Life Tasks of Adult Graduate Learners in Public Universities of Ethiopia: Departments as Developmental Niches

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Abstract: The major objective of this study was to assess life tasks of adult learners in the graduate program and support systems available in two developmental niches of the system in six public universities of Ethiopia using an open-ended questionnaire. The research further attempted to examine the relationship between adult life tasks and age and marital status of graduate students. The research design employed a qualitative approach particularly a socio-phenomenological design. The unifying life tasks among the married and bachelor graduate students were professional development, social networking, conceptions about the self and participating in academic, social, and religious circles. The analysis showed that there were no fixed series of tasks neatly tied to each age group. Rather combinations of marriage, rearing children, and career development were the developmental milestones across the different groups. Although there were variations across universities, some common elements were identified in relation to the support system and challenges. Individual advising, cohesion between students and teachers, clear and scheduled course delivery, two-way communication to attain goals, program links with institutions and organizations in the community and abroad, availability of hard and soft copy learning materials, forum for experience sharing between staff and students and inviting guest professors were factors that helped to meet adult responsibilities at institutional and societal levels. Unfairness in treating students by some professors, no responsive individual, and institutional framework, absence of systematically synchronized curriculum, uncommitted instructors, and bias were challenges graduate students faced in the course of achieving adult developmental milestones.

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Background

In the context of higher education, an adult learner can be better described in terms of proportionately combining different roles played in work place, family and as learner in a given period. The overarching criteria being chronological age, the adult learner in higher education is conceptualized as one who does not join higher education directly after completing secondary education. In spite of this circumstance, the adult learner brings complex life experiences to the learning environments.

Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot, and Meril (1999), cited in Buchler, et al (2007, p. 128) defined the adult learner in the context of modern higher education as: those that commonly combine study with other major life roles: work, family, and community. Their dedication to the business of being a student is less excursive. On the other hand, their occupancy of the student role may be more single-minded and purposeful: getting a degree, not living the life of a student who is growing up".

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) publication identified adult learners with a set of loosely set criteria. Accordingly, unlike the traditional full-time students, adult learners are characterized by delayed enrollment into post-secondary education, attend part time, financially independent of parents, work full time while enrolled, and have dependents other than spouse.

The adult graduate learner can be defined in many other ways. The adult graduate learner in the context of this research can be considered as one who has completed his undergraduate study some time ago and gained experience in the work force prior to joining the graduate program and often playing multiple life roles. The age range for this group of learners could vary depending upon individual and program requirements. Research has demonstrated that learning style preferences and the consideration educators give to learning styles are closely related to individual characteristics such as motivation,

cognitive development, experience, and developmental life tasks of the learner. A number of educators and psychologists underlined the importance of the interactive relationship between the environment and the adult learner (Kolb, 1984; Rollin and Yoder, 1993).

Adult learning is not merely an accumulation of experience or accommodating information, but also reflecting upon information essentially, as it is or changing the information or oneself to fit ones thinking (Rollin and Yoder, 1993 p?). The relevance of diversified life experiences and life style changes adult learners bring to classrooms also differentiate them from the traditional learners in terms of learning preferences in higher education (Knowles, 1970). The high proficiency of the graduate students in analytical problem solving and their ability to cope up with the life style change of college campuses were found to be significantly different from the traditional students. Chao, DeRocco, and Flynn (2007, p.2) stated that *understanding the unique needs of adult learners is critical to designing higher education systems and policies that support this population and promote their success.*

The Problem

Higher education in Ethiopia began in the mid-1960s. It is only in the past fifteen years that it became a priority educational sector. The expansion has opened better access for the wider community especially at graduate level, once considered a privilege and luxurious exercise. In the past ten years, the government has demonstrated continued commitment to expanding equitable access to quality and relevant higher education. Since 2004/05, the number of public higher education institutions has increased from eight to thirty-six distributed across all regions of the country. Enrolment in the second-degree program in public higher education institutions increased from 7,211 in 2007/08 to 27,643 in 2013/14. Recently private institutions joined the task of enrolling postgraduate students and currently they have 3,000

Master's students. Consequently, the total enrolment at this level reached 30,643 at the end of ESDP IV. Enrolment in third degree programs (doctorate) has increased from a low base of only 258 in 2007/08 to 3,169 in 2013/14. New universities are being established to provide equitable geographic distribution across the regions, to provide opportunities to all from higher education's broader development effect on a local economy (ESDP, 2015/2016-2019/2020 P. 24).

The motive for studying adult development ranges from describing and understanding the process of change to its practical implications to directly improving the quality of adult's life at micro-macro systems. According to Hoyer, et al (1999, p.2), interest in the study of adult development and aging can be categorized as: 1) scientific and factual, 2) personal, and 3) altruistic. Hence, investigating the life tasks of adult learners and support system in the graduate program would help to develop ways that would help them to integrate the tasks and challenges of the graduate program and societal expectations in matured way.

Apart from curricula demands, adult learners in the graduate program are expected to meet multiple age-graded developmental tasks in a matured way as per societal norms and standards. Because human development is an outcome of the interaction of individual and environmental factors, the support system at micro developmental niche is a potential resource center for graduate students to execute multiple life tasks. Life tasks of adult learners and support system in the graduate program as a topic of investigation in this research is selected because it is thought to be an important milestone to explain how the development of adults as a group is configured at different levels of higher education and the society. As (Cruce and Hillman 2012; cited in Chen, 2017) indicated, while the literature on adult learning theory and adult education is quite robust, the translation of these scholarship areas into actual education administration and subsequent teaching practice in higher education institutions is quite limited. Hence, investigating the situation by which the lives of adult graduate students

are configured in the context of the graduate program has a theoretical and practical significance. As indicated in developmental research, empirical work is by large targeting children and adolescents. Research work that attempts to describe and explain the process of development during the adult stage particularly in the context of higher education is meager. This is especially true in the Ethiopian context. A cursory look into graduate and undergraduate these works in the behavioral studies highlights that by large the theses works are skewed to the study of children and adolescents. This research is an attempt to sensitize researchers and practitioners in the developmental sciences to address the adult population at macro and micro developmental levels and describe the opportunities and challenges the group is facing in the course of its move along the developmental continuum.

