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Perception of Competence and Level of Engagement Among Chadian Students in Transition to The Master's Cycle at The University of Douala in Cameroon

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Abstract: This article aims to highlight the catalytic role of perceived competence on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition to a master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon. Indeed, several studies emphasize the constant specific difficulties faced by the majority of Chadian students during their studies in traditional or professional master's programs (Berger, 2012; Fernandez, 2010; Frenay, Boudrenghien, Dayez & Paul, 2007 cited by Dubeau, Frenay, and Samson, 2015). This situation raises the issue of low academic engagement, or even a decline in the academic engagement of these students. In doing so, the article explores among Chadian students in transition the weight of perseverance in the face of failure, interactions with peers, judgments of their abilities, and the representation of the educational value of their actions on their agreed decision to remain focused on academic goals in master's cycle. 120 Chadian students regularly enrolled in master's programs responded to a self-assessment questionnaire, and the results of the SPSS analysis through a Spearman correlation show that the perception of competence among Chadian students in a transition situation creates conditions for improving their level of academic engagement in the master's program at the University of Douala.

Keywords: Perception, Competence, Engagement, Transition, Student

Introduction

Focusing on the notion of commitment at school, Monteil and Beauvois (2001) observe its constant character in life and pose these two questions: how to lead others to freely do what they have to do? What can be done to ensure that a difficult decision (to stop smoking, to follow a diet to lose weight, not to drink if one is driving, etc.) is more likely to have lasting effects? (Reynal and Rieunier, 2014; 201). In reality, the trajectory of every human being is marked by changes, so the adaptive value leads us to a constant self-evaluation, followed by a redefinition of learning objectives or confrontation with new situations. This clearly also brings its share of challenges and difficulties. A reality inherent to student life, but which seems to be even more amplified among students who obtained their degree in Chad and decide to continue their training in Cameroonian institutions, specifically in Douala. Beyond the environmental challenges (organizational, functional, infrastructural, administrative), there are also pedagogical ones (course scheduling, teaching methods, evaluation methods), as well as cultural ones (languages: French/English in Cameroon and Arabic/French in Chad). Moreover, the transition from one level of study to another is always marked by adaptation challenges that explain significant intellectual changes. Moreover, the adaptation of students during the transition from one university to another is a real research concern according to Monteil and Beauvois (2001), who are interested in the decision-making process that allows for the freely consented act of transition. This justifies our inquiry into the explanatory factors behind the decline in academic engagement among the student population in general, and specifically among Chadian students in transition at the University of Douala. This situation resonates favorably in interdisciplinary research involving researchers from anthropology, economics, sociology, pedagogy, and psychology. Thus, factors such as motivation, dropout, cultural constraints, performance, adaptation, the educational system, the teaching/learning process, culture, and living conditions have remained major themes of analysis here.

However, no study so far has truly focused on the personal dimension of the student facing the educational task to understand their self-assessment of their abilities in an academic situation, let alone

in relation to the decision to act against transitional and academic challenges (Morlaix & Suchaut, 2012; Paivandi, 2015; Parry, Hladkyj, Pekrun, & Pelletin, 2001; Trautwein & Bosse, 2016). A holistic view of higher education in sub-Saharan Africa over the past ten years highlights a rise in dropout and adaptation phenomena, and in the Central African sub-region, there has been a surge in the conversion of students of all categories to small trades (guarding, motorcycle taxis, street vendors). In Cameroon or Chad in particular, the observation is almost similar since the near disappearance of scholarships that allowed for student mobility in the sub-region with ease. The case of Chadian students in Cameroon without scholarships is particularly striking as 68% of these students repeat at least once during a cycle, 88% are forced to take the make-up exam, and more than 36% drop out before completing a training cycle (National Teacher Policy of Chad February 2004-2030). However, it is no secret that dropping out of higher education before graduation has an impact on both the individual's personality, the student's professional project, the intrinsic value of the university within the school population, as well as the determination of younger students to envision themselves there. In the literature (Chemers, Hu, & Garcias, 2001), there has been a considerable increase in recent years in psychological problems among students in transition to master's programs, fundamentally linked to a different current reality. This include: the economic vulnerability of families, and consequently of students relocating to Cameroon, as well as the psychological fragility of these students due to pressure from the educational and cultural environment, which is almost the opposite of that in Chad. Moreover, there is a lack of appropriate coping strategies, and finally, a deficiency in preparation for subsequent change cycles. As might be expected, the quality of student integration into the academic and social systems of the learning environment is a quite significant characteristic to motivate the decision of involvement and especially the acceptance or internalization of the responsibility of training (Tinto, 1975).

