The pattern of reasons why minority students drop out: An empirical study of the Hmong minority in Laos

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Abstract

Inquiry into the issue of minority dropout is complex. This paper looks into the reasons for dropping out of higher education among Laotian Hmong minority students and further analyzes the patterns of some emergent reasons. 11 Hmong student-leavers were recruited as the key informants, using a snowball sampling technique. The participants were invited to do a self-report interview study. The paper employed a qualitative content analysis for processing the obtained data. The findings revealed a clear pattern, in which the majority of participants' reasons for dropping out fell into only one group. Furthermore, the study also found that family-related reasons appear to be the most frequently cited. A further inquiry into the subject is strongly recommended.

Keywords: Higher Education, Hmong minority, Patterns of reason, Minority dropout

Introduction

It is claimed that minority students are underrepresented and tend to lag behind their non-minority counterparts in academic achievement in higher education (Grubb, 1989; Samora, 1963; Williams, 2019; Wong & Wong, 1980). Students of minority backgrounds are the most likely to drop out prior to completing a program (Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Chen & Desjardins, 2010; Reisel & Brekke, 2010). This may reflect an inequality issue in society but a serious dropout rate also has an impact on the country's economic development (Kyophilavong et al., 2018; Rumberger, 2001; Tidwell, 1989). Knowing why students drop out can be useful in addressing educational issues (Rumberger, 2001). A high drop out rate among minority students has been an ongoing problem in many societies and this has led to extensive research literature. York et al. (1993), found several

reasons why minority students drop, including poor learning ability, financial restrictions, administrative-related problems, lack of social and academic interaction, and curriculum-related problems. Meeuwisse et al. (2010) noted that minority students drop out due to several reasons, such as poor learning, worries regarding future employment, home problems, culture, and the content of education. Some other authors have assumed that high minority dropout rates are associated with their peer socialization (Nagasawa & Wong, 1999), and their social class (Bourdieu, 1984). The existing research suggests there are a multitude of factors which contribute to minority students dropping out.

The existing theoretical perspectives on minority dropout rates tend to be merged from Western contexts, which may describe only the situations of among Western minority students. Little data on minority dropouts from the Southeast Asian Region is known or has been conceptualized. This research area is an ongoing one and it is hard to generalize to the reality of the situation (Bidgood et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2001). Moreover, the analysis of factors contributing to students of minority backgrounds dropping out is limited in past studies. Therefore, this present study probes into the reasons for university dropout among Hmong minority students. This case study of the Laotian Hmong minority may result in increasing knowledge of the factors contributing to dropouts and contribute to the existing literature pertaining to the dropout issue in higher education. This research paper may serve as a reference in planning for inclusive education within Laos as well as in other pluralistic contexts with culturally diverse societies. The research questions for this study included (1) What could be the possible reasons be for dropping out, as described by minority student-leavers? and (2) What is the pattern of these reasons among minority student-leavers?

This paper is structured into the following sections: Section 1 presents the research context of the Hmong minority in Laotian higher education and the dropout issue among the Hmong. Section 2 reviews certain theoretical perspectives on minority dropout. Section 3 outlines key theoretical assumptions regarding minority dropout factors, as well as the conceptual framework for our present study. Section 4 discusses the methodology including sampling, data collection procedures, and our analysis strategy. Section 5 presents the findings and links these to existing studies before offering the conclusion.

Hmong Minority in Laotian Higher Education: A Research Context

The Hmong, an indigenous ethnic minority group, are originally from China, having lived in China for a few thousand years prior to migrating to Southeast Asia a few hundred years ago (Vang, 2003). At present, Hmong people live in the mountainous areas of China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. In Laos, the Hmong rank as the 3rd largest ethnic minority group (UNPO, 2021). After 1975, when Laos gained its independence, more Hmong started to migrate abroad: they can currently be found in countries such as France, USA, Australia, and Canada. Socially, the Hmong are likely to prefer living with family or near their relatives. In school environments, the Hmong appear culturally reserved, shy, and quiet to others (Vang, 2003). In Laotian higher education, Hmong students are seen as underrepresented - the statistical data for the academic year 2021-2022 shows approximately 11% out of the total 19,106 students who enrolled at the National University of Laos are occupied by Hmong (NUoL, 2022). With such a small portion of Hmong students in the NUoL, however, there appears, at a faculty within the university (as the sampled faculty for this research), that many Hmong students left prior to completing their programs every year in the past 3 years (academic years 2018-2020). For instance, 26% out of the total 27 student-leavers at the faculty in 2019 were of the Hmong minority. The causes behind their dropouts are

unknown, and only the confirmation of their dropout by the related departments is noted in the faculty's database. There have been, in the literature, plenty of studies investigating Hmong American students' dropouts and difficult situations in higher education (Hang & Walsh, 2021; Vang, 2015; Xiong & Lee, 2011; Xiong, 2018). Among other papers, a recent work by Xiong (2020) has proposed that Laotian Hmong students often encounter a financial barrier when entering higher education, however, this present study looks further into the matter among this population and analyzes patterns of reasons that are related to their dropouts.

