

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **1.1 Background and Rationale**

As in most developing countries, the education system in Thailand is of paramount importance because it is the basis for the future development of the nation. In the past, government planners tended to focus on the development of the primary and secondary education systems. More recently, attention has turned to tertiary education, as new private universities have been created and thus have provided healthy competition to the longer established public universities. As these universities have matured, more attention has turned to graduate programs, these graduate programs have encountered difficulties. However since research in Thailand cannot progress without collaboration with universities in other countries where English, rather than Thai, is the prevalent medium of communication, graduate students in Thailand face the additional difficulty of gaining fluency in English before they can play a full role in research initiatives. In addition, there is a shortage of experienced thesis supervisors in Thai universities.

Despite these difficulties, several Thai universities, including Prince of Songkla University in Southern Thailand, have developed strong graduate programs, particularly at the Masters level. Moreover, they have largely refused to slavishly follow the trend to proliferate purely coursework Masters Degrees that have become lucrative income-earners in many western countries, but which downgrade research. Given the greater cost associated with graduate programs involving thesis supervision, it is important to develop efficient and cost-effective practices for running these programs.

In this thesis we report the findings from a survey of students graduating with higher degrees from Prince of Songkla University in September 2002. This survey focused on levels of satisfaction with respect to various aspects of the students' academic programs, difficulties faced, their views of the helpfulness of their advisers, and especially the time they took to complete their degrees. Such studies can provide important information that can be used to improve the quality of graduate education in Thailand.

From its database for the academic years 2001 and 2002, the Graduate School at Prince of Songkla University is well aware of the fact that most graduate students take more

than three years to complete their studies. This situation has the following adverse consequences:

1. Advisors cannot accept new students because they have some students still finishing their study.
2. Students who have taken leave of absence from their work to study must return to their job or company before finishing their study.
3. Students suffer lost time and money because they have to register for their student status, and they have to pay some cost to the university every semester. In addition, they have to pay for transportation between university and their home.
4. In the case of students who have no job, they have no chance of gaining employment.
5. A good opportunity for the student is lost, and society loses out as well, because the pool of qualified workers is reduced.

## **1.2 Objectives**

Our data comprise 307 of the graduate students who finished their Masters Degree and attended the graduation ceremony in 2002 at Prince of Songkla University and completed a questionnaire, and are classified into 6 sections. We use these data to describe all the relevant variables.

The specific objectives of our study are as follows:

1. To investigate the causes of graduate students not finishing their studies on time.
2. To investigate the satisfaction of graduate students with their studies.
3. To investigate the relationship between time taken by the student to complete their degree (retention time), their satisfaction with the study program, and other relevant determinants.

## **1.3 Literature Review**

Pongpullponasak et al (2004) studied factors associated with students' satisfaction about the learning process in a computer education program in Southern Rajabhat Institutes. The sample was 307 undergraduate students. The results showed that there were 8 factors that effected the student's satisfaction. These factors were behaviour of president, parent, teacher and student, condition of classroom laboratory and library, character of student's activity and subject. Nearly all factors were satisfied with the

medium level except the factors of behaviour of parent were satisfied with the high level.

Nocksakul (1988) studied factors related to the success in conducting thesis of graduates at Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit, Bangkok. Based on a random sample of 202 graduate students, her results indicated that the factors related to doing a thesis well were the characteristics of the adviser, the characteristics of the student, the academic experience of the student and the academic school service. The relevant characteristics of supervision were found to be good advice from the adviser, the student's experience in academic study, statistical knowledge for research, research instrument making ability, and ability to do their thesis. The relevant factors for university education service included the quantity of articles and books related to their thesis in the library.

Rattanakoch (1999) studied factors for predicting academic achievement of graduate students at Prince of Songkla University. The sample consisted of 294 graduate students who had graduated during the academic years 1993-1997. The most relevant factors were found to be grade point average in bachelor degree, marital status, the institute where the student gained their bachelor degree, and the time taken to complete their studies in the graduate school.

Bumrunghai (2001) studied the causes and problems associated with failing to finish the degree on time among graduate students at three government universities and three private universities, the sample comprising 30 students at each place. Data were also collected from 15 administrators and 15 supervisors at each place. The determinants of spending time beyond schedule were found to be domicile, age, cost per month, computer room service and independent study room service. The administrators and supervisors reported that the causes of spending time over schedule were the bureaucratic delays associated with processing forms and getting permissions and thus delaying the students' progress on their theses, and the students not understanding or keeping up with changes in official regulations.