Gossuin and Devoet (1984) recall a basic principle which states that the success of university studies requires not only the ability to effectively respond to the demands of the university environment but also to overcome the imbalance mentioned by the transition from a known environment to an unknown living environment. To do this, the quality of integration directly results from the motivation of the student, their consistency, the image they have of their abilities to face the complex situation, and their active participation in the activity in the university context. Several authors have thus addressed this question in its relation to related factors that may lead to numerous disruptions on cognitive, social, and existential levels, which explain the many difficulties experienced by novice students (Parvandi, 2016, 2020; Endrizzi, 2010).

In Chad specifically, the debate is ongoing regarding the issue of academic engagement in higher education (statement by Minister Dr. Tome Erdimi, June 2024). As the author points out, the government of Chad makes education and thus the involvement of learners in the teaching/learning process a national priority despite all the constraints (economic, infrastructural, socio-cultural) of the Chadian education system. These are not the only concerns, as individuals also face personal issues such as performance anxiety, procrastination, and pessimism regarding the value of this education, which is often labeled as a purely exotic product (...). Once they complete their undergraduate studies, often marked by the aforementioned challenges, many are forced to emigrate in order to further their education for reasons of specialization or continued training for others. Cameroon then becomes a promised land for economic reasons, accessibility, or even proximity. These are indeed the reasons mentioned by most participants in this study. However, the reality on the ground is quite different considering the dropout rate mentioned in the previous lines, thus justifying a much deeper reality that is the ambiguous belief of students about their own ability to overcome the constraints of the Cameroonian university environment.

Currently, the observation is unequivocal; Chadian students who drop out of their studies were already contemplating a potential dropout due to insufficient resources from the outset of their project. The realities of dropout in the Master's cycle among Chadian students in transition can be perceived in their speeches even before they begin their first assessments (field survey in 2025). What marks the onset of processes such as the perseverance of students in vulnerable situations (Papi and Thériault 2020). This is compounded by deficiencies in the design of learning strategies (cognitive and self-regulation), problems with academic integration, social integration issues, low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence, followed by a lack of interest in the task. On the other hand, it seems quite interesting to ask why some transitioning students succeed in their higher education in Cameroon? And what can explain their

consistently high level of academic engagement in light of their performance and especially in the context we have just described? The search for an answer to this questioning has allowed us to consider the analysis of the influence of the perception of the competencies of Chadian students in a transition situation at the University of Douala on their level of academic engagement. Based on this, we formulated the following general hypothesis: the perception of competence influences the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon. From this, three specific hypotheses derive, namely:

1. Perseverance in the face of failure has an influence on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon;

2. Interactions with peers influence the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon;

3. The subject's judgment on their abilities has an effect on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon;

4. The representation of the educational value of their actions improves the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon.