Theoretical Perspectives on Minority Dropout Rates

A minority group refers to a group of people whose characteristics, such as physical, social, cultural, and other dimensions set them apart from the larger society. These differential treatments also include educational opportunities that make minority people unequal to the non-minority group (Wong & Wong, 1979). It is seen as the nature of minorities that when they are marginalized on campus, they feel isolated (Nagasawa & Wong, 1999). Most often, it is claimed that minorities are underrepresented in higher education, compared to their non-minority counterparts (Wong & Wong, 1980). Furthermore, minority students are found to have greater issues with completing a degree and they drop out prior to graduation (Baysu & Phalet, 2012; Chen & Desjardins, 2010; Grubb, 1989; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Reisel & Brekke, 2010).

Investigations into minority dropouts are not a new endeavor. The term "dropout," therefore, has been defined in different wordings. For instance, Reisel and Brekke (2010) defined dropout as a situation in which a student leaves without obtaining a degree. For Grubb (1989), dropout signifies students' leaving an educational institution without credentials, including students who have transferred to another institution. However, this case, in which students move or transfer to another program or institution, can be categorized as a "switcher". Furthermore,

dropouts can be grouped into sub-categories: voluntary and involuntary patterns (Wong & Wong, 1980). According to Chen (2008, as cited in Chen & DesJardins, 2010, p. 186), there are three distinctive types of dropouts in higher education: (1) "stopout" referring to students who quit their studies temporarily and later return to continue their enrolment; (2) "institutional dropout" referring to those students who move out from one institution to another, and (3) "system dropout" referring to students who completely withdraw from their education. Based on the perspectives mentioned above, the definition of dropout needs to be clear when investigating this issue. It may lead to misunderstandings if researchers fail to define it clearly in their studies. The issue of minority dropout may be explained better by a theory of habitus and capital, proposed by Bourdieu (1984). According to Bourdieu, there is a link between education and social capital, that is, the differences in social and economic status can predict the students' inequality in academic achievement. Students of minority backgrounds and those from a lower socioeconomic level tend to lag behind. Moreover, Nagasawa and Wong (1997) have assumed that the issue of minority dropout is linked to the presence or absence of a critical mass or campus socialization/social interaction. When discussing the dropout issue, the scholarly research community often pays attention to the reasons for the dropouts. According to the literature reviewed, it seems that the possible reasons that minority students often drop out fall into three groups of reasons, those being individual-related, family-related, and institutional-related reasons. The discussion of these three categories of dropout reasons is as follows.

- **Minority Dropout and Individual-related Reasons**

One reason minority students drop out is related to personal issues. The findings of previous studies have reported that a reason for dropping out among minority students is due to their unclear future plans and expectations (Astin & Cross, 1979; Desjardins, 2010; Rodgers,

2013), which also includes a negative view of their prospects for future employment (Meeuwisse et al., 2010). Grubb (1989) has proposed a similar view: the dropout may be concerned with their unspecified goals, and in some cases a student might enroll in higher education as an experiment, not knowing which courses they actually prefer. For them, whenever a good job is offered to them by chance, they are likely to take up employment without completing their degree (Grubb, 1989). From such a perspective, it might be said that learning with unspecified future goals creates a lack of true inspiration and motivation for learning. It is evident that students with low motivation are likely to drop out (Bidgood et al., 2006; Grubb, 1989). Moreover, minority students appear to experience a greater level of academic problems. For instance, in an interview study by York et al. (1993), the sampled student leavers reported poor learning performance as a major reason for dropping out. Meeuwisse et al. (2010) also found the same tendency, that minority students' dropout relates to their low academic performance. Meeuwisse and colleagues further noted that minority students tend to be limited in learning abilities, which may be rooted in language barriers, cultural differences, and structural disadvantages. More recent works (O'Keeffe, 2013; Woodfield, 2017) confirm the inability to perform well academically as a cause for withdrawing from educational programs. In addition, minority students are often seen as isolated from others. According to Nagasawa and Wong (1999), minority students are viewed as outsiders in higher education and for them it is quite challenging to adapt themselves to a good campus life, causing them to feel anonymous and lacking in networks with subcultural groups and peers on campus, leading to some of them abandoning their studies prior to graduation (Nagasawa & Wong, 1999). In conclusion, the above reasons for dropping out are also obviously linked to students' personal attributes, such as individual attitudes, expectations, and behaviors, as well as the conditions of

their academic experiences and performance. Therefore, one reason for minority dropout is explained by individual-related circumstances.

