	.9997
I discuss my feelings with colleagues in the program.	3.18	.9623
I try to get emotional support from friends or relatives.	2.83	.9833
I get sympathy and understanding from the university with regard to my problems in the graduate program.	2.18	.9775

A rating of 1 and 2 is taken as less frequently used coping strategies while 3 and 4 is taken as most frequently used strategies by graduate students. Hence, aggregate percentages for the lower and upper groups were computed and the significance of the difference between these two percentages was computed. It was hypothesized that there is statistically significant difference between the percentages falling below the average and percentages falling above the average ratings. The standard error was used in determining the significance of the difference between the low group and high group percentages where P_1 (aggregate percentage of the upper group) and P_2 (aggregate percentage of the lower group) and then the common population parameter "P" was determined by pooling P_1 and P_2 . The critical Ratio

(CR) is obtained by dividing the difference between the two percentages by the standard error of the difference between the two uncorrelated percentages (Garrett & Woodworth, 1967). Results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Significance difference test between percentages falling above the average and below the average and critical ratios (CR)

Items	High	Low	Diff	SE	CR(0.05)
I grow as graduate student----	75.5	22.8	52.7	7.40	7.12
I see graduate program as opportunity--	83	15.4	67.6	7.99	8.46
I see something good----	73.9	24.5	49.4	7.30	6.77
I learn something from day to day-----	76	16.1	59.9	8.39	7.14
I try to get advice-----	53.1	44.4	8.7	6.55	1.33
I talk to the department chairperson-----	32.9	61.8	-28.9	8.98	3.22
I ask senior students-----	68.9	27.0	41.9	7.23	5.79
I discuss my feelings-----	76.7	18.7	58	7.91	7.32
I try to get emotional support-----	64.7	32.8	31.9	6.16	5.18
I get sympathy and understanding-----	39.4	57.3	-17.9	6.75	2.65

The obtained difference between the two aggregate percentages is significant at 0.01 level of confidence. Critical ratios for all items were found to exceed 2.58 at 0.01 levels except the item that reads "I try to get advice from my advisor about what to do in the graduate program". Hence, it is safe to conclude that the majority of respondents tend to use the coping strategies listed in the scale.

Enhancing factors in the graduate program

Teaching learning process

One of the themes developed from the list of enhancing factors was teaching and learning process. Several issues were raised under this theme. Availability of experienced high ranking professors and exemplary role model teachers was identified as enhancing factor that increased adult learners coping strategies in the graduate program. Teaching style of

instructors was another element that helped graduate students to cope with the demands of the graduate program. Research-based teaching learning process, project works, group discussions, term papers, seminar presentations, capacity building trainings, arranging different public lectures and presentation of research works, continuous assessment and feedback, inviting guest lecturers from other universities and focus on practice-based education were factors that enhanced coping capacity of adult learners in the graduate program.

Facilities and resources

The other common theme across universities is labeled as facilities and resources. Adult learners in all universities identified factors such as laboratories, instructional materials, 24 hours internet access to download materials, availability of uploaded publications, provision of hard copies, modules prepared by instructors as enhancing factors in the graduate program. Resources such as café, water and other supplies, dormitory service, infrastructures suited for different purposes were factors that contributed for effective attainment of curriculum demands in the graduate program.

Support net work

Support net work adult learners maintained in due course of their study with different groups in the system was enhancing theme identified from the analysis. A number of factors have been clustered under this rubric. Support from colleagues and family, religious affiliation and provisions from the graduate program offices in the respective universities were found to be sources of strength and self enhancement. Cooperation and appreciation from colleagues, family, classmates, and experience shared from senior students, and God's mercy were sources of support in the program. Institutional support included factors such as financial support from post graduate offices to undertake research, free scholarship (mainly for government sponsored students). Respondents also reported that guidance and encouragement by course instructors, support from research advisors, staff cooperation and responsiveness to students' problems, positive

treatment of instructors, and coordinated activities in the department were reported as institutional supporting elements that enhanced coping strategies of graduate students.

Individual characteristics

The fourth theme “Individual characteristics” was formed from responses obtained from five universities with the exception of Arbaminch University. These individual characteristics included learners’ emotional and cognitive strength and positive appraisal of the program in general. Patience, Prosocial behavior of colleagues, setting of one’s own realistic goal, effective time management, flexibility in life style, intrinsic motivation to learn, engagement in income generating activities, commitment to advance one’s own knowledge, emotional maturity that served to resolve problems , vision to achieve long term ambition, determination, life experience enriched through research and extensive reading, communication skill were factors in the adult learners’ life that enhanced their coping strategies.