Status questionis:

Coulon (1997) presents the process of adapting to obstacles in the university context as learning aimed at constructing an academic socialization defined by the degree of investment of the student in order to better appropriate their study environment by responding to pedagogical expectations and requirements. Paivandi (2016) adds that building student sociability, intellectual affiliation, and social affiliation are foundations for successful university integration. In this vein, Zittoun (2008, 2009) through a developmental approach, considers the transition as a sudden break involving major changes in the individual's attitudes and behaviors to adapt to this environment. Thus, the transition in studies is an adjustment process to a major life change in the learner's journey involving a set of challenges in the university context such as administrative complexity, more anonymous teaching, increased physical and mental workload, or the learning climate (Declercq, Van Meenen, and Frenay, 2020). Current university contexts face enormous challenges characterized by significant worrying instability including: the increase in the number of students and their diversity; the pressure of the job market related to the development of economic activities based on the achievements of university education… (Loiola and Tardif, 2001; Clark, 1998). First of all, it must be said that all successes in university studies require not only the best abilities to respond effectively to academic demands but also to overcome the imbalance caused by the transition from a familiar environment *(the family background and secondary education)* to an unknown living environment (the campus and university studies) (Gonsuin and Devoet, 1984; 13). It is therefore not insignificant to say that the quality of university integration is more or less a result of the student's motivation and therefore their commitment in the face of the tedious experiences of the university context, especially during the transition period.

Next, another reality will emerge which is the perception of the student's competence in seeking integration into life on the new campus, stemming from the interaction of students with their host institution, whether in lectures or various activities on campus, including associations. This particular engagement of the student is also experienced through the lens of a personal decision manifesting on one hand, as willingness and, on the other hand, as the capacity to fully engage in their studies, thereby linking two dimensions: the attention to engage and the manner of proceeding in study (Willis, 1993). Thus, students in a transition period in their master's cycle develop beliefs of efficacy that affect their emotional quality of life and their vulnerability to stress and depression (Bandura, 2009). The perception of their own ability adjusts in this case based on their academic skills and the sources of stress generated by such a context (Faurie, Thouin & Sauvezon, 2016).

Tadaha (2024; 8) cites Lacroix and Potvin (n.d.) who highlight that a student's engagement should be explained by three types of perceptions: the perception of the value of the activity, the perception of their competence to accomplish it, and the perception of the control that the student has over the process and the outcome of the execution. For the author, the certainty of a well-paying job or a substantial improvement in their quality of life at the end of their training, or personal beliefs in their own abilities

to succeed in their academic journey based on their previous experiences. It is on this line he states that, the development of a representation of their own competence and their ability to understand the process and purpose of an activity, explains their commitment and dedication to completing a given task (p.8). In the Cameroonian context, higher education gives considerable importance to Chadian students (estimated at just over 120,000 according to the association of Chadian students in Douala) in the integration process through university and professional training, given that, just like Cameroonian students, those of Chadian nationality pay the same amount of university fees, which amount to fifty thousand francs (50,000fcfa).

Regarding the perception of competence in relation to the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in a Master's transition situation, we align with Harter's (1972) perspective, which asserts that the overall perception of competence is an adaptive source against academic difficulties. Clearly, the failure rate among Master's students leaves us no choice but to examine the realities of developing their perception of competence and the impact of this on their level of academic engagement. Thus, as emphasized by Galand (2006) cited by Tadaha (2024), a certain attribution (external or internal) of successes or failures becomes an important motive in avoiding anxiety about results and the feeling of control over the situation of competence (p. 22). Given that perseverance in the face of failure, peer interactions, the representation of the educational value of their actions, and the subject's judgment of their abilities empirically constitute the primary battleground for our students in transition once they are in master's programs at the University of Douala in Cameroon. This inevitably leads, in most cases, to the development of emotional instability in interpersonal relationships, a profound detachment from social relations, and is also associated with inconsistencies in psychological, financial, and linguistic support, along with a lower self-esteem that strips them of any willpower in the face of the considerable demands of the host environment. Furthermore, the issues faced by our Chadian students in transition during their master's studies are numerous (academic dropout, inability to adapt, intellectual fragility, language barriers, lack of psychological support, etc.) influencing perseverance in higher education training programs. Until now, the institutional and social integration programs for students in the sub-region (Central Africa) have remained a genuine intention of these states (scientific committee of the great network initiative for success, 2020). However, as Tinto and Pusser (2006) state, the institutional support provided to students is a major determinant of their success. Bandura (1986) further supports this in his social cognitive theory of learning, which highlights the influences of cognitive, affective, motivational, and behavioral processes on a person's performance in achieving a learning task and thus their academic engagement. Furthermore, Bouffard, Boasvert, and Vezeau (2003) emphasize the interaction between beliefs about perceived competencies and levels of academic engagement. To better understand the mechanisms and stakes of the perception of competence, it is first important to give meaning to perception.

