

Coping Strategies on Academic Performance among Undergraduate Students in Malaysia

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Abstract—The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of coping strategies among undergraduate students in Malaysia. This study used the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies (Sullivan, 2010), which was translated into Malay language, it contained 56 statements namely Approach Coping Strategy, Avoidance Coping Strategy, and Social Support Coping Strategy. The respondents consisted of 400 students, there were randomly selected from 13 different schools at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The Effectiveness of Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies (Malaysia version) was tested for reliability coefficients (Cronbach Alpha) as follows: Approach Coping Strategy (0.96), Avoidance Coping Strategy (0.98) and Social Support Coping Strategy (0.93). The finding showed that 83.3% of the respondents agreed that Approach Coping Strategy helped them to cope with academic performance problems. Furthermore, 82.2% of students agreed for Social Support Coping Strategy helped them to cope with academic performance problems and 69.8% of students agreed with the Avoidance Coping Strategy helped them to cope with academic performance problems.

Keywords—Academic Coping Strategies; Academic Performance; Coping Strategies; Malaysian Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Students.

Abbreviations—Institution of Higher Learning (IHL); Kerangka Kelayakan Malaysia (KKM); Malaysia, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE); Malaysia, Private Institutions of Higher Education (PvIHE); Malaysia, Public Institutions of Higher Education (PIHE); The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA); The Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF); Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

I. INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia was established in March 2004 with the following core thrusts: to set up a strategic and systematic plan for higher education; to reinforce the management of higher education in the country; to increase the capacity, access, and participation levels in higher education; to raise the quality of higher education in the country comparable to international standards; and to internationalize higher education in the country. The Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), under the Ministry of Higher Education, administers the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF or Kerangka Kelayakan Malaysia, KKM), designed to be a unified system of qualifications offered on a national basis by all educational and training institutions which include colleges, universities, vocational institutions, professional organizations, and other higher educational institutions in the public and private sectors as well as workplace training and lifelong learning experiences [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 2010/2011].

Undergraduate students in Malaysia are the students, aged between from 17 and 23 years old [Malaysia, Ministry

of Higher Education, 2013B]. At present, the number of undergraduate students enrolment in higher institutions increased from 683,353 in 2008 to 758,139 in 2009 [UNESCO, 2010/2012, Bangkok Asia and Pacific Region Bureau for Education, 2012]. In recent years, in Malaysia, there has been a significant increase in higher education opportunities supported by 20 public universities comprising 5 research universities, 4 comprehensive universities, and 11 focussed universities [Malaysia Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), Public Institutions of Higher Education, PIHE, 2013A) and 35 private universities (Malaysia, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)), Private Institutions of Higher Education, PvIHE, 2013].

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Jobstreet.com.my (2013) did a survey in November 2011 on the top problems faced by employers in hiring fresh graduates (Figure 1). The participants were 571 human resource personnel and 1,830 fresh graduates. The results from the survey showed that 56% of fresh graduates had poor command of English language and 52% of them had poor communication skills [Jobstreet.com, 2013]. The survey from

jobstreet.com (2013) shows the top reasons why fresh graduates were not hired [2011 survey, the survey conducted by Jobstreet.com in 2013].

Top Reasons Why Fresh Graduates Were Not Hired (2011 Survey)		
No.	Employers' Opinion*	Fresh Graduate's Opinion**
1	Asking for unrealistic salary/Benefits (64%)	Stiff competition (32%)
2	Poor character, attitude or Personality (60%)	Lacking of certain required skills (31%)
3	Poor command of English Language (56%)	Poor command of English language (23%)
4	Poor communication skills (52%)	Poor communication skills (22%)
5	Choosy about the job or Company (38%)	Do not know Mandarin/Tamil (19%)

Source: Jobstreet.com.my (2013)

Figure 1: Survey Conducted by Jobstreet.com.my

*571 human resource personnel participated (October 2011)

**1,830 fresh graduate participated (November 2011)

In addition, communication skill is considered to be one of the important skills that needed to be developed by undergraduate students especially to find opportunities in government and commercial sectors. Communication apprehension can be a problem for several people, whenever anxiety and fear affect a person's ability to communicate well such as in meetings, in public speaking, and in interpersonal and group discussions. These feelings will engage their intention and attitude to get into some communication situations whether encouraging or discouraging them to communicate. According to previous evidence from the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, Malaysia, Ministry of Higher Education forecasted that more than 50% of fresh graduates are deemed to be unsatisfactory in English communication skills. To summarise the discussion, some Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) in Malaysia failed to recognize their shortcomings and their graduate employability rates that remained poor or unimproved [Malaysia, Ministry of Higher Education, 2012].

Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia (MOHE) said that the current employment in Malaysia requires the graduates to be more workplace competent. Thus, they need to have the necessary soft skills. Nowadays, soft skills are considered to be important in developing the career of graduates in the future. Besides the technical skills that they need to have, each of individual soft skills should be considered as important skills for employability. Teamwork skills such as coordination, decision making, leadership, interpersonal skills, adaptability and communication, are needed to be recommended to the educators, lecturers, and university. Those involved in the education sectors should implement several academic coping strategies and teaching styles to improve undergraduate students so that they will be well equipped and competent with knowledge, academic coping strategies and soft skills [Ilias et al., 2012].

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of academic coping strategies on academic

performance among Malaysian undergraduate students. Specifically, the objectives of the study are as follows:

- To examine the coping strategies practiced by Malaysian undergraduate students who challenges faced academic performance problems.
- To identify the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study that examines the coping strategies and their effectiveness among Malaysian undergraduate students. Hence, Combs & Onwuegbuzie (2012) suggested that a quantitative study is well suited to "answering questions of who, where, how many, how much, and what is the relationship between specific variables". However, Combs & Onwuegbuzie also commented that quantitative research studies typically yield data that do not explain the reasons underlying prevalence rates, relationships, or differences that have been identified by researchers.

V. SAMPLES

The population for this study were undergraduate students from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) who were randomly selected (Table 1). From the first year students, 80 (20.0%) were males and 80 (20.0%) were females. Meanwhile, the second year students consisted of 60 (15.0%) males and 60 (15.0%) females and from third year students 60 (15.0%) were males and 60 (15.0%) were females.

Table 1: Number of Samples

Year Level	Undergraduate Students in Malaysia (N = 400)	
	Male	Female
1st	80 (20.0%)	80 (20.0%)
2nd	60 (15.0%)	60 (15.0%)
3rd	60 (15.0%)	60 (15.0%)

VI. THE INSTRUMENT

The original version of the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies [Sullivan, 2010] was translated into Bahasa Malaysia, the Malay language and then used in this study. The instrument consisted of two parts, the background information and the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies. The Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies (Bahasa Malaysia version) consists of 56 statements. The Approach Factor was measured using 23 statements, the Avoidance Factor was measured by 19 statements, and the Social Support Factor was measured by 14 statements.

6.1. Validity

To ensure the content validity of these statements of the Academic Coping Strategies Questionnaire (Adapted from Sullivan, 2010) was sent to two lecturers at USM. They were approached to give feedback. Their recommendations were used to modify the content of the questionnaire. Four hundred

Malaysian undergraduate students from USM participated in this study. The original version of the Academic Coping Strategies on Academic Performance among Undergraduate Students Questionnaire was written in English. Prior to data collection, the undergraduate students were given consent forms explaining the purpose and confidentiality of the study. Four hundred Malaysian undergraduate students who agreed to participate were asked to complete the questionnaires. After the questionnaires were completed and returned by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) undergraduate students, the validity of the content could be tested.

6.2. Reliability

To test the reliability of the instruments (the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies on Academic Performance among Undergraduate Students Questionnaire, Adapted from Sullivan, 2010), the researchers were randomly selected 400 undergraduate students from 13 different schools (Physic, HBP, Management, Mathematics, Computer Science, Education, Chemistry, Social Science, Pharmacy, Biology Science, Technology Industry, Communication, and Humanity) at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), who have been randomly chosen as respondents. The instruments used were the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies which was translated into Malaysia language; it contained 56 statements and the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies which was translated into Bahasa Malaysia language. As a result of the translated Bahasa Malaysia version, a reliability coefficient (Cronbach Alpha) for using academic coping strategies was Approach Coping Strategy (0.96), Avoidance Coping Strategy (0.98), and Social Support Coping Strategy (0.93) (Table 2).

