



Factors Affecting Undergraduates' Academic Competence: A Case Study of Unikl MICET

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Abstract

The academic performance of undergraduates is vital in any higher learning institution. The academic competence of the students in the Malaysian Institute of Chemical and Bioengineering Technology (MICET) of University of Kuala Lumpur (UniKL) is based on the grade point average. Hence, when the number of students obtaining low grade point average increased to more than 5% from the usual 3 – 4 % of the student population, the management needs to act to find ways to curb the decline. This study used a set of questionnaire that was distributed to 80 of UniKL MICET students who did not excel in their recent January 2015's semester examinations. The study identified that the main factors that were detrimental in affecting the underachievers' academic competence were poor study skills like lack of proper study schedules, poor note-taking skills, no study groups and lack of revisions; and also a number of personal habits like sleeping late and lack of sleep. The Student Development unit of UniKL MICET are in the midst of planning special programmes to provide students with better study and personal skills in order to overcome the issues.

INTRODUCTION

The education sector is now an important commodity for most nations, as it could provide to be a major contribution to a country's economy. To attract students, the Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) must ensure that apart from the facilities provided, they could guarantee that their undergraduates could perform well in their studies, and will be able to secure desired employment opportunities once they graduate. Thus, if the number of undergraduates who do not perform well or fail to continue their studies is high, the HLIs must find ways to guide the students as a high number of dropouts is not good for an institute's reputation, and might even affect enrollment.

In educational institutions around the world, the grade point average system is the preferred system in evaluating students' academic performance. Graduates' performance is a concern for all stakeholders, especially the industry that is the 'end user' in the supply chain (Alfan & Othman, 2005). The results of students are reflective

of their knowledge of a subject matter, and getting good grades and failing subjects usually reflect one's knowledge, but most often, reflects one's efforts towards studying as well.

The Grade Point Average system, which originates from the United States education system, is adopted by most universities and colleges in Malaysia as a way to measure students' academic achievement. The highest grade point is 4.0, while for most HLIs, the passing grade point is 2.0. If a student's result dips below 2.0 for the first time, then the student will be placed under probation. In University of Kuala Lumpur (UniKL), a student cannot be under probation for more than three times, as he/she will then be terminated.

In the UniKL Melaka campus of Malaysian Institute of Chemical and Bioengineering Technology (MICET), most subjects offered are hands-on subjects, as the university is a technical-based university which means that most of the subjects require the undergraduates to display their practical understanding of the subjects learned, hence the breakdown of theory and practical assessment is usually around 40/60. Thus, instead of sitting for theoretical tests and exams, most times, the students need to submit assignments, perform experiments and execute projects for their assessment for every semester. Hence, it requires students to pour a lot of efforts and time into completing their assignment rather than cramming all-nighters preparing for tests and final exams. Students who fail to adapt to this system quickly, or dilly-dally in completing their assignments would suffer by getting poor results.

The rise in the number of student enrolment at UniKL MICET also saw a rise in the number of students performing poorly in their studies. The past five years saw the percentage of students performing poorly hover around 2-4%. However, the past year somehow sees the percentage spiking to above 5%, which is above the university's normal average. In the January 2015 semester, the number of students classified as probationary students was 128, which is 5.2% of the UniKL MICET population. This alarmed the university's board, as it was the first time it was more than 5%. Hence, it was important that the students were given counsel and guidance in order to assist them to cope with their students to ensure that their studies could improve in the coming semesters. Apart from that, it is also important that the factors of the students' poor performance are identified to ensure that the problems could be addressed.

This study aims to identify the main factors that influence the students' results, so that the management could come up with prevention methods to help the students overcome the problems, and hopefully, improve the students' academic performance.

FACTORS AFFECTING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Students from all levels who are equipped with excellent study skills will definitely perform well in their studies (Gettiner & Seibert, 2002). These good students are "directors" of their personal schedules, know what to retain and which information matters most (ibid). They are inspired to exert their efforts and concentrate on their studies in order to achieve academic success (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). It shows that students need the proper direction and motivation to perform well in their studies.