Objective of the Study

The major objective of this study is to identify major life tasks of self and government sponsored adult learners enrolled in the graduate program at public universities in Ethiopia and examine the support systems available at department developmental niche and challenges they face in the course of their career. The research further aims at exploring the variations in adult life tasks with regard to age and marital status.

Research Questions

The research is designed to address the following issues:

- The major life tasks of adult learners in the context of graduate program and the society at large;
- Whether adult learners vary in their life tasks with respect to age and marital status;

- The support systems are available in the universities that promote the fulfillment of adult developmental life tasks in the graduate program; and
- The challenges that adult learners in the graduate program face in the universities that hinder the fulfillment of their developmental life tasks

Theoretical Discourse

Adult Development and Life Tasks

The theoretical framework in developmental theories considers the development of human personality as an ongoing process that is continually influenced by biological and environmental factors. The lifespan perspective divides the entire range of human development into two phases: an early phase (childhood and adolescence) and a latent phase (young adulthood, middle age, and old age). The early phase is characterized by rapid age-related increases in people's size and abilities while the later phase is characterized by slower changes in size with continued abilities to develop to adapt to the environment (Cavanaugh and Blatchford, 2002). For developmental psychologists the life span perspective is featured by four key elements: the first one is multi directionality that involves both growth and decline and the second one is plasticity, which signifies that despite limitations there are still potentials for improvement provided there are trainings and practice. The third feature emphasizes the importance of historical contexts within which the person was born and is developing and the fourth key feature denotes the presence of multiple causations that arise from variety of forces.

In line with the lifespan perspective, development is the dynamic interaction between growth, maintenance, and loss regulation in which there are age-graded reduction and increase in physical and mental resources. The lifespan perspective suggests that three systems of environmental influences play a role in individual development across

the lifespan: age-graded influences, history-graded influences, and non-normative influences. Age-graded influences represent normative events and transitions that are associated with specific age phases, such as the transition to parenthood in young adulthood. History-graded influences refer to factors that are associated with historical time. In addition, individuals can be confronted with non-normative influences, which refer to events that are not experienced by the majority of individuals of the same age group (Cavanaugh and Blatchford, 2002).

Life tasks are taken as framework to describe and explain the pattern of personality development across the adult life span in developmental theories. Havigurst (1972) defined developmental tasks as age-graded normative tasks based on societal expectations about the developmental milestones that should be reached in specific life phases. The extent to which people succeed to accomplish normative developmental tasks is associated with the degree of personal maturation, their life experiences and more over by socio cultural and cross-cultural contexts. Developmental tasks that seem appropriate in one culture may or may not have relevance in other cultures. Developmental tasks are by definition tied to societal expectations. Consequently, developmental tasks are strongly influenced by socio-cultural changes across historical time and by cross-cultural differences. For example, the developmental task of selecting a mate in early adulthood can still be considered a normative developmental task in contemporary society and across diverse cultural contexts (Hutteman, et al., 2014). In the perspective life course, development can also be examined within the context of historical time characterized by specific socio-cultural resources, constraints and opportunities (Ranta, 2015**).**

In theoretical terms, the transition to adulthood can be apportioned into two transition types: intrinsic and role transitions. During an intrinsic

transition, an individual accomplishes new skills and competences by adopting a new interpretation of the world. The role transition is more explicit, as it is related to chronological age, social roles and attaining a new status defined by the surrounding environment. These two types of transitions open new opportunities for further development, unless lack of opportunities persist over an extended period within important transitional domains, such as in the transition from education to employment. Secondly, these transitions also require new strategies to cope with entirely unfamiliar experiences, such as in the work and romantic relationship life domains (Buchmann and Kriesi, 2011; Schoon, 2007; cited in Rena, 2015).missing in reference (maybe he/she means ranta). In other words, taking responsibility for oneself and making independent judgments in both small and large-scale decisions in everyday life is important during the transition to adulthood, but also more abstract issues such as beliefs and values seem to be seen as important markers of young adults themselves, with increasing individualization taking place. In the western world, studies showed that the top three criteria for achieving adulthood are acceptance of responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent(Rena, 2015)

In this research, the focus is on the age-graded normative developmental tasks of adult learners in the graduate program that may arise from the interaction between processes, personal attributes, and societal expectations. Developmental tasks entail a broader range of challenges and opportunities that involve successful mastery of the vicissitudes of mastering these tasks and attaining developmental milestones. Despite multiple role expectations by the society to this group, graduate students grow and mature as an adult. The unique intellectual environment coupled with wealth of experience enables them to be exposed to the fulfillment of adult life tasks. As proposed by (Bradley and Graham 2000; cited in Fairchild, 2003) there are four ways in which adult students succeed despite the challenges in accomplishing their multiple roles. These include their ability in applying skills and knowledge to life circumstances, age graded wealth

of complex knowledge, opportunity for connecting classroom with real life experiences due to their authentic involvement in multiple settings, and making sense out of interaction with faculty and peers in the graduate program. Caspi (1997, p. 351) writes:

> Beyond childhood, the search for coherence becomes more complicated, and it may be that a purely psychological approach is insufficient for the analysis of personality continuity and change as the individual increasingly negotiates social roles defined by the culture. Indeed, some researchers have found it useful to adopt a socio-cultural perspective and to conceive the life course as a sequence of culturally defined, age-graded roles that the individual enacts over time.

Havighurst (1972) posits major developmental tasks associated with early adult hood, middle adult hood and late adult hood. These are romantic relations, family life, social life, and physical change. The classic work by Havighurst presents eight developmental tasks in young adulthood between ages 19 and 30: (1) deciding on a partner; (2) living with a partner;(3) starting a family; (4) raising children; (5) maintaining a (family) household;(6) starting a professional career; (7) taking societal responsibility; and (8) finding an adequate social network. These developmental tasks can be conceptualized as achievement-and affiliation-related developmental tasks (Rena, 2015) missing in ref. section. This same categorization of tasks was found applicable to this research although the specific developmental tasks as well as the timing and normal progression of these tasks may not exactly fit into these categories. In line with the life-span model, Havighurst's conceptualization of developmental tasks is primarily growth oriented, in which the adult graduate student is expected to maintain desired levels of functioning as per the normative changes in personality development.