 ▪ **Minority Dropout and Family-related Reasons**

It has been found that dropouts also occur as a result of family-related reasons. According to Astin & Cross (1979), minority students often struggle with the cost of attendance, such as tuition fees, rent, course materials, etc. and they are likely to drop out if their families cannot afford to finance their studies. York, Bollar, and Schoob (1993) found that "Money Problems" are among the top five reasons for dropping out of higher education. Several authors confirmed this tendency: the family's limited financial support contributes to dropping out (Bidgood et al., 2006; Rodgers, 2013; Rogers, 2009; Vang, 2015; Xiong & Lee, 2011). Furthermore, parents unwilling to help and support their children through further education appear to be another factor in dropping out. Some past works (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Samora, 1963) seem to support this tendency, that a lack of family support matters. According to Meeuwisse and colleagues, the family has two, both positive and negative, impacts on minority students' educational persistence, meaning that a family could support them to persist in their schooling, or, on the other hand, that the care and responsibilities required by the family may hinder the student in their learning accomplishments. According to Astin and Cross (1979); and The Commission on the Higher Education of Minorities, hereafter written as "The CHEM" (1982), students coming from single-parent families, especially ethnic group students, tend to have more responsibilities in taking care of their family or a parent. Vang (2015) showed that some Hmong American students encountered a divorce in the family that caused a challenge in their tertiary education journey. In addition, minority students who are from a family with low educational levels are likely to drop out (Grubb, 1989; Radunzel, 2017), which

is probably due to the parents' limited experiences and knowledge regarding the higher education system as well as that of the school in which their child is enrolled. The parents, therefore, tend not to fully support their children in pursuing higher education (Reisel & Brekke, 2010). This tendency also includes students who are the first generation of the family to manage to transition to higher education, so they receive little encouragement from the family (Radunzel, 2017; Yang, 2023). To conclude, the above reasons for minority students dropping out are associated with the family's situation and the extent to which they can support further education, considering socioeconomic status, parents' encouragement, as well as the extent of the family's appreciation for education. From this perspective, family-related reasons constitute an important factor in students of minority groups dropping out.

▪ **Minority Dropout and Institutional-related Reasons**

Another point of consideration is that the dropout of minority students may be strongly correlated to institutional structures and policy systems (O'Keeffe, 2013; Radunzel, 2017; Rogers, 2009; Samora, 1963). From this perspective, it can be claimed that minority students drop out of schooling due to certain institutional-related reasons. According to Samora (1963), students who are from a lower-class background, and those from an ethnic minority may not fit the mold. They are less likely to perform well and take great risks by dropping out (Samora, 1963). Samora further added that dropouts may be influenced by several aspects of institutional support, such as a lack of facilities, unqualified teachers, a lack of counseling services, few supporting staff, and a mismatch in the curriculum. Similarly, Astin and Cross (1979) have indicated that student leavers often encounter problems in fitting in with a program and school activities. Consequently, they get bored as they are uninterested in the course of study. A recent work by Xiong (2018) pointed out that some minority students face a challenge with the curriculum; they find the materials designed

for the courses difficult for them. Moreover, a work by Meeuwisse and colleagues (2010) reported a similar tendency: minority students may leave their studies due to a dislike of the program and its contents. An empirical study by York, Bollar, and Schoob (1993) also pointed out that the "Administrative Facilities/Units" appears to be a reason for dropping out. It is asserted that students of minority backgrounds often have very limited or no interactions with peers on campus. Tinto (1987) stressed the significance of social and academic interactions in student persistence in education (cited in Nagasawa & Wong, 1997). In this respect, the minority dropout issue may be well explained by students' adaptive behaviors. Nagasawa and Wong (1997) noted that a lack of critical mass in subcultural groups and socialization on campus might be a reason for dropping out among minority students. Without support in students' well-being offered by the institution, students may find it hard to adapt themselves to the campus environment and may leave midway, without completing the program. Astin and Cross (1979) have asserted the need for student support in campus life, for instance, by inviting students to reside on the campus itself. By staying in dormitories, students may find their learning conditions improved because they can interact with peers and they are more likely to have more opportunities to participate in academic and non-academic activities offered by the faculty or university (Astin & Cross, 1979). Moreover, Astin and Cross (1979) asserted that those students who live in dormitories are more likely to persist in school. The institution's attention to student well-being, such as by developing students' school connectedness, and teacher relatedness, as well as providing social integration activities, can reduce the high risk of dropping out (Anderson et al., 2018; Azaola, 2019; Deil-Amen, 2011; Hoffman, 2002) A recent work (Yang, 2023) has pointed out students of ethnic minority backgrounds are often considered marginalized and that universities cannot accommodate their needs/voices, so they have to navigate through educational system themselves. To conclude, the

reasons minority students drop out are related to institutional structures and systems, such as programs, requirements, provision of facilities, as well as all practices regarding inclusion. Therefore, institutional-related reasons constitute an important factor in students from minority populations dropping out.