Perception encompasses all the processes by which an organism becomes aware of the world and its environment based on the information processed by its senses (The Great Dictionary of Physiology Larousse, 2002). Furthermore, according to Bagot (1999) cited by Tadaha (2020), perception refers to all the processes that allow us to become aware of the surrounding world and to build our own mental representations of that world. Paired with competence, the perception of competence is the judgment that an individual makes regarding the execution of all actions required to achieve a performance or objective. According to Wigfield & Eccles (2002); Wigfield, Tonks & Klauda (2009) it represents the assessment that an individual makes of their abilities in relation to completing a task (for example: I feel good at this activity). It is in this vein that Bandura (1986) as well as Harter (1982, 1986) conclude that a positive perception of competence encourages a person's willingness to actively engage in a task, whereas a low perception of competence leads to superficial engagement and giving up at the first difficulty. This disposition manifests in behaviors such as task attention, effort, and perseverance in the face of difficulties, as well as positive feelings towards the task. According to interactional theories that are based on the idea that the interaction between the student and the university plays a major role in persistence in studies, it is interesting to examine the complexity of the notion of engagement after becoming aware of the perception of competence.

Several researchers have focused on academic engagement and student persistence in higher education (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, Gonyea, and Frederiks, 20008; Pintrich and Schunk, 2002; Pirot and De

Ketele, 2000; Willis, 1993). Engagement is the key to success for students in their daily life and particularly in their academic life. In 1984, Astin specified that it was a physical and psychological energy. It is in this same vein that Pirot and De Deketele (2000) consider engagement in studies as the affective, conative, cognitive, and metacognitive mobilization in a learning activity. This implies that academic engagement should encompass the mindset or the attitudinal and even behavioral disposition of students to mobilize and invest themselves in prescribed academic tasks. Bédard (2012) will say no differently when he asserts that academic engagement is the ability to invest time and resources throughout the duration of the training program. Academic engagement is a multidimensional process that involves four types of mobilization:

1. An emotional mobilization, the origin and engine of action: the desire to learn, aspirations, attitudes, and self-perceptions and perceptions of the learning context (Boulet, 1993; Miller, 1977 and Adams, 1991; Willis, 1993);

2. A conative mobilization: the quality of physical and psychological energy invested by the student in learning activities (Astin, 1984);

3. A cognitive mobilization: the intellectual work undertaken by the student in learning (Boulet, 1993; Nystrand and Gamoran, 1991; Willis, 1993).

4. In addition to this:

5. A metacognitive mobilization: the strategies by which the student becomes aware of their learning approaches, analyzes the results they lead to, evaluates them to possibly regulate them (Boulet, 1993; Romainville, 1992; Vian, 1994). Thus, the relevance lies in the fact that students are aware of their ability to reflect on the relevance and effectiveness of their working techniques.

To this exploration, we will subsequently add an empirical approach to verifying our research hypotheses.

Methodology

This research is oriented towards a quantitative approach and employs the snowball sampling method in the data collection. The data was collected through a self-assessment questionnaire (44 items) addressed to Chadian students in transition to a master's cycle who are facing a decline in engagement in the host university system (University of Douala). To ensure that only those with low academic engagement participate, we took care to conduct interviews with members of the Chadian student association at the University of Douala and those of the Muslim faith who pray every Friday at the mosque on the Plateau at the Essec campus two. After identifying the initial participants, the snowball method was deployed for the subsequent stages. The SPSS software version 23 was used for various analyses and the sample size is 120 students, which seems very interesting according to Dépelteau (2011). Our analyses showed that the subjects are predominantly (54%) female; 66% of them identify as Christian and 70% are unable to validate the courses taken with an English-speaking teacher. They are, on average, 38 years old and have an average of 3 years on the campus of the University of Douala. Indeed, 88% of those who have been on campus for more than 3 years have not yet been able to complete the validation of levels one and two in the master's cycle, which officially takes two years. The items of each independent variable were assessed on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree to 4 = Strongly agree. The dependent variable was assessed on a three-point scale (1 = low; 2 = medium; 3 = high).