Empirical evidences indicate that social vitality increases during the college years. Increases in social dominance, conscientiousness, and emotional stability as indicators of maturity are observed in early adulthood stage of development. Many transitions into age-graded social roles such as marrying, starting a family, and finding a job take place in this life phase. According to the maturity principle, social roles come along with strong social expectations that motivate people to develop towards greater maturity. Establishing job life is found to be an important developmental milestone of early adults. Hennecke, Orth, and Reitz (2014, p.6) stated that taking into account history-graded influences in the sense of the extended period of education associated with emerging adulthood in modern society, not only transitioning to work life but also finishing education can be considered one of the developmental tasks associated with early adulthood. Furthermore, establishing adult social life is found to be an important developmental milestone at this particular stage of adult development. As reported by Hennecke, Orth, and Reitz (2014), normative developmental tasks in areas of romantic relationships, family life, job life, social life, and physical changes are observed life transitions in personality in early adulthood.

Meta-analysis of research findings by Hennecke, Orth, and Reitz (2014) further showed that as in early adulthood, mean-level changes in midlife point in the direction of greater maturity: social dominance, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability increase in middle adulthood (~30–60 years). Accordingly, from early to middle adulthood, the focus of developmental tasks shifts from the establishment of new social roles to the maintenance and mastery of these roles. Maintaining a romantic relationship and keeping up a satisfying partnership, guiding teenage children to become responsible and happy adults, reaching high job life, managing leisure time activities, and maintaining occupational attainment are milestones of middle adulthood. Middle-aged adults might not only be concerned with maintaining a satisfying job for their own good but also with contributing

to the welfare of the next generation in discharging the social and civic responsibility ascribed by the society.

Adult Learners in the Context of Higher Education

Adult students increasing enrollment in colleges and universities is a global phenomenon. According to the Hanover research (2016) report for example, over 40 percent of students in institutions of higher education are twenty-five years of age or older, and this pattern is expected to persist over the next decade. The presence of adult students in significant numbers must be recognized if institutions are to be effective in realizing their missions and visions. Variations in age, societal life tasks, and experiences relate to differences in the learning process, including learning styles, academic self-confidence, and clarity in career and life goals.

Although every other adult student is unique, there is some communality across the group. These life tasks are shared across cultures and contexts. The shared adult multiple roles in the context of higher education according to Terrel (1990) include many activities in which adult students are involved. For one thing, they often are full-time employees. In addition to their work roles, adults are caregivers for children and aging relatives, community leaders, and volunteer workers. In the context of higher education institutions adults take new roles. The context of higher education ascribes a unique dimension in the development of the graduate learner. By mentioning various sources, Terrell (1990, p.12) described several adult transitions that have an effect on adult students' participation in higher education. Accordingly:

> As adults build families, careers, and positions within their communities, their perception of higher education changes. Rather than being a life-encompassing, identity-building experience, such as the one we hope to provide for traditional-

aged students, higher education for adults is one activity among many in which adults can participate to meet other specific needs, such as learning a new job-related skill or preparing for a new career altogether.

Researchers underline a systemic approach that considers adult learners as special group in the context of higher education and the need for the institutions to be responsive to their needs and establish a support system for self-accomplishment. Milhelm (2005, p.?) writes:

> Adults now constitute the majority of students in higher education, and what drives them, what they bring to, what they want and need from universities are important questions for research and in the development of a more responsive system of higher education. In turn, those working in higher education need a fuller understanding of the impact of education on learners' motivation and sense of identity as well as the barriers, which separate adult learners from traditional students. Educational institutions must respond to these needs as effectively as possible in order to remain competitive and accessible to nontraditional adult learners.

In the changing context of higher education Fry, Ketterudge, and Mrashall (2004, p.163) stated that "the sector has seen a significant change in emphasis from understanding teaching as a process in which academic staff simply lectures to one in which students are supported in their learning" . With increasing diversity among students of higher education, there is a need to respond to their learning needs. Universities by large and departments in particular have the responsibility for recognizing these needs and making provisions to meet them. One way towards that end is through the interaction between teaching staff and students in lectures and through feedback provided during advisor-advisee relationships. Cross-institutional and campus –based services including library, resource centers, IT services, providing formative feedback to adult learners and facilitating a variety of peer support mechanisms have to be worked out so that

they can accomplish life tasks ascribed to them by the society and demands of the respective programs effectively and efficiently (Fry, Ketterudge, and Mrashall, 2004).

The adult life is continually shaped over the course of development by the environment. Adult development is contextual in that it can vary substantially depending on the historical and socio-cultural conditions in which it takes place. It is an outcome of the interactive effects of nature and nurture resulting in variability within the same person across time and across situations. The adult graduate learner is a cohort specific and the graduate program is a context or niche for inter individual and intra individual variability. According to (Hoyer, et al.; 1999) the contextual paradigm suggests that adults are ongoing, dynamic and not directed toward an ideal goal and an adult continuously influences and is influenced by the different contexts of life. Adult life tasks and their education in higher education institutions are inseparably connected. Separating adults' life into two independent periods: one of learning in higher education institutions and other roles in the family and the community is misunderstanding human development not as continuous process rather as discrete pieces of changes.

In order to achieve transformation and development in the lives of adult learners in higher education institutions especially in the graduate program, it is essential to create a fertile environment; where there is synergy among components in the system, and where learning becomes a social process and learners relate to one another rather than functioning in isolation. Mentioning various sources Natassa and Thanassis (2016) stated that in order to achieve transformative learning, it is necessary to reinforce the learner-teacher relationship, to nurture cooperation, to nurture participation in groups, and to give the learner the leading role for better outcome of the learning process in higher education institutions. They further noted that it is necessary for

faculty members to maintain a well-balanced relationship with their students. An analysis on the relevance of quality of relation between professors and the university students by Cox (2009) revealed that the interaction between them is so important that if it is not well organized, not clear and lacks common goals from both parties, it can be destructive.

One of the key findings of the Hanover research (2016), for example, is that institutions should develop support systems that help adult learners to balance academic expectations with other social responsibilities. Adult students in the graduate program are more likely to be working professionals with family obligations. Relationship problems could be barriers in discharging adult life tasks. Due to their multiple responsibilities, graduate students may require a different set of support structures than students in the undergraduate program. Colleges and universities need to understand how this cohort group differs from the younger population. Findings of the Hanover research however, indicated that higher education institutions do not support these students adequately. Despite the gap in addressing the needs of this cohort group, most institutions acknowledge and value the importance of creating an academic environment that supports the needs of adult learners. For example, 92.6 percent of institutions that responded to one survey recognize the high value of providing dedicated academic advising to these students (Hanover research. com, 2016).