Defining Minority Dropout Reasons as the Purpose for this Current Study

As discussed in the previous section, the reasons for minority students withdrawing from schooling are diverse. Even though the existing literature has provided extensive information on minority students' dropout, few studies have focused on the Hmong minority in Laos. Likewise, some works (e.g., Nagasawa & Wong, 1999) do not provide any empirical evidence. The authors of the current paper are interested in redefining and further investigating the reasons Laotian Hmong minority students drop out of higher education. To do so, key previous works (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Nagasawa & Wong, 1999; Sengsouliya & Vannasy, 2022; The CHEM, 1982; York et al., 1993) have been collated together and synthesized. From that, we gathered a list of 10 potential dropout reasons, which can be grouped into three main categorizations: individual-related, family-related, and institutional-related reasons (see *Table 1*). A detailed discussion now follows.

(1) *Low academic performance*: this reason refers to a minority student having dropped out due to the inability to perform well academically while on campus. This category resembles the terms used in past works, such as "Lacking good study habits," (The CHEM, 1982), "Academic problems," (in York et al., 1993), "Ability," (in Meeuwisse et al., 2010), and "Poor learning conditions," that are used in a work of Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022). All these wordings similarly suggest low academic performance as being a reason for dropping out.

(2) *Lacking minority peers*: yet another reason for minority students dropping out is the inability to socialize/network with other minority students on campus. This category resembles the

terms used in past works, such as The CHEM (1982): "A lack of commitment to minority students",Nagasawa & Wong (1999): "Absence of a critical mass of ethnic minority peers", and Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022): "Low interaction with peers" - all these terms share a similar meaning, namely, a student choosing to dropout because of a lack of social interaction with fellow minority peers.

(3) *Worry about unemployment:* another reason for minority students dropping out is their negative perception of future job prospects after graduating.

All three sub-categories mentioned above are grouped into individual-related reasons. This table represents the reasons for dropping out which are in relation to an individual's attitudes, actions, as well as their personal conditions for learning.

Table 1. Outlining Minority Students' Dropout Reasons

Previous works (Identified minority dropout reasons)	**The present study** (A framework on minority dropout reasons)	**Categori- zations**
The CHEM (1982) *"Lacking good study habits"* York et al. (1993) *"Academic problems"* Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Ability"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Poor Learning conditions"*	*"Low academic performance"*	Individual-related reasons
The CHEM (1982) *"A lack of commitment to minority students"* Nagasawa & Wong (1999) *"Absence of a critical mass of ethnic minority peers"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Low interaction with peers"*	*"Lacking minority peers"*	

Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Future jobs"*	*"Worry about unemployment"*	
The CHEM (1982) *"Outside jobs"* Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Home situation"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Need for employment"*	*"Family responsibilities/tasks"*	Family-related reasons
The CHEM (1982) *"Heavy financial problems"* York et al. (1993) *"Money problems"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Family's financial constraints"*	*"Low socioeconomic family"*	
Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Home situation"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Parents with little appreciation for education"*	*"Family's little appreciation for education"*	
Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Parents' low educational qualification"*	*"Parents' low educational qualification"*	
The CHEM (1982) "*Culture shock*" *"Institutional ethnocentricity"* York et al. (1992) *"Administrative facilities/units"* Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Culture"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) *"Mismatch in cultures"*	*"Administrative system for inclusion"*	Institutional-related reasons
The CHEM (1982) *"Social isolation & loneliness"* York et al. (1993) *"Lack of communication within system"* Nagasawa & Wong (1999) *"Absence of campus social networks"* Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022)	*"A lack of quality of instruction"*	

"School connectedness"		
York et al. (1993) *"Narrow curriculum"* Meeuwisse et al. (2010) *"Content of education"*	*"Curriculum structure"*	

Source: A demonstration by the authors

(4) *Family responsibilities/tasks:* this reason refers to a minority student choosing to dropout due to difficult situations at home/within their family, such as having to take care of family members, or taking on employment to support the family. This category emerges from past research including CHEM (1982): "Outside jobs" Meeuwisse et al. (2010) "Home situation" and of Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022): "Need for employment" The finding of these authors share similar ideas that dropouts can occur due to the students' responsibilities and/or tasks.

(5) *Low socioeconomic family:* another factor in minority students dropping out is the parents' low socioeconomic status and lack of money for educational expenses. This category resembles works of The CHEM (1982): "Heavy financial problems", York et al. (1993): "Money problems" Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022): "Family's financial constraints", where the terms used are similar in meaning, indicating that dropouts can occur because of the low socioeconomic status of the family.

(6) *Family's lack of appreciation for education:* this refers to dropping out due to a lack of support and encouragement from parents. This category emerged from the terms used in past works, such as "Home situation" (in Meeuwisse et al., 2010), and "Parents with little appreciation

for education" (in Sengsouliya & Vannasy, 2022). These authors have similarly asserted that dropouts happen because of the family's lack of appreciation for education.