The internal consistency of each measure is very good. The analysis of the factor structure of the measurement scales for these independent variables indicates satisfactory successive KMO values well above the minimum threshold of 0.6 recommended by Evrad, Pras, and Roux (2003) (see Table 1 below). The same procedure is applied for the level of academic engagement, which is measured using 14 items inspired by the adjusted scale of Allen and Meyer (1990).

Table 1. Internal consistency and dimensionality of the measurement scales of the variables.

Variables	Alpha de Conbach	KMO	Significativité du test de Bartlett	% de la variance
HR1	0,84	0,65	000	50,851
HR2	0,73	0,67	000	47,900
HR3	0,73	0,8	000	41,530
HR4	0,83	0,7	000	47,620

Sources : Enquêtes de terrain**.**

Results

The Spearman correlation is used to test the link between each dimension of the perception of skills and the level of academic engagement of Chadian students in transition in the master's program in Cameroon. See in the table below the summary of the results of the verification of the research hypotheses:

Table 2. Synthesis of the results.

Research hypothesis 1: The perseverance in the face of failure influences the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program to the University of Douala in Cameroon.

		Valeur	Erreur asymptotique standard[a]	T approximatif[b]	Signification approximative
Intervalle par Intervalle	R de Pearson	,184	,102	2,033	,044[c]
Ordinal par Ordinal	Corrélation de Spearman	,147	,094	1,617	,019[c]
N		120			

- Research hypothesis 2: Interactions with peers have an impact on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's cycle at the University of Douala in Cameroon.

		Valeur	Erreur asymptotique standard[a]	T approximatif[b]	Signification approximative
Intervalle par Intervalle	R de Pearson	-,157	,099	-,625	,033[c]
Ordinal par Ordinal	Corrélation de Spearman	-,146	,093	-,501	,018[c]
N		120			

- Research hypothesis 2: The subject's judgment of his abilities has an effect on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's program to the University of Douala in Cameroon.

		Valeur	Erreur asymptotique standard[a]	T approximatif[b]	Signification approximative
Intervalle par Intervalle	R de Pearson	,204	,087	2,264	,025[c]
Ordinal par	Corrélation	,196	,088	2,168	,032[c]

| | | Ordinal | de | | |
| | | Spearman | | | |

N d'observations valides	120	

Research hypothesis 4: The representation of the educational value of its actions has an effect on the level of academic engagement among Chadian students in transition from the Master's cycle to the University of Douala in Cameroon.

		Valeur	Erreur asymptotique standard[a]	T approximatif [b]	Signification approximative
Intervalle par Intervalle	R de Pearson	,152	,056	1,674	,057[c]
Ordinal par Ordinal	Corrélation de Spearman	,155	,052	1,700	,052[c]

r = *Spearman's rank correlation coefficient*; **N** = *Number of valid observations*.

Looking at the summary table above, we note that the values of the rank coefficient for our different hypotheses are as follows: r = 0.14 for HR1; r = -0.14 for HR2; r = 0.19 for HR3 and r = 0.15. With a probability of equal to or less than 0.05 of making a decision error, we conclude on the existence of a low-intensity relationship between the variables considered in each of the hypotheses. Therefore, we can assert that the low level of academic engagement of Chadian students in transition at the Master's level at the University of Douala is explained by a poor perception they have developed of their skills. Everything that allows us to understand why instead of the two years required to complete the master's program, these students go up to three, or even four, five years for the most resilient ones.