The role of the faculty in addressing the needs of the graduate student is so important that students highly value their relationships with professors and advisors, and these relationships serve as an important support system for many adult learners. The Hanover research (2016) showed that Eighty-Eight Percent of non-traditional students that participated in the study reported accessibility and personalized help as a very important aspect of support services. The finding suggests that the more professors, advisors, and students are connected in the classroom and outside the classroom; the better-equipped students will

be for success and develop the feeling of belongingness. To this end, the role of dedicated advisors and advising services are essential support services required by many of adult learners in higher education institutions.

Departments as Developmental Niches

Organisms affect the living and non-living environment through activities and their behavior and this enables them to survive. They construct micro-developmental environments that eventually help them to adapt to the environment. These micro environments are niches in which many species of animals including human beings pull out their innate potentials as well as learned behaviors to function effectively. The niche construction is evident among animal species in the form of building nests in trees, and burrowing holes on the ground. In the biological and ecological sciences, this act of micro environment construction for survival purpose is known as niche construction theory (NCT). According to (Flynn et al; 2013), insights from NCT provide evidence that niche construction is likely to be of considerable ecological and evolutionary importance, and suggest that it may have implications for adjacent disciplines such as developmental psychology. Theories of human development acknowledge the fact that the mind is not only working as per prewired genetically inherited programs but develops through constant reciprocal interaction between the individual and the immediate environment. This two-way interplay between man and his/her environment enables the human being to respond selectively to the pressure exerted and enable him/her to play an active role in shaping the conditions of their own development. This constant and bidirectional flow of energy between human beings and their environment results in behavioral as well as evolutionary change triggering more and refined capability to survive and function. As reviewed by (Flynn et al , 2013), human beings can and do modify their environment mainly through ontogenetic and cultural processes, and it

is this reliance on learning, plasticity and culture that lends human niche construction a special potency. Through intensive interaction with the environment, human beings drastically changed both the social and natural environment. This cannot entirely be explained by genetically inherited natural endowments. Rather, the human culture expressed by means of tools, technology, and new discoveries over the entire life span enables them to construct favorable developmental niche. Unlike the lower animals, human beings are able to construct diverse developmental environments or niches. According to (Flynnet al; 2013), by modifying the world, human niche construction creates artifacts and other externally inherited resources that not only act as sources of biological selection on human genes but also shape the learning opportunities and developmental trajectories of recipient organisms.

The concept of developmental niche not only suggests making the environment suitable to human beings but also nurtures further growth and development by providing learning opportunities. Concepts such as signaling, scaffolding, and guided participation well known in the developmental psychology literature suggest the role of developmental niche as source of learning and growth. Yet the developmental niche in return reciprocates by providing opportunities to learn culturally appropriate practices and experiences through guided participation. According to (Flynnet al; 2013) niche construction does not affect what we should learn. But it provides an opportunity for learning something more general, an ability to learn how to learn. Thus, the constructed niche supports the learning of learning skills.

Stotz(2013) considers the developmental niche as multi-dimensional space in which environmentally induced and developmentally regulated, heritable resources jointly scaffold development. It provides a link between the generations through mechanisms that promote the transitions for young and adult species through the interaction of the physical and biological environment by means of reconstruction and modification of the evolving niche and transcending the life cycle to

higher levels. This evolving developmental niche provided channels for further sustenance and creation of developmental pathways for the transmission of cultural heritages from generation to generation. According to Stotz (2013), a reliably reproduced developmental system is the result of the reliable provision of a wide range of developmental resources necessary to reconstruct the organism's life cycle. Stotz (2013) further argued that the developmental niche links the young and the adult, the old and the new generation by means of transmitting crucial information and lending itself to plasticity, diversity and adaptability.

As (Super and Harkes 1990; cited in Gardner and Kosmitzki, 2008, p.30) identified, there are three interrelated components of the developmental niche. These are the physical and social settings of daily life, customs of childcare and child rearing, and psychology of the caretakers. Extrapolating the concept of developmental niche from the field of biological ecology, that describes the combined feature of a particular animal's environment or habitat they stated the following. *The theoretical framework can be equally well applied to adult development by expanding the third component –the psychology of the caretakers-to include the psychology of others (e.g., mates, coworkers) who might affect the adult.*

In view of the above discussion, departments are developmental niches in which adult learners grow and develop through continued interaction in the graduate program environment. Departments are niches in which adult learners develop socially, intellectually and emotionally. The Addis Ababa University Senate Legislation ascribes heavy responsibilities to departments. Article 109 lists out the responsibilities of departments in nurturing the well-being of students and creating conducive environment for their academic and social progression. Under the sub-article 109.1 that states the duties and responsibilities, departments oversee the wellbeing of students of their

respective departments/schools/ centers, and facilitate and follow-up academic advice of students (p. 128). The Senate Legislation under articles 114 and 120 emphatically underlines general provisions in the graduate program and the role of the supervisor in enhancing the development of the graduate student. Under the sub-article 114.4, it states the following:

> Graduate programs in the regular, continuing, and distance shall have equal value as such programs are the same as regular graduate programs in all respects except in the form of delivery, duration of study and scheduling. Accordingly, graduate, continuing, and distance education students shall receive quality instruction, advising and administrative services comparable to regular graduate students (p.135).

Under article 120 sub-article 120.2, the legislation (p.137-138) states the entitlement of students to get quality advisory service from their supervisors. It states:

> The primary responsibility of the supervisor is to assist the student to complete the research area within an agreed time frame. In particular, it is the responsibility of such a supervisor to follow up the progress of the candidate, advise him on areas of specialization and research, and provide adequate and timely feedback and evaluation of his progress.

Taking note of the above mentioned Senate legislation articles, advisor-advisee relationships are the two most important developmental niches where the adult graduate student is capacitated to carry out the developmental tasks effectively. Accordingly, it makes sense to explore how these developmental niches are functioning, and what support systems are available for the adult graduate learner to fulfill effectively the developmental tasks.