Rascha (2004) studied opinions on learning environments of students at Prince of Songkla University, Pattani Campus in 2004. The sample comprised 421 undergraduate students. He reported that the "student's opinions on the learning environments in all

aspects were found to be appropriate at a medium level” and “student’s opinions from different faculties on learning environments in all aspects were statistically different”.

The Graduate School, Prince of Songkla University (2004) studied the role of prospective supervisors of its graduate students. The sample comprised 108 lecturers and administrators responsible for graduate studies and 294 graduate students in the academic year 2002-2003 in seven faculties. They concluded that the following roles of the supervisor, classified as either “Education” or “Personality” were important:

#### 1. Educational Roles

- 1.1 To carefully check and correct the final version of the thesis.
- 1.2 To have an up-to-date knowledge of the subject matter.
- 1.3 To monitor the students progress in thesis writing.
- 1.4 To give the student the opportunity to write independently.
- 1.5 To show the students how to write research reports in both Thai and English.
- 1.6 To give strong leadership to the students doing their thesis.
- 1.7 To evaluate student’s work and help them when they have thesis difficulties.
- 1.8 To join with students in improving thesis projects and research methodology.

#### 2. Personality Traits

- 2.1 To provide students with understanding, care and kindness.
- 2.2 To give advice appropriately when students do something wrong in their thesis.

The Graduate School, Michigan State University (1996) surveyed graduate students’ opinions on the quality of their graduate education. The sample comprised students who had been enrolled in the Graduate School in 1996. Of 6500 masters and doctoral students surveyed, there were 1391 valid responses, 1026 from graduate students who had been enrolled for more than one year and 365 from new students. It was found that the majority of the respondents were generally positive about their graduate experience. For example 74% of experienced students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they would recommend their program to prospective students. Interestingly, the percentage of positive responses was even higher (84%) among new students.

Whitehead (2004) reported the results of a survey of graduate students in the biology department at Dalhousie University, USA. The researcher sent a reminder message to the students by email, a repeat of the surveys carried out in 1989, 1992, 1996 and 1999.

Thirty-eight students of 109 in 2004 completed the survey. That is 35%, as compared to 26% in 1999, 34% in 1996, 54% in 1992 and 59% in 1989. The results of this survey were generally similar to those from the previous surveys, and were summarized as follows:

1. Graduate courses offered by the biology department in the students' area of interest were described as "too few" or "much too few".
2. Additional courses were requested, particularly in statistics and ecology/population biology, and several students requested classes that were not cross-listed as under graduate classes.
3. Similarly, modules offered by the biology department in the students' area of interest were described as "too few" or "much too few".
4. Students were generally happy with the quality of the courses and modules that were offered, but several noted that the modules varied considerably in quality.
5. One quarter of the respondents had problems with the payment of their monthly stipends which were either frequent, difficult to resolve, or both. Assuming they had to pay regular fees of about \$7,000 per year, students estimated they would need a median income of \$20,500 per year.

Chirkiatsakul (1998) studied the difficulties of Thai students in Australia compared with other overseas students. The sample comprised overseas students enrolled at Macquarie University in 1997. The total number of completed questionnaires was 66. Thai students found that the most difficult aspects of studying in an Australian university were communication, the teaching atmosphere and a lack of research assistance.

Vanitsupavong (2003) investigated the factors affecting decisions to enrol in the Master's Degree Programs in Education at Prince of Songkla University. The relevant factors were found to be expertise of teaching faculty, and appealing and flexible curricula.

#### **1.4 Study Design**

For convenience and internal validity, our study design used a cross-sectional survey study by questionnaire involving the graduate students from a selected study population, the graduate students who finished their Master degree at Prince of Songkla University.

The questionnaire was constructed by administration and checked for correctness by staff in the Graduate School, Prince of Songkla University in 2002. (The Graduate School, Prince of Songkla University, 2002). This questionnaire is listed in the appendix.

##### *Population and Sample*

The target population comprised all graduate students at Prince of Songkla University who finished their Masters Degree and gave permission to attend the graduation ceremony in September 2002. The sample comprised 307 graduates from a total of 733 students (41.9%).

##### *Outcome variables*

The standard duration of the Masters Degree is two years. We chose the primary outcome variable to be the time taken by the student to complete their degree (retention time). A secondary outcome comprised the satisfaction of the student with their study experience, measured using 39 items on a questionnaire developed by the Graduate School, Prince of Songkla University indicating the students' responses on a scale of 1 to 5.

##### *Intervening variables*

Since not all the students were required to write a thesis, it was important to classify them accordingly, and this binary variable (doing a thesis or not) was thus an intervening variable. There were also ten other variables that are classified as intervening variables, including six characteristics of the thesis topic and four variables describing the relationship between the student and the advisor.