Discussion

The results of our various analyses support our main hypothesis. Thus, the perception of competencies influences the level of academic engagement of Chadian master's students in transition at the University of Douala. In the face of the perception of their competence and specifically regarding the necessity for potentially difficult academic perseverance, Chadian students experience stress and feel more vulnerable when confronted with prescribed academic tasks. The negative effects of this stress can explain certain academic dropouts, some resistance, or a lack of involvement in various learning activities. These students, according to Booth et al. (2001), indeed need more support to persist and accomplish the tasks they engage in, and the establishment of an emotional foundation with the teacher contributes to such support. However, in light of the Expectancy-Value models by Eccles & Wigfield (2002), which are composed of two main variables: success expectations and the educational value of the task for the student, these factors influence their ability to orient themselves and make judgments about the perceived difficulty of the task to be performed. This supports Bandura's (2003) idea that without belief in their own success, an individual would be unable to engage in the task and thus aspire to better performance. Specifically, the value of the task remains an inevitable factor in this belief, as their subjective representation regarding their approach to executing an academic task is not negligible in this process. The value of this task consists of the following four dimensions: importance, interest, cost, and perceived usefulness of the task. This is what Creten, Lens, and Simons (2002) sought to verify in the relationship between perceived task usefulness and academic performance, mediated by students' cognitive and metacognitive strategies. In fact, the teaching-learning process and the student's perspective on the programs are pillars of academic engagement that speculate on the development of a meaningful relationship with others in order to control the disengagement of students at risk of academic maladjustment.

According to Best et al. (2005), the psychopedagogical support provided by teachers is therefore established as a protective factor against students' academic disengagement. The best relationships with teachers are, according to the authors, a shield against the decline in academic engagement. The attitude that young people adopt towards classroom learning activities should be considered in light of academic

activities with inconsistent interest (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Tollefson, 2000). Thus, the refusal of any academic engagement begins with a gradual reduction in efforts, procrastination, or even the refusal of any external help in the sense of Turner et al. (2002). Moreover, with the difficult living conditions of students without scholarships from disadvantaged backgrounds, their academic engagement is identified by several researchers as one of the important factors that can positively influence their chances of future academic and professional success (Fredricks et al, 2004). To this end, it is important for the Chadian government to implement various assistance measures to support students in transition to a master's program outside of Chadian territory to prevent academic dropout.

Conclusion

This study addressed the issue of disengagement of Chadian students in transition to the master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon. The aim was to verify the correlation of this phenomenon with the perception of competencies of regularly enrolled Chadian students in the master's program at the University of Douala. The analysis of field observations and the verification of formulated research hypotheses confirm that the perception of competencies has a significant impact on the level of academic engagement of Chadian students in transition to the master's program at the University of Douala in Cameroon. Indeed, their lower investment in educational activities is largely dependent on sociocultural realities different from their country of origin, as well as on pedagogical practices that are also divergent in the two educational systems. Indeed, the inconsistency of teaching methods and techniques with the proximal zone of development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1985) of adolescents, the deficit in pedagogical mediation, remediation of learning, and psychopedagogical support negatively impact students' attendance and perseverance in their studies.

In light of these results, we first suggest that a proactive and longitudinal approach based on the needs of foreign students be adopted in various training curricula to ensure early engagement and continuous psychopedagogical support to support their academic success. This through the establishment of volunteer programs from the start to keep students active throughout the process, ensure the effectiveness of academic services throughout their coursework, implement communication tailored to the needs of foreign students, and above all ensure institutional collaboration between different educational systems.

Secondly, to establish specialized orientation programs to help Chadian students in transition for better integration, as well as peer mentoring to strengthen the social support system that enhances retention and academic engagement.

Furthermore, linguistic support and sociocultural integration, as well as administrative and logistical support aimed at facilitating access to obtaining necessary documents, housing.

Lastly, the establishment of practical workshops for future university and professional orientation through the dissemination of knowledge about the job market or an understanding of the professional world (entrepreneurship courses, project management, administrative writing).

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