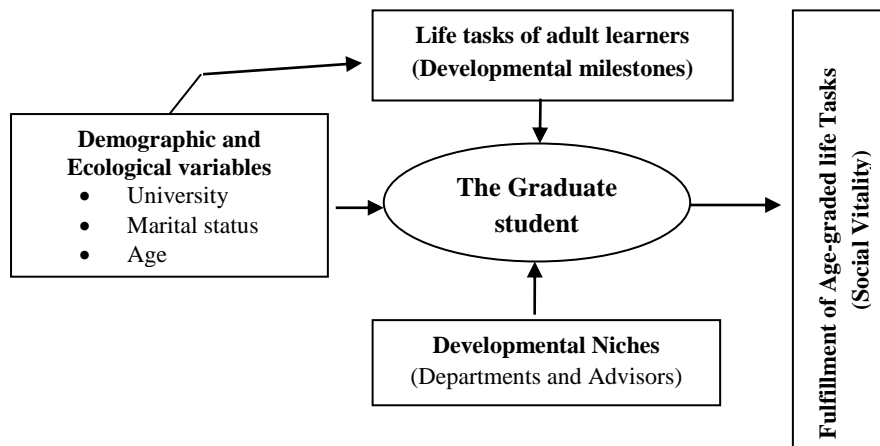*Conceptual Framework of Study Life Tasks of Adult Learners and Support System in Two Developmental Niches*

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the research process

Methodology

Research design

A descriptive survey design was used to describe the life tasks of adult learners in the graduate program and support systems at two developmental niches that enabled them to fulfill developmental tasks. Koul (1984), for example, stated that descriptive survey design becomes useful particularly where one needs to understand some particular information. Best and Khan (2006) have noted that a descriptive survey research design involves a clearly defined problem and a definite objective. Within the descriptive survey research, the phenomenological qualitative research type is employed as it helps to inductively and holistically understand the developmental tasks of adult

graduate students in the context of graduate program (Patton, 1990). Phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value. Phenomenology refers to the description of one or more individual's consciousness and experience (perception, imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition and action) of a phenomenon such as viewing oneself as an adult, the experience of being a graduate student, being member of a group in this case a department, faculty or school (Johnson and Christensen, 2004). Different individuals exposed to the same environment experience it, interpret it, and react to it differently. Each individual extracts a subjective psychological environment from the objective surroundings, and that subjective environment shapes both personality and subsequent social interactions. This is the basic tenet of the phenomenology approach historically favored by social psychology and other related disciplines (Thomas and Thomas, 1928; cited in Caspi, 1997). Phenomenology researchers do not only study the unique part of an individual's experience that varies from person to person but they assume there is some communality in human experiences and seek to understand this communality. Qualitative research is based more on a naturalistic phenomenological philosophy, which assumes that multiple realities are constructed through individual and collective definitions of the situation. Meanings are constructed from these multiple realities through interaction and are negotiated socially and historically.

Sampling

In order to capture the living and learning conditions of adult learners in the graduate program, an extensive survey was made in public universities. The survey was conducted using a mixed research design and both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from research participants. This component of the survey report entirely focuses on the qualitative data captured from open-ended items.

Participants of this study were adult students drawn from public universities enrolled in the graduate programs to scale up the profile of university teaching staffs at MA 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 adult responsibilities and the challenges in meeting the intellectual demands of the graduate programs uniquely influence and shape experiences of this cohort group.

Respondents were drawn from different bands of study involving Engineering and Technology, Social Sciences and Humanities, Natural and Computational Sciences, and Business and Economics. Since the academic calendar for graduate programs varies across universities and due to high mobility of graduate students, availability-sampling technique was used to reach research participants. Graduate students that fulfilled the criterion of at least one-year stay in the program they enrolled were considered during data collection period.

Table 1: Sampling distribution of respondents from six public universities

Universities	Freq	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Adama	28	11.6	11.6	11.6
Addis Ababa	62	25.7	25.7	11.6
Arba Minch	18	7.5	7.5	44.8
Awassa	45	18.7	18.7	63.5
Bahirdar	49	20.3	20.3	83.8
Jimma	39	16.2	16.2	100
Total	241	100.0	100.0	

Data collection instruments

The instrument for data collection consisted of three sections. Section 1 was about demographic and ecological information of respondents. Respondents were asked to provide information about their marital status, age, university, department or faculty in which they are enrolled. In section two of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to list down five life tasks that are typical to an adult learner in the context of the graduate program. In section three respondents were asked to list down support systems available at two micro developmental niches namely at advisor and department levels that promoted their learning to meet the developmental tasks as an adult learner in the graduate program. In section four research participants were asked to list down challenges and possible solutions to problems they faced.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data pertaining to life tasks that are typical to an adult learner in the context of the graduate program and support systems available at two micro-system levels namely at advisor and department levels that promoted their learning to meet the demands of the graduate program were collected using open ended items. Essential features that came out from the interview were analyzed following the steps suggested by Groenewald (2004).

- Since the general purpose of the research was to capture the lived life experiences of adults, the researcher read the responses to have a holistic understanding of the phenomenology of the issue.
- Statements and catchy words and phrases that would illuminate the crux of adult life tasks in relation to the graduate program were identified.
- The third step taken was to form cluster of non-repetitive words and meanings to surface major life tasks. This step is bracketing of the content of the responses to the open-ended items within the ambit of the research questions.
- The fourth data analysis step taken was to incorporate and assemble the major life tasks and essentials bracketed along the research questions and detail out sub-tasks to have a holistic understanding of adult learners' life tasks and support systems.
- As a final step, general summary of the responses is classified and presented in matrices that reflect the graduate program in context.

Because this research is descriptive, the intent is essentially trying to lay out data on the life tasks of adult learners and to explain how the support system in the graduate program is aligned with the

accomplishments of these developmental milestones. The analyses moves through identifying different life tasks that condense into a more and more coherent understanding of what it looks like in the context of graduate program. Description in Bernard's (1988) cited in (Miles and Huberman, 1994) terms is making complicated things understandable by reducing them to their component parts. The issue is making a clear accounting of the phenomena at hand, making complicated things understandable by showing how their component parts fit together according to some rules that are theory. Miles, and Huberman (1994, p.91)) emphasized the importance of reducing thick descriptions to manageable size to show intentions and meanings as well. They stated:

> Our experience tells us that extended, unreduced text alone is a weak and cumbersome form of display. It is hard on analysis because it is dispersed over many pages and is not easy to see as a whole. It is sequential rather than simultaneous, making it difficult to look at two or three variables at once. It is usually poorly ordered, and it can get very bulky, monotonously overloading. Comparing several extended texts carefully is very difficult.