Learning environment

The last theme “Learning environment” was formed from responses solicited from four universities namely Adama, Addis Ababa, Arbaminch, and Bahir Dar. Factors under this cluster include physical settings, program management; policy issues that govern graduate program, peace and security within campuses, allocation of separate classrooms for graduate program classes, and ecology of the campus were contexts that enhanced graduate learners’ adjustment to meet the demands of the curriculum. Issues pertaining to program coordination and management include: post semester discussions, dissemination of best practices, timely assignment of advisors, group dynamism in the department , and arrangement of classes during weekends (especially for self sponsored adult learners) were found to bring about positive influence on graduate students’ capacity to stay in the program. Furthermore, factors such as well-coordinated program implementation, policy that involves students in decision making, involvement of departments in the country’s Growth and

Transformation Program, and open door policy to get information from top management were issues that helped adult learners to strive to meet their goals.

Table 7: Matrix of enhancing factors across universities

Themes	Universities					
	Adama	Addis Ababa	Arbaminch	Awassa	Bahir Dar	Jimma
Teaching and learning	√	√	√	√	√	√
Facilities and resources	√	√	√	√	√	√
Support network	√	√	√	√	√	√
Learning environment		√	√		√	√
Individual characteristics	√	√		√	√	√

Support systems in the graduate program

In section four of the survey questionnaire graduate students were asked to report the support they obtained from their advisors and departments they are enrolled in. List of support systems available in the context of graduate program were categorically put under each university. Repetitive words and phrases narrated by adult learners in their respective universities were delineated in the list and non-overlapping factors were sorted out. Themes that describe contexts across universities were formed.

Support system at advisor level

Psychological support

A number of catching words and phrases were used by graduate students to describe the type and extent of psychological support given by advisors. Committed and cooperative advisors, advisors that respect students and take things positively, negotiable advisors, interested and sensitive to hear and help students in any academic

related issue, flexibility in communication, advisors that encourage, guide, and comment constructively were kinds of psychological support adult learners obtained to cope up with the demands of the graduate program. Excerpts taken from the qualitative data demonstrate the emotional attachment between adult learners and their respective advisors.

There is good interaction with our advisors. We are friendly; he is sympathetic to our problems (*respondent from Bahir Dar University*)

Some dedicated instructors help in every aspect of students' problem (*respondent from Adama University*).

Readiness to help and solve my problems (*respondent from Addis Ababa University*).

Technical support

This aspect of support system includes advisors' technical knowhow and professional competencies in their area of specialization in particular and the mechanisms by which he/she shares his/her wealth of experience to shape research knowledge and skills of adult learners. Specific instances that supported graduate learners to cope up with the challenges they encountered during course work and research were delineated in the analysis. These include: Periodic meetings with advisee, sharing of new information in the area, timely comment, regular assistance and follow up of students' progress, timely feedback, individual support, Peer advisement and discussion, advisement on academic and personal problems, profound knowledge in a subject area, information on test taking skills especially procedures and techniques of the grading system, identifying the missing piece in students' knowledge and abilities, sharing of life experiences are technical support availed to learners at advisor level. Statements taken from the qualitative data are shown to substantiate the technical professional component of support obtained from advisors.

- He encourages us to be voracious readers (*respondent from Bahir Dar University*).
- Inspirational from time to time even if some mistakes, are committed (*respondent from Jimma University*)
- Regular presence in his workplace which made easy access to his office (*respondent from Addis Ababa university*)
- Punctuality and on time feedback (*respondent from Awassa University*)
- Follow-up not only in academic areas but also in other areas of the adult learners' life (*respondent from Awassa University*)
- Always available in the office and lab, gives constructive comments and suggestions, accepting and defending issues raised in classrooms (*respondent from Awassa university*)

Support system at department level

The sub-themes that were extracted from the responses by graduate students to the support system at department level may fall under three broad categories. These are facilitation, coordination and provisions. Although there are variations across universities some common elements can be identified in relation to these broader categories of support system at department level.