There are a number of factors that cause students in higher learning institutions to perform poorly in their studies. The respondents in Crede & Kuncel's (2008) study claim that their major problems are learning patterns, attitude, poor study skills and lack of encouragement. Students' stance towards a subject, interest, time, perception of parental support, teachers' influence and socio-economic status also play a role in determining their academic results (Alfan & Othman, 2005). Thus, the factors need to be identified to ensure that the students' problems are identified and properly tackled so that they will be able to identify their weaknesses and overcome them in order to turn their results around.

Time management is another important determinant that could affect students' results (Britton & Tesser, 1991) as if students spend their time unwisely, they might not have enough time to focus on their studies. In another study, it was deemed that efficient time management greatly contribute to good academic performance (Campbell et al, 1992). Bad time management especially when time is not appropriately delegated for assignments, last-minute studying for test and exams, and not meeting deadlines are listed as the cause of stress and non-performance in studies (McCann et al, 2012). Other studies also claim that there is a strong correlation between time management and academic performance (Macan, et al 1990; Britton & Tesser, 1991). It is no doubt then that improper time management could lead to negative consequences to one's academic achievement.

There were incidents when students who did not do well in their studies did not receive assistance and advice from their educators or counsellors (Denison et al, 2006). Apart from that, at times, poor performing students often receive negative feedback instead of getting the help they need (Cleland et al, 2005). However, past

research show that by running programs that help students improve their personal and social skills (Greenberg et al, 2003), study skills (Lipsky & Ender, 1990), and learning strategies (Dignath et al, 2008) have definitely boosted the poor performers' results. Thus, it is important that academic institutions step in with intervention programs to aid the students enhance their study and personal skills that play a part in determining their academic performance.

METHODOLOGY

The data for the students' academic performance was obtained from UniKL MICET's Academic and Student Services department, where a list of the students who performed poorly was provided. Then, information on the possible factors that influenced the students' academic performance was gathered through the distribution of a set of questionnaire. The variables for the questionnaire was developed based on findings of earlier studies that indicate that study skills and personal habits, especially the traits related to time management in order to identify the relevance to their academic performance. The set was distributed to 80 (63% of population) poor-performing undergraduates in UniKL MICET through their academic advisors. 74 respondents, or 92.5% returned the sets. The data was analysed using the percentage, with the aim of analysing them further using the SPSS to see the correlation between the factors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results for the studies are shown the two following tables, divided into sets on study skills and personal skills.

Study skills

TABLE I: STUDY SKILLS

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
I always prepare for my classes		20.3%	75.7%	4%	
I always pay attention during lessons.		13.5%	75.7%	10.8%	
I study the lessons I missed if I was absent		33.8%	56.8%	6.8%	2.8%
I study and prepare well for my tests and quizzes		4%	64.9%	31.1%	
I am able to take notes well		12.5%	87.5%		

The table above shows the respondents' study skills. Overall, it shows that for most questions, respondents chose 'Sometimes' as the preferred indicator. When asked whether they *always prepared for classes* or not, only 4% of respondents chose *Often*, 75.7% chose *Sometimes*, while 20.3% chose *Rarely*. However, no respondent chose *Always* or *Never*. This is quite a worrying trend as it shows that most of the poor performers did not prepare ahead before their lessons, as only 4% indicated that they often did it.

Then, when asked whether they *always paid attention during lessons*, the result is almost similar, with no respondent choosing *Never* or *Always*, while only 10.8% chose *Often*, 75.7% chose *Sometimes* and 13.5% chose *Rarely*. Hence, it shows that most times, about three-quarters of the respondents chose *Sometimes* which infers that they did not concentrate on their lessons half of the time. This could be one of the reasons why did not fare well in their studies.

As for *studying for missing lessons*, 33.8% of the respondents claimed they *Rarely* did it, which speaks volumes on their attitude towards their studies. Only 2.8%, or 2 respondents claimed they *Always* did, and only 6.8% chose *Often*.