In order to make full analyses of the details listed as major and sub-life tasks of adult learners and to organize information coherently, matrices are constructed. A matrix is essentially the crossing of lists of developmental life tasks set up as rows or columns. Matrices essentially involve the crossing of two or more main dimensions or variable often with sub variables to see how they interact. They lend themselves well to a variable-oriented analysis style and can be expanded to more holistic case oriented style (Miles and Huberman, 1994). After close inspection of the entire list of adult life tasks in general and in the context of the graduate program in particular, condensation and standardization was done that enabled to place the thick data in rows and columns that represent descriptive categories. The use of matrices to display the qualitative data was especially

helpful for understanding relationships of adult life tasks, for selecting demographic variables and for making condensation of data. As stated by Miles, and Huberman (1994), the basic strength of qualitative matrices lies in their inclusion of text. Hence, the analyses in this research employed a mixture of direct quotes and summary of paraphrases along the categorization of data in the respective matrix cells.

Results

Life Tasks of Graduate Students in the Context of the Graduate Program

In section two of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to list down five life tasks that are typical to an adult learner in the context of the graduate program. A host of factors has been listed that featured developmental milestones of this age group. Following that, their life tasks are coded under the respective universities, in terms of marital status and age of respondents. Marital status was labeled as married, bachelor and other. Accordingly, 39% of the respondents were married, 56% were bachelors and the remaining were under the category "Other Table 1 is frequency distribution of respondents falling under the three categories.

Table 2: Marital status of research participants

Marital status	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married	94	39.0	39.3	39.3
Bachelor	134	55.6	56.1	95.4
Others	11	4.6	4.6	100.0
Total	**239**	**99.2**	**100.0**	

Major life tasks were re-coded under the three marital status categories. For this analysis, the life tasks of married and bachelor adult learners were

closely examined to have a general understanding of the developmental milestones of the cohort group. Words and phrases that came out repeatedly were identified and themes were formed from the long list of responses across the three categories. Five themes that would represent the life tasks of married adult learners were formed and accordingly labeled in the context of the graduate program. Similar procedures are followed in analyzing the life tasks of bachelor graduate learners. Marital status is an important predictor of one's own behavior towards others and shaping life styles. Marriage obviously entails additional responsibilities. Discharging paternal and maternal roles in the family setting is a norm across all cultures. Taking care of children, sustaining the household economy from income generated from diverse sources are social and natural responsibilities.

Although the married and bachelor adults varied in terms of their family and societal responsibilities, there are a number of communalities between the two groups. Professional development, social networking, conceptions about the self and participating in academic, social and religious circles are unifying themes among the married and bachelor adult learners. These themes, being the common denominators, are atypical life goals that seem to be more relevant to the bachelors than the married ones. Analysis of the life tasks of the bachelors enables to identify features pertinent to this group. Although these life tasks seem to be overlapping with developmental tasks of the married adult groups, five themes came out from the responses of bachelor graduate students.

It would be interesting to look into the details of life tasks that fall under each of these thematic areas. Along the major developmental milestones, sub-life tasks were formed after looking into the contents falling under the broader categories. From the long list of life tasks, one could understand that developmental milestone varies with respect to one's own area of specialization, economic status, position in the respective work place, life ambitions, and value about life. Major and specific life tasks that featured the developmental milestones of married and bachelor adult learners are clustered separately and shown in the matrix.

Table 3: A 5x2 matrix showing the relationship between life tasks and marital status

Marital status			
Married		**Bachelor**	
Major life tasks	**Sub-tasks**	**Major life tasks**	**Sub-tasks**
Theme one: Professional growth	Capacitate oneself to attain expertise in ones area of specialization; change shelf research into real world research; create opportunity for further study; learning and sharing experience; develop insight in all walks of life; publishing articles; learn more on how to overcome life challenges; ensure quality of education in secondary schools	**Theme one: Caring and Parenthood**	Marriage and have children; Taking care of one's own parents;
Theme two: Self reliant	Exercise autonomy in research and learning; become responsible for one's own action; develop ability to comprehend complex issues; self-promotion as esteemed citizen; readiness for shouldering any responsibility; develop self-esteem; lead personal life in healthy manner; own private house and car.	**Theme two :Professional development**	Develop critical thinking; Status change; add something new to the construction technology; create job opportunity for others; contribute to the Nation's dream.
Theme three: Membership in social network	Participate in social circle; not to be mocked and/or insulted by staff and others; solve problems of others; meet life challenges at home; participate in developmental programs such as HIV-AIDS; be good model for the society and the family	**Theme three: Strengthen social network**	Collaborate with institutions and NGOs; Membership in social network; create link with fund raising companies and institutions;
Theme four: Maintain Status quo	Academic Promotion; hold position in the university; get recognition from society; improve quality of life at home; work hard to have better life; get recognition from society; generate income; become good leader	**Theme four :Development of the self**	Lead one's own life through the principle of versatility; become business manager; develop self-esteem; commitment to one's own life goals; become role model
Theme five: Discharge family and societal responsibilities	Responsible to work for additional income; take care of my husband ;create better future for the family; contribute to the society and the nation; support relatives; participate in the country's transportation system; support one's own organization; enjoy and engage in domestic works; capacitate others; take care of my children's' health, education and nutrition;	**Theme five: Participating in academic, social and religious circles**	Engage in voluntary activities; support government's food security program;

Life tasks and age of graduate learners

The analysis in this section starts from the broader classification of stages of adult psychosocial development and attempts to examine details of life tasks of the adult graduate learners by grouping life structures taking note of specific age groups. The stages of adult psychosocial development are classified into three periods. Early adulthood ranges from 20-40 years. The second period is middle adulthood ranging from 40-65. Late adulthood is 65 up to death. The distribution of respondents in this study shows that graduate students are in the early adulthood age group. Eriksson (1982) characterized this period as a time in which adults resolve the intimacy versus isolation contradiction. Sense of intimacy is exemplified in the quality of close relationship in terms of forming marriage partner, friendship, work ties, cooperation, tolerance, and attempts in accepting differences in background values. Child bearing and rearing, which are aspects of generativity and which may extend up to middle adult period, usually happen to take place during this period and other life tasks such as contributing to society through work are underway during this period. The age range 33 to 40 is characterized by culmination of life structure of early adulthood. Prior to this culmination phase the age range between 28 to 33 is marked as transition, in which the adult group moves into the status of consolidating the life structures of early adulthood and paves the way for the upcoming middle adult hood (40-65).