(7) *Parents' low educational qualifications:* another factor contributing to minority dropout is the parents' lack of higher educational experiences. This category emerges from the previous findings of Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022): "Parents' low educational qualification".

All of the four sub-categories mentioned above are within the group of family-related reasons, namely issues in family situations and the lack of support from family members, causing minority students to drop out of education.

(8) *Administrative system for inclusion:* this refers to a minority student dropping out due to the administrative system, policies, and facilities provided by the institution. This resembles terms used in past works, such as "Culture shock" and "Institutional ethnocentricity" in The CHEM (1982), "Administrative facilities/units" in York et al. (1992), "Culture" in Meeuwisse et al. (2010), and Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022) who used "Mismatch in cultures". All of these similarly suggest that dropouts occur due to issues in the administrative system for inclusion.

(9) *A lack of quality of instruction:* this refers to a minority student dropping out due to poor teaching methods and poor faculty-student relationships. This category emerges from the review of the terms used in past works, such as The CHEM (1982): "Social isolation & loneliness" York et al. (1993): "Lack of communication within system" Nagasawa & Wong (1999): "Absence of campus social networks", Sengsouliya & Vannasy (2022), use the term: "School connectedness". All these researchers similarly suggest that dropouts can occur due to a lack of quality instruction.

(10) *Curriculum structure:* another reason for minority students dropping out may be due to uninteresting courses and schedules. This category resembles the works of York et al. (1993),

using the terms "Narrow curriculum" and "Content of education" in Meeuwisse et al. (2010). These all similarly suggest that a minority student may drop out because of an uninteresting curriculum.

All three sub-categories mentioned above are within the group of institution-related reasons, meaning they relate to the problems of the institutional system, its practices, and policies that cause minority students to drop out of education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study was carried out with the interview research method. The participants were invited to a semi-structured interview and they were probed to describe their university life and the reasons they stated for dropping out. This is an appropriate research approach within sociology for investigating a particular situation of human behaviors (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Dawson, 2002). This current study, therefore, employed a qualitative research design for probing minority students' reasons for dropping out of their higher education studies.

Sampling, Data Collection Procedures, and Preparation for Analysis

The authors of the current paper managed to select 11 participants (2 females) among Hmong student drop outs at a faculty in a Laotian university, using a snowball sampling technique. Access to the cases was made by asking for assistance from people with close contact or having good relations with Hmong students. Dropping out is a sensitive topic because it is an issue involving students' educational loss. Therefore, it is advantageous to consider a snowball sampling method for this paper in approaching the sample, considered to be hidden and of socially atypical traits (Laerd Dissertation, 2012). The recruited sample was based on students who had dropped out no earlier than in the past 3 years (at the time of investigation). The control of this characteristic

in the sample was in place because students who had left 5 or more years prior tended to forget some parts of their campus life and may not have been able to reflect on all of their educational experiences (Meeuwisse et al., 2010).

Almost all of the recruited participants were interviewed by the same author, however, the two female cases were interviewed in collaboration with a female colleague because Hmong female students may be quite reserved, shy, and not very comfortable talking with male strangers. The interviews were carried out in the Lao language as a means of conversation and in different formats for the personal convenience of the participants. Among the 11 cases, 2 consisted of a face-to-face interview, 1 did a voice message on WhatsApp, and the other 8 were via voice calls on WhatsApp. To ensure the validity of the interview protocol, the interview questions were proof-checked by an expert in the field of adult education, and some wording was revised accordingly. Furthermore, a pilot study with one case was carried out, which confirmed the clarity and validity of the questions. During the interview, the interviewer asked the sample for permission to record the conversations. Some key questions in the interviews included: "*How was your study in the faculty? Are there any barriers to your learning/study? What made you decide to drop out of the study?* etc." The length of time for the interviews ranged from 12-20 minutes. Every single word of the interviews, including the interviewees' responses and the interviewer's questions, was then transcribed into text materials (Schreier, 2014). Data collection, processing, and analyses were carried out in Lao. The English translation was made only for publication. Since the current paper also set out to analyze the patterns of dropout reasons, three patterns were established beforehand, namely "Only one group of reasons," "Two groups of reasons intertwined," and "Complex intertwinement of all the groups of reasons", based on the individual-related, family-related, and the institutional-related reasons.

Application of a Qualitative Content Analysis Approach

This study employed qualitative content analysis, using a mixed procedure of a deductive category assignment and a deductive category formation, for analyzing the data (Mayring, 2014). According to Schreier (2014). Qualitative content analysis is a systematic procedure for analyzing large amounts of interview data and it is useful for researchers to quantify categories of data systematically. In conducting the data analyses, the free software "QCAmap," developed by Mayring (2014), was applied. For running the analyses, a coding framework was developed, including category definitions, anchor examples, and coding rules. The coding framework serves as a guideline and it is the most important part of qualitative content analysis as it gives details of all the aspects of the research body, as well as of the interpretation of the study (Schreier, 2014).