In terms of *preparing for tests and quizzes*, 31.1% claims that they *Often* prepared well, while more than half (56.8%) chose *Sometimes*. The result indicates that about 90% of the poor academic achievers did not prepare well for their tests and quizzes, which is indeed a worrying trend.

The last variable shows that none of the respondents chose *Always* and *Often*, with 87.5% claiming that they were capable of *taking good notes* *Sometimes*, and 12.55% choosing *Rarely*. This is indeed something that needs to be overcome, as study skills is definitely important for students to perform well in their studies.

The findings appear consistent with the studies by Alfian & Othman (2005) where the respondents' main problems include learning patterns, attitude and poor study skills; and McCann et al (2012) which found that among others, students' approach towards a subject, interest and time play a role in determining their academic results.

If students are equipped with excellent study skills, they will indeed do well in their studies (Gettiner & Seibert, 2002). If properly encouraged to apply their efforts and pay attention in their studies, poor performers had shown that they too could succeed in their studies (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Therefore, it is indeed important for UniKL MICET to identify special programs that could assist the poor performers improve their study skills to ensure that they will be able to cope with the demands of their engineering technology programs.

Personal skills

TABLE 2: PERSONAL SKILLS

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
I attend all my classes regularly.	2.7%	8.1%	48.6%	40.6%	
I get at least six hours of sleep every night	10.8%	24.3%	33.8%	18.6%	12.5%
I sleep early (by 12a.m.) every night	12.5%	20.3%	24.3%	29.7%	13.2%
I have my own study schedules every semester	4%	12%	62.5%	21.5%	
I spend my free time doing assignments or revising my lessons		24.3%	51.4%	24.3%	

Table 2 above demonstrates the responses received from the students on variables on *Study skills*. The findings show that none of the respondents *attended all the classes* regularly (0% for *Always*), while 10.9% chose *Never* and *Rarely*. The result indicates that the attendance rate for the students is not satisfactory, which could be a contributing factor to their poor academic performance.

In terms of sleeping habits, only about 30% of the respondents claimed that they *had at least six hours of sleep*. There were about eight (10.8%) respondents who claimed that they *Never* get six hours of sleep at night. Then, almost similar number of respondents (9 / 12.5%) admitted that they *never slept earlier than 12.00 am every night*. Even though 13.2% *Always* slept earlier than midnight, but about 20.3% said they *rarely* did and 24.3% only did it from time to time. Hence, it shows that the sleeping habits of the respondents are not healthy, and this could also be one factor that affect their academic competence.

The respondents were also found to not having *proper study schedules*, as only 21.5% claim they often had one. 4% *Never* had any, while 12% said *Rarely* and about 3/5 (62.5%) chose *Sometimes*. Having proper time schedules is also important as it could help one plan properly to keep up with meeting deadlines and study accordingly (Longman & Atkins, 2004).

Finally, when queried on whether they spent their free time on assignments and revisions, 24.3% said they did it regularly (24.3%), while 51.4% claimed they did it *Regularly* while 24.3% *Rarely* did. This findings infer that the most of the students did not spend enough time on their assignments and studying, which must have impacted their results in the long run.

The findings illustrate that the students did not manage their time wisely, and they need to improve a lot if they wish to perform better in their studies (Britton & Tesser, 1991; Campbell & Svenson, 1992). Not spending enough time on assignments and preparing for tests and exams will also affect academic competence, as described in studies by Macan, et al (1990); Britton & Tesser, (1991). Hence, intervention programmes should be organized by UniKL MICET to guide the students manage their time better as the findings show that the poor academic performers' time management is indeed in need of improvement.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that there is need for intervention to assist the poor performance improve their study skills and personal habits especially in the aspects of note-taking, paying attention, preparing for lessons, attending classes, sleeping patterns and managing schedules. It is hoped that the identification of the factors would help in developing suitable programmes that can assist the poor academic achievers to improve their results in the future.

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