In the preceding section, an attempt is made to examine the life structure of graduate learners in terms of their marital status. Thus, in the analysis it was possible to show a number of life tasks that symbolize the adult learners. There were a number of attributes common to the married and single ones in terms of life goals. There were shifts in emphasis that differentiated the two groups. In this section, an attempt is made to examine life structures of graduate students in terms of age. List of life tasks of graduate learners were grouped along three periods following the classification of Levinson's

theory (Levinson, 1977). Early life structures of adult learners in the age group 22-28 were listed separately, followed by life tasks of graduate learners in the age group 28-33 years, and the third category was the age group 33-40. After making an exhaustive list of life tasks in the respective age groups, specific life tasks pertinent to each group were identified. The analysis has shown that there are no fixed series of tasks neatly tied to each age group. Rather combinations of marriage, childrearing, and career are observed across the groups. After close inspection of the entire list of adult life tasks in general and in the context of the graduate program, a 4x3 matrix was developed in order to place the thick data in rows and columns that represent descriptive categories. Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: A 4x3 matrix Life tasks and age of graduate learners

Stages	Age	Developmental tasks
Early adult hood (early life structures)	22-28	Develop life style; get married; support countries development program; capacitate students' knowledge and skills; solve societal problems; take care of one's own parents; engage in voluntary activities; guiding one's own life style by the principle of versatility; discharge family responsibilities; share life experience with friends; participate in social, academic spiritual activities; involve in income generating activities; prepare oneself for greater responsibilities; self-sufficiency; stop blaming government policy and do what one can do; become business manager; develop the habit of independent work; face new challenges'; internalize one's skill/job.
Transition (consolidating of early life structures)	28 - 33	Get specialized knowledge; develop area of specialization; create industry-society linkage; advance one's own knowledge in congruence with new demands; continue further education; solve nations problems in one's own area of specialization; be role model for others; support government's food security program; create job opportunity for others; create responsible and confident citizens; write articles and publish; create link with companies; become well paid; independence in one's own job; conduct research in social sciences; better understand one's area of specialization; change position in the organization; self-actualization; meet the challenges of life at home; budget time for my family; get support from others; serve the Nation and government; achieve good grade; support relatives; own private car and house; get recognition from the society; competency in engineering; enhance cooperative learning; become head of a family.
Early adulthood (culmination of life structure).	33 - 40	Teach and conduct research; become strong economically and socially; take care of one's children's in terms of health, nutrition and education; take care of one's spouse; Pursue career development; actively participate in one's social circle; become exemplary model for others; create better future for the family; change status; provide psychological support to my family through telephone; overall change in life; shoulder more responsibilities; help orphans; contribute to country's development plan; capacitate others; become university professor; become self-esteemed person ;enjoy domestic work; educate one's children in schools that provide quality education; solve problems of others.
Middle adult hood (middle transition)	40- 45	Extensively reading books; develop self-esteem; develop the ability to comprehend complex issues; promote self-education; participate in the nations transport system; develop insight in all walks of life; promote myself as citizen and to play role as member of the society; become expert in my area of specialization; competency and lead enjoyable life; read more to be scholar in the field; good role model in the society and in the family; ensure quality education in secondary schools; seeking better position.

Support systems in the graduate program

In section three of the survey questionnaire, graduate students were asked to report the support they obtained from their advisors and departments they are enrolled in. The analysis was done following the steps stipulated by Groenewald (2004). In order to have a general impression of the subject matter, responses were examined to have an understanding of the phenomenology of support systems at two micro developmental niches. A list of support systems available in the context of graduate program was 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. A separate column was allotted for capturing comments and suggestions of respondents on the support system available to graduate students at department and advisor levels that helped them to discharge multiple adult life tasks and challenges of the graduate program. Rather than summarizing responses by forming themes, the researcher found it useful to put direct statements with respect to each university. Extracts taken from this column were separately put for each university. This will give a better picture on what is actually taking place in the respective universities. In order to have a broader understanding of the variations in the six universities a 6x4 matrix was developed and comments and possible suggestions applicable to the respective universities that fall in the cells were categorized separately. Results are shown in table of the Appendix (please see the table in the Appendix for the 6x4 matrix on support systems that helped adult learners to discharge adult life tasks, challenges, and suggested solutions).

Discussion and Implications

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. An attempt was made to analyze the support systems available at different levels of the graduate program and challenges faced by adult learners. The dominant motivator for the adult learners across universities seems career progression. Professional development and becoming a self-reliant person are the major life tasks of graduate students regardless of their marital status and age. From the long list of life tasks, developmental milestone varies with respect to one's own area of specialization, economic status, position in the respective work place, life ambitions, and value about life. Life tasks such as supporting the country's development program, creating industry-society linkage, supporting government's food security program, and participating actively in the nation's transport system are variations depending on the life goals of individual adult learner and the contexts in each university and program type enrolled. These major life tasks and sub-tasks listed by adult learners are in consistent with Mette's (2015) and Terrel's (1990) argument in which developmental tasks are partly achievement oriented and partly affiliation related.

Individual advising, and advisors' follow-up and support, cohesion between students and teachers, clear and scheduled course delivery, two ways communication to attain goals, linking programs with institutions and organizations in the community and abroad are support networks at graduate program level that helped learners to meet adult responsibilities at institutional and societal levels. This is in line with Fry, Ketterudge, and Marshall (2004) suggestion in which variety of support mechanisms have to be in place in order to empower adult learners to accomplish the demands of the graduate program and societal expectations. Injustice in treating students by some professors,

individual and institutional framework being not responsive, absence of systematically synchronized curriculum, uncommitted instructors, and bias are challenges graduate students faced in due course of achieving adult developmental milestones. The finding suggests that adult graduate learners attach importance to positive relationships formed in due course of their learning. This is in line with the Hanover research.com (2016) and Cox (2009) findings in which high value is attached to providing dedicated academic advising to these students and the role of departments and advisors as two most important developmental niches.