Table 2. An overview of the categories applied in the coding process.

Main categories	Sub-categories
A. Individual-related reasons (consisting of 3 sub-categories)	A1. Low academic performance A2. Lack of minority peers A3. Worry about unemployment
B. Family-related reasons (consisting of 6 sub-categories)	B1. Family responsibilities/tasks B2. Low socioeconomic family B3. Family's little appreciation for education B4. Parents' low educational qualification B5. Marriage and early parenthood** B6. Being homesick**
C. Institutional-related reasons (consisting of 3 sub-categories)	C1. Administrative system for inclusion C2. A lack of quality of instruction C3. Curriculum structure

Note: ** (an inductively added category)

To ensure the quality of the coding framework and the categories within, a testing coding was conducted, and based on this conduct, the coding framework was revised (Mayring, 2014). Once the coding framework was prepared, the coding started and was run on a line-to-line basis. Having

finished the process, two additional sub-categories, "Marriage and early parenthood" and "Being homesick", emerged and were then inductively added to the categories list. The added category was from a particular sample's statements regarding their reasons for dropping out from schooling, and that was not mentioned in the theoretical background reviewed (Mayring, 2014). The overview of the main categories and sub-categories in the coding process are presented (see *Table 2*).

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study in which two parts of the findings are discussed, namely reasons why minority students drop out and the patterns of those reasons. The presentation begins with the patterns, which give a clear overview of the complexity of minority dropout. Then the reporting of the reasons legitimated for not persisting in education follows.

Patterns of Dropout Reasons:

As indicated earlier, the present paper investigates the reasons minority students drop out and analyzes the emerging patterns of those reasons. According to the findings (see *Table 3*), there are different patterns of reasons. There appears to be a clear pattern indicating that the majority of student leavers dropped out due to only one group of reasons. Looking more closely at this pattern, it can be seen that six participants' (Case 1; 4; 6; 7; 8; & 11) reasons for their dropout concerned family-related factors. Another pattern appears to be that some participants dropped out for a combination of two groups of reasons. In this pattern, four participants (Case 3; 5; 9; & 10) all had a mix of reasons for dropping out. For instance, Case 3's reasons were both family-related and institutional-related factors, Case 5's were both individual-related and family-related reasons and so on. Furthermore, one last pattern is also found: some leaver participants dropped out because of the complex intertwinement of all the groups of reasons. This is the case with one participant,

(Case 2), who dropped out due to different factors, including individual-related, family-related, and institutional-related reasons.

Table 3. An analysis of the patterns of participants' reasons for dropping out

Patterns	Cases	Ind.*	Fam.*	Inst.*	No. of Cases (summing up to 11)
Only one group of reasons	Case 1.	No	Yes	No	6
	Case 4.	No	Yes	No	
	Case 6.	No	Yes	No	
	Case 7.	No	Yes	No	
	Case 8.	No	Yes	No	
	Case 11.	No	Yes	No	
Two groups of reasons	Case 3.	No	Yes	Yes	4
	Case 5.	Yes	Yes	No	
	Case 9.	Yes	Yes	No	
	Case 10.	No	Yes	Yes	
Complex intertwinement of all the groups of reasons	Case 2.	Yes	Yes	Yes	1

Note: Ind.= Individual; Fam.= Family; Inst.= Institution

Reasons for minority students dropping out:

Another objective of this present paper was to look further into the reasons for dropping out from their studies given by minority students. The findings indicated that three groups of reasons appear to be related to dropping out, namely family-related, individual-related, and institutional-related reasons.

▪ Family-related reasons

Referring to *Table 3*, it can be seen that family-related reasons tend to be the most frequently cited by minority students. The majority of the participants in the study, 10 out of 11, stated that they had dropped out because they were unable to afford educational expenses, such as tuition fees, the cost of living, etc. According to them, they come from poor families and their

parents did not have sufficient money for them to persist in their education. The following quote provides a sample reason for the situation:

> My family didn't feel like encouraging me to study
>
> anymore because they could not afford for me to
>
> continue, (Case 7).

The poverty of the family also caused the participants to have to do something extra to survive at university. For instance, one participant had a part-time job to obtain extra money for his education and to support his family. As a result of having this job, however, the participant started to skip classes and was having a hard time studying. A sample comment is described in the following quote:

> Once I found a part-time job in a private agency
>
> and worked there for a while, I felt so uncomfortable
>
> to study and that caused me to skip classes and decide
>
> to fully quit my education" (Case 1).

Some participants, 3 in total, said that they dropped out due to their responsibilities at home. Difficult situations in their family that they felt obliged to take care of included, for instance, having to look after a sick family member, or an elderly parent, as well as helping out on the family farm. This sample statement describes the situation:

> My major reason for dropping out from my study
>
> was that my parents got old and had no one took care of them.
>
> My brother, who lived in my hometown but his job is 4-hour
>
> ride from the house, was not able to offer a full care of them
>
> due to working in a different area, (Case 3).