##### *Determinants*

The main determinants of interest were characteristics of the students, comprising (1) major (faculty or department), (2) program (part-time or full-time status), (3) gender,

(4) marital status, (5) age group, (6) occupational status, (7) prior research experience, (8) prior knowledge of methodology, (9) computer skill for data acquisition and analysis (10) ability to search English articles (11) ability to search articles at other institutes, (12) family, work or financial problems and (13) thesis timing

#### *Conceptual Framework*

We now show the relationships between 13 characteristics of the student-base determinants and factors affected to Retention Time (time taken to complete the master degree) and satisfaction of graduate student. The conceptual model of this study is as follows:

Figure 1.1 shows the putative relationships between the variables.

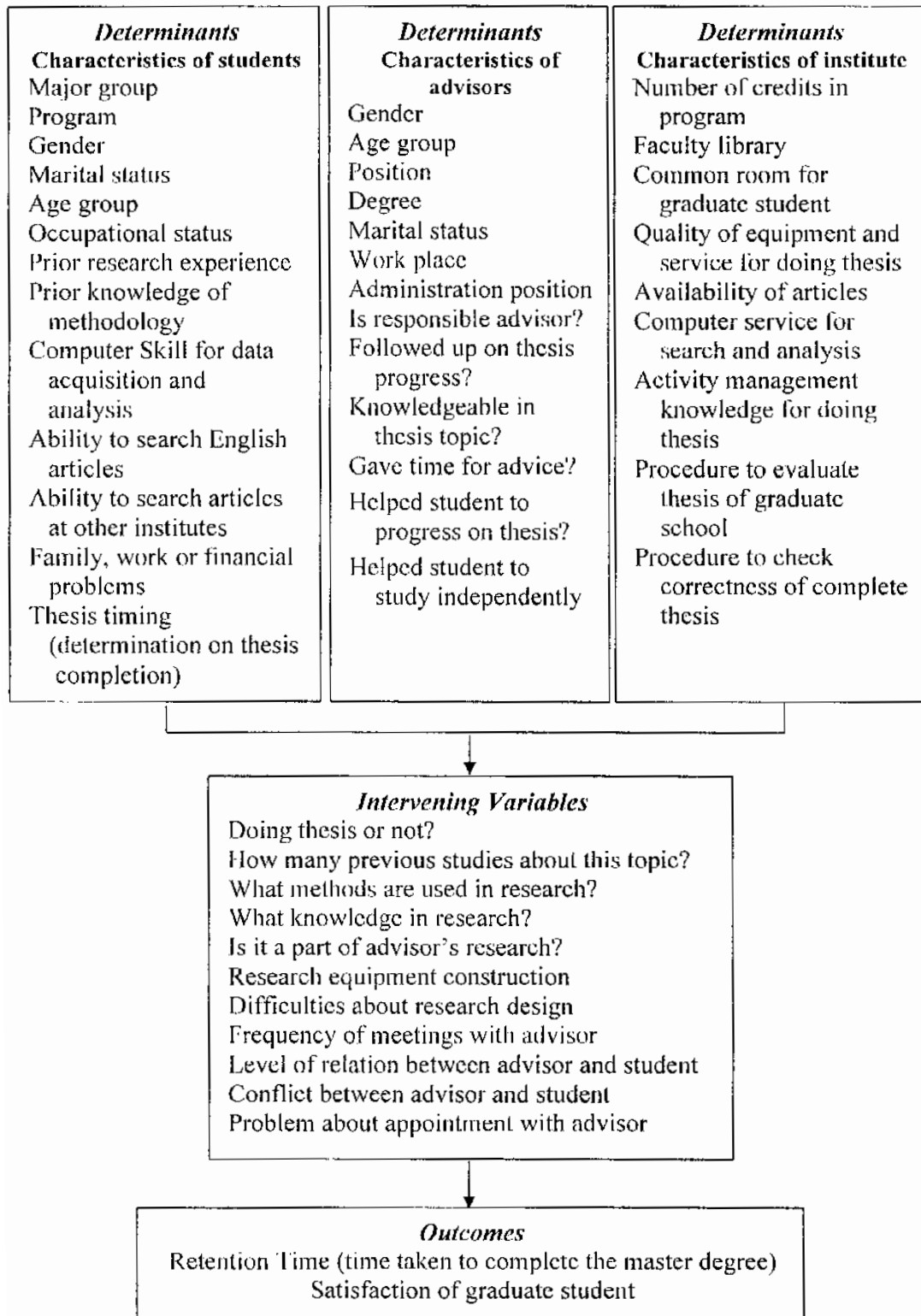


Figure 1.1 Schematic diagram of variables of interest