The shift from being full-time learner to one that requires the accomplishment of multiple family and societal roles calls for becoming a self-fulfilling personality, which is reflected in self-direct activity. Occupation, work, family and other community based roles considered as milestones of the adult stage of development shape the adult personality in general and their learning preferences in the context of graduate program. These multiple aspects of the adult personality uniquely shape the thinking process and belief systems of the adult learner. The ability to conceptualize events from multiple perspectives and to generate multiple solutions to problems arising in a given context allows the adult learner to monitor the learning situation independently and transcend classroom experiences to the broader macro system and broader life task. Many thinkers in general terms characterize adult learning as self-directed learning in the sense that the learner tends to be independent without exclusively relying on the instructor. As discussed by Crawford (2009), adults are often eager to learn and approach learning from mentality of readiness, problem orientation, and time perspective. In view of the need to recognize the physical and social settings of the daily life of the adult graduate learners, and Havigurst's(1972) notion of developmental tasks, results in this study showed that the focus of developmental tasks seems to shift from the establishment of new family roles such as discharging

paternal and maternal roles in the family setting to the development of self-esteem, development of insight in all walks of life and promoting oneself as capable citizen that would play pivotal role as member of the society.

Implications

- Issues highlighted in the results section suggested the need for joined-up thinking, which refers to the cycle of adult life tasks and the interconnectedness of living and learning. Maintaining synergy between the different parts of the graduate program especially at advisor and department developmental niches would help to respond to adult concerns. So horizontal and vertical linkages between the different systems such as departments, graduate program offices, university top management and developing a mechanisms where different parts of the system operate in pulsating fashion to enable adult learners to effectively discharge adult life tasks is so important.
- Creating awareness among institutional leaders about the needs of graduate students is an important step that has to be taken by the respective graduate program coordinating offices across universities. This awareness creation must foster institutional governance to enhance positive advisor-advisee relationships for providing dedicated academic advisement in the respective graduate programs. As indicated in the results section, one of the biggest concerns among the graduate students is that universities/institutions are not offering tailored courses in their programs. Hence, in order to prepare them for career progression and prepare them for developing skills to get into the job market at national and global level, higher education institutions need to update their programs on regular basis.
- There is a pressure among adult graduate learners in maintaining the balance between different roles such as family responsibilities, work schedules and academic requirements.

Due to these on-going pressures, along with the added societal expectations and responsibilities, it is the responsibility of the universities and the advisors to put in place support mechanisms to ensure fulfillment of adult life tasks.

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Appendix: A 6x4 matrix on Support systems that helped adult learners to discharge adult life tasks, challenges, and suggested solutions

Universities	Support system	Challenges	Suggested solutions
Adama		They don't solve problems; they simply listen	
Addis Ababa	Clear and scheduled course delivery; Follow up and support; Joint planning and scheduling of programs; Well planned and coordinated teaching and learning process; Accessibility of materials	Injustice in treating their students by some professors; Both the individual and institutional framework is not responsive and there is no mechanism to solve problems related to students; Department doesn't have systematically synchronized curriculum; Most teachers are not committed; Department head lacks knowledge; Most teachers are biased; No single factor helped me to cope rather the school (department) itself poses problem; The school is not willing to hear students' problems or to take appropriate measures; Unwillingness to give constructive comments and advice.	Taking the challenges as ease and tolerance to problems this is my coping mechanism towards the problem; The department should conduct discussion with students on problems; The need for collaboration between department head and faculty. A radical change is necessary to improve the educational system that allows personalities and institutions to discharge their responsibilities and make them accountable;
Arba Minch	Updating the status of the program; Two-way communication to attain common goals; Availability of resources in library and computer center; -Sharing resources; Up loading of e-books; panel discussion; Paper presentations		

Awassa	Take immediate actions to our problems; Link program with individuals, institutions and organizations in the community and abroad; Availing hard and soft copy learning materials; Providing additional learning materials; Scheduling activities; Effective communication with students; Discussion at the end of the semester; Forum for experience sharing between staff and students; Monitoring advisors	I strongly feel that some advisors are incompetent, do not know what to do; Foreigners are not good in advising students; Department lacks checking mechanisms on what students and instructors are doing. Long term training at home is the worst, as there is no skilled manpower, except buildings.	Department should seek ways to access internet services; Department should buy new up-to-date books; .Advance e-learning system; Advisor and department should work closely to solve students' problem; Should have a separate library for graduate students and staff; .Early preparation of advisors, the registrar, faculties, and announcing the starting and ending of programs early at the beginning of the class; Journals should be subscribed by the university; Improved library services; Indian teachers should be carefully recruited through due process of verifications.
Jimma	Scheduling of activities; Devising quality control measures of research papers; Inviting guest professors; Schedule courses; Punctuality in programming; Coach the teaching method; Internet service		The colleges and department should arrange courses according to their level of difficulty in terms of time to complete the courses; There must be close link between department and researchers, and a need to respect ideas of students and listen to them patiently.
Bahir Dar	Design relevant courses for future career; Link program with institutions and professional associations;	Some instructors are not cooperative even they don't provide reading materials; The university is not responsive to students' problems; Computers are not allocated adequately; Since there is superiority complex among instructors they are not even ready for discussion; Courses are not practice oriented; No clear instruction from advisors while they give assignments; At faculty level they are not interested to listen to our demands; They blatantly speak to us; for example they ridicule by saying "if you want to learn you need to keep silent and learn, and never to interfere, as it is none of	Overlap between courses so it is better to do revision work on the courses across the universities; Regular advisement and support; The advisors are expected to guide me on the type of research most important and acceptable and rectify problems with regard to my field of study; Deployment of qualified teachers; Facilitating timely start and ending of the academic calendar; Assigning appropriate instructors for the courses; .There should

	our business"; Things are not timely accomplished, for example, grades are not timely reported; There are also some teachers who did not teach us rather only give grades randomly.	be close contact and communications between post graduate students and staff; Dormitory for Postgraduate students should be improved.;