Marriage and/or becoming a young parent was another reason for minority students dropping out, as stated by 3 participants. Upon getting married, they became very busy with their many roles in the family, causing them to change their life goals. They dropped out of university and prepared instead to take on the responsibilities of parenthood and spend more time with their spouse at home. This is illustrated by the following words:

> After getting married, I started thinking of dropping
>
> out from my studies due to the load of responsibility
>
> …and when my wife had a baby, she could not live
>
> without me in my parents' house, (Case 8).

Furthermore, their parents' lack of appreciation for education seems to be another factor in reasons for a student dropping out. One participant reported that she had to make a decision on everything about education by herself. Another reason is that the parents worry about their children's job prospects. The parent does not seem to trust that completing a degree will be beneficial as they have seen many graduates who are unemployed after graduation. As a result of this, the parent believes completing a university degree to be pointless in securing a good job thereafter. One last reason found is the students' feeling of homesickness, as stated by one participant. For him, staying alone in an apartment made him feel too lonely and that caused him to miss home.

- ▪ Individual-related reasons

The present paper revealed that some participants of the study dropped out of university for individual-related reasons. According to 2 participants, a lack of friendship/good relations appears to have been a reason. They felt isolated while on campus as they didn't have the opportunity to network sufficiently with peers from the same minority background. It would have

been better for them to have been able to meet and socialize with minority peers. The following statement describes the situation:

> I had little peer interaction while I was studying,
>
> it was rare to see female Hmong students on
>
> the university campus (Case 9).

Moreover, the potential prospect of unemployment tends to be part of the reason for dropping out. Some of them think that it is hard to get a job after graduation as they have seen a lot of new graduates working as temp staff for several years without being recruited into full-time employment. This situation worries them and makes them unmotivated to persevere. An example statement follows:

> A reason for dropping out from my studies was that
>
> there were many new graduates who remained unrecruited
>
> as permanent staff, even though they had about 5-6 years working
>
> as a temporary employee, and that worried me a lot, (Case 5).

▪ Institutional-related reasons

In the interview data, it was revealed that institutional-related reasons for dropping out tend to be involved, but less frequently cited. Dissatisfaction with the faculty's program and its subjects was one of those institutional-related reasons. One participant claimed that he disliked the program because there were too many subjects and that made him have to study too hard. Before arriving at the university, he expected to study only subjects relevant to the specific program. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> I did not feel happy with the fact that I had to study so many

> subjects in the program. I thought that I learned many
>
> subjects already in high school and I would expect
>
> to focus more on my enrolled major. In my major "English
>
> Education" I thought that I would study only relevant subjects
>
> in English but that was not the reality, (Case 3).

Another factor given was dissatisfaction with the teaching approach during the Covid 19 pandemic. Learning in the format of virtual classes became boring, as stated by one participant. He did not enjoy the virtual classes because he felt they offered no learning. Furthermore, one last reason related to the university's administrative system for inclusion. One participant expressed his dissatisfaction with the dormitories provided by the university. He explained that he was eligible to stay in a dormitory but he chose not to because he did not feel comfortable sharing a room with other students. He could not find a roommate from the same Hmong background, and he was slightly concerned about living in the dorm because of possible issues with things like cooking and sharing food and keeping valuable things safe in the dormitory room. This is reflected in the following statement:

> I felt hesitant to stay in a dormitory provided by the university
>
> because there were no Hmong roommates. I chose to live
>
> off-campus due to difficulties regarding cooking and keeping
>
> money safe, (Case 3).

Discussion, Limitations, and Perspectives for Future Research

Discussion

This qualitative study found a clear pattern in the reasons for dropping out, in which minority students frequently cited only one group of reasons as factors in making that decision.

The findings also indicated that family-related reasons weigh more heavily than other reasons for dropping out among minority students. The student participants often referred to the fact that they were from poor families with limited finances. This tendency is consistent with past works (York et al., 1993; Bidgood et al., 2006; Chen & Desjardins, 2010; Rodgers, 2013, etc.). Hmong students in Laos often face a challenge in paying tuition fees when coming to higher education (Xiong, 2020). "Financial hardship" plays a significant role in a student's decision to drop out (Bidgood et al., 2006). It is also consistent with studies on Hmong students, even in a different context, for instance, among Hmong Americans, that they accept that they are from poor families and fall into a financial struggle in pursuing higher education (Vang, 2015; Xiong & Lee, 2011). Moreover, family responsibilities are another factor observed in the present study. The participants were concerned about their family as there were a lot of problems that called for help from them, such as taking care of parents, and a family member, and helping out on the family farm. When encountering such problems, they became stressed, and worried and had a lowered motivation for learning, and this home-life difficulty caused them to drop out (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Rogers, 2009). This study also pointed out that marriage and/or becoming a parent creates difficulties in persisting at university. This finding may also connect with the work of Astin and Cross (1979), which suggests students who have a spouse are more likely to drop out of their studies.