Discussion

The general objective of this research was to describe and explain the contexts that shaped the developmental tasks of adult learners enrolled in the graduate program of public universities in Ethiopia. The research specifically attempted to investigate the coping strategies used by graduate students to effectively discharge their adult responsibilities and meet curricula demands in the graduate program. An attempt has also been made to analyze factors that enhanced and threatened

graduate students and the support systems availed in due course of their study at two levels of the graduate program Microsystems.

The findings revealed that graduate students make use of different kinds of coping strategies to meet their adult responsibilities in the context of graduate program. These strategies are mainly pertaining to positive appraisal of the graduate program and emotional support they get from instructors, friends and their families. Self improvement goal is a driving force that leads to graduate students' persistence to meet the demands of the graduate program. Positive appraisal of the graduate program and assessing it as an opportunity despite institutional and individual related problems has been found as an important coping strategy adopted by graduate students. Personal strength and learning strategies adopted are key coping mechanisms adopted by graduate students in this research. The findings are consistent with Huang & Klinger (2006) study of Chinese Graduate Students at two North American Universities. It was reported that note taking, memorization of basic concepts, pre-class reading, self study, and review and more over being active all the time are learning styles and personal strengths which helped Chinese students to adjust themselves to the graduate program. According to Noh & Kaspar (2003, cited in D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991)) the most effective form of coping is the use of active coping technique with avoidance coping being less effective. Folkman & Lazarus (1985 cited in D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991) suggested that students who used positive thinking were more satisfied compared to those students who relied on avoidance coping responses such as withdrawal and wishful thinking. The findings in this research as well indicated that graduate students appraisal of the graduate program as an opportunity is a major strategy that enhanced adult learners to effectively discharge their academic responsibility rather than dwelling on problems and daily hassles.

Adult learners' personal characteristics affect whether they will succeed in a post graduate program. Institutional support has not been identified as major coping strategy of the adult learners. Analysis of mean values of the separate items showed that graduate students do not seem to share their problems with their instructors and seek solution to problems they face in the graduate programs. Instead they tend to share their problems with colleagues and resort to the use of their personal strengths as sources of coping strategy. This finding seems to be supported by other studies. According to Gulgoz (2001 cited in D'Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991), graduate students do not often ask professors for help when encountering stress. Accordingly, Gulgoz postulated that graduate students assume that it is not appropriate to seek help from a faculty or staff. Thus, employing a mentoring program may indeed help reduce stress and assist non-traditional graduate students employ proper coping mechanism

Results showed the prevalence of a range of institutional problems that threatened learners' coping strategies. Data demonstrated good practices while at the same time it appears to go against the mainstream institutional practices. In general, it appears that there is no integrated institutional response to mitigate the constraints graduate students face to enhance quality of the graduate program. It seems there is lack of integration among the various sections of the universities and across programs and units to oversee and monitor aspects of the graduate program and tracking of adult learners' problems.

Statements taken from graduate students' responses and from list of threatening factors revealed the fact that adult learners seem disappointed in the overall management of the graduate program for multiple reasons. The reasons are mal practices related to the teaching and learning process, unhealthy relational processes, lack of resources, and modalities of course offerings. Rank ordering of potential threatening factors in the graduate program showed economic status, living arrangement, and MoE policy as three most deterring

factors in the graduate program. This is in line with Huang & Klinger (2006) study that identified financial difficulties, difficulty in adapting to the classroom learning environment, and emotional difficulties among Chinese Graduate Students at North American Universities.

Implications

To attain quality of graduate program in higher education, practical intervention measures are required from the micro teaching and learning relationships prevailing among learners, instructors, and the university management, to institutional cultures in the respective universities, and to the macro policy environment at the Ministry level.

Short duration preparatory courses in computational, computer and language courses have been offered to students entering into the graduate program to update their cognitive knowledge to meet the demands of course work and research in the graduate program. As part of this entry level orientation, it is advisable to include adult life skill trainings, stress management trainings and departmental orientation for graduate students as part of this readiness program. Graduate program office in the universities in collaboration with academic units could organize brief orientation sessions by which graduate students would be capacitated to manage their life tasks in the context of the graduate program and address ways by which they can integrate themselves to the graduate program environment.

Semester based discussions with university management on the learning and living conditions of graduate students was found to be an important platform to discuss issues of common interest. This practice of actively engaging students in decisions making, or at least providing a forum to discuss issues of common interest should be encouraged. Graduate program office in the universities can facilitate productive dialogue between graduate students and the university management in order to reach an agreeable solution to problems encountered in the graduate program.

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