Other previous works (Grubb, 1989; Reisel & Brekke, 2010; Radunzel, 2017) have confirmed that having parents with low educational backgrounds is likely to hinder students' persistence in education. However, this study found little influence from the family's low educational qualifications. Only one participant raised this issue as part of her reasoning for dropping out. The current paper also found another contrasting result, which is that poor academic performance is not relevant to minority students' reasons for dropping out. According to several

authors (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; O'Keeffe, 2013; Radunzel, 2017; Woodfield, 2017), minority dropout is most likely caused by poor academic achievement. Nagasawa and Wong (1997) assumed that the ability to network with peers of ethnic minority backgrounds can predict the persistence in school. However, this study found only one participant who mentioned the lack of a minority peer on campus as part of their reasons for leaving. In addition, some authors (Deil-Amen, 2011; Radunzel, 2017; York et al., 1993) have stressed the influence of institutional support on minority students' educational achievement. However, the present study found that only a few participants mentioned this factor. They described some of their dissatisfaction with the university's administrative system for inclusion, the instructional approach, and the curriculum structure as contributing to their reasons for dropping out. This finding contributes to previous work (Xiong, 2018), which found that Hmong students (living in the US) face a challenge with the curriculum; they claimed that the materials and the courses are too challenging for them. Last but not least, the present paper also revealed that one participant dropped out to transfer to another institution. This case may be considered as a switcher (Meeuwisse et al., 2010) or as an institutional dropout (Chen 2008, in Chen & DesJardins, 2010), referring to those students who move from one institution to another. Moreover, from the present authors' view, minority dropouts are likely to be influenced by disciplinary background and types of transition to higher education (recruitment system and policy); most participants in this study were from soft sciences and transitioned to the university through the non-quota system (in which students pay the full tuition fee and other related costs by themselves).

Limitations and Perspectives for Future Research

This research paper offers an understanding of the reasons for dropping out among minority Hmong college students in Laos. However, the findings of the present study should be used with

caution due to some limitations. One, the findings were obtained from a qualitative research design, interviewing 11 Hmong students, meaning the interpretation of the findings cannot be generalized nor be representative of a larger population of Hmong students. Likewise, the interpretation was dependent on the interview materials only, using a mixed procedure of a deductive category assignment and a deductive category formation (Mayring, 2014). Another limitation is that the findings were from the minority student-leavers, via a self-report interview. It would be more interesting to hear some further viewpoints of the people surrounding them, such as teachers, peers, parents, and cousins. Moreover, the majority of interviews were made via WhatsApp calls, while only two cases were through face-to-face interviews. An online interview can miss some hidden responses from the participants. Future researchers may seek to include more face-to-face interviews to get factual views and more natural reactions. Moreover, more interview time with the participants should be considered in future research so that researchers can probe further for particular situations and reasons. This paper did not involve an equal number of female and male students: among a total of 11 participants, there were just two females. Even though family-related reasons seem to be the most frequently cited ones by minority students, some aspects of the family-related reasons, such as being homesick, and marriage and early parenthood, should be further investigated by future researchers.

Conclusion

The present qualitative study set out to investigate the patterns in reasons for dropping out among Hmong minority students in Laos. For this case study 11 Hmong minority student leavers participated in a semi-structured interview. The findings indicate that the participants had a mix of reasons (concerning these three factors: individual-related, family-related, and institutional-related) for their dropouts. However, when categorizing the patterns, the study shows a clear

pattern, with the majority of minority students dropping out due to only one group of reasons. According to the data, family-related reasons weighed more heavily than other reasons. In this group of family-related reasons, the participants reported issues such as a lack of money, as, coming from a poor family, the parents cannot afford the expenses of the cost of living, the materials, tuition fees, and so on. Moreover, other family-related reasons for dropping out, as described by the minority students, included having a lot of home responsibilities (e.g., taking care of a parent, or a family member, having to help on a farm, etc.), as well as an overall lack of parental support for education. In this regard, obligations associated with the family environment can be perceived as causing difficulties for Hmong students. They have a strong relationship with their family. Family factors alone may prevent them from dropping out of education, if only their family had financial stability and could give sufficient encouragement. Last but not least, Hmong minority students noted that just like other marginalized groups; they have poor learning conditions, compared to other non-minority peers and they have little support from home, so educators should acknowledge their background uniqueness when planning and/or providing educational supports. Most importantly, campus support from both faculty and social networks is very necessary for their academic enhancement. Making them feel a sense of belonging on campus could enhance their school-related activity participation and may prevent them from thinking of dropping out of school. Finally, further inquiry into the relationship between dropping out and individual, institutional, and family conditions is strongly recommended.

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