Table 2: The Reliability Coefficients (Cronbach Alpha) on the Effectiveness of the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies on Academic Performance in Malaysia (N = 400)

Scale	No of Statements	Cronbach Alpha
Approach	23	0.96
Avoidance	19	0.98
Social Support	14	0.93

Notes: Adapted and Revised from the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies by Sullivan (2010) (N=400)

Table 3: 13 Items of Academic Coping Strategies practiced by More than 85% of the 400 Malaysian Undergraduate Students who Challenges Faced Academic Performance

No	Factor	Factor	Yes	%
1	Approach	Trying to gain control over the problem	361	90.3
	Social Support	Talking to a friend from outside school, or family member, for specific advice on how to solve the problem	361	90.3
3	Approach	Trying to learn from your mistakes	359	89.8
4	Approach	Trying to learn something from the experience	357	89.3
5	Social Support	Talking to another student for specific advice on how to solve the problem	353	88.2
6	Approach	Setting specific goals for solving the problem	352	88.0
	Approach	Brainstorming a variety of possible solutions to the problem more about the problem	352	88.0
8	Approach	Trying to stay calm	349	87.3
9	Social Support	Talking to another student for emotional Support	348	87.0
10	Approach	Trying to find out what you did wrong	345	86.3
11	Social Support	Spending time with someone you care about	341	85.3
	Approach	Being persistent in trying to solve or fix the problem	341	85.3
13	Approach	Adjusting your priorities	340	85.0

VII. FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

7.1. Research Question 1: What are the academic coping strategies practiced by Malaysian undergraduate students who challenges facing academic performance problems?

Table 3 shows the 13 items of academic coping strategies practiced by more than 85% of 400 Malaysian undergraduate students who were facing academic performance problems according to three factors of academic coping strategies on academic performance problems in the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies [Sullivan, 2010] in Malaysian questionnaire. To address the Research Question 1, descriptive statistics such as numbers and percentage were employed.

7.1.1. Approach Coping Strategy

A total of 361 (90.3%) Malaysian undergraduate students expressed that they tried to gain control over the problem, 359 (89.3%) students tried to learn from your mistakes, 357 (89.3%) students tried to learn something from the experience, 352 (88.0%) students brainstormed a variety of possible solutions to the problem, 352 (88.0%) students set specific goals for solving the problem, 349 (87.3%) students tried to stay calm, 345 (86.3%) students tried to find out what you did wrong, 341 (85.3%) students were persistent in trying to solve or fix the problem, and 340 (85.0%) students adjusted their priorities (Table 3).

7.1.2. Social Support Coping Strategy

A total of 361 (90.3%) Malaysian undergraduate students talked to a friend from outside school, or family member, for specific advice on how to solve the problem, 353 (88.2%) students talked to another student for specific advice on how to solve the problem, 348 (87.0%) students talked to another student for emotional support, and 341 (85.3%) students spent time with someone that they cared about (Table 3).

7.2. Research Question 2: *Is there any significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of the three scales of academic coping strategies in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems?*

To address this research question, Hypotheses 1 to 3 provided the answer to Research Question 2.

7.2.1. Hypothesis 1 (H01): *There is no significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of approach coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems.*

The chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there is a significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of approach coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems at a significance level $p < .01$. The result shows that there was a significant difference of opinion of students ($\chi^2 = 277.29$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$) about the effectiveness of approach coping strategy in helping them to cope with academic performance problems (Table 4). Based on the chi-square result this hypothesis was rejected.

In analysis the mean of the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of approach coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance, the result showed that the mean for approach coping strategy on academic performance was 1.33 (Table 4).

7.2.2. Hypothesis 2 (H02): *There is no significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of avoidance coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems.*

The chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there is a significant difference in the opinions of the students about the effectiveness of avoidance coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems at a significance level $p < .01$. The result shows that there was a significant difference in the opinions of the students ($\chi^2 = 188.20$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$) about the effectiveness of avoidance coping strategy in helping them to cope with academic performance problems (Table 4). Based on the chi-square result this hypothesis was rejected.

In analysis the mean of the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of avoidance coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance, the result showed that the mean for avoidance coping strategy on academic performance was 1.18 (Table 4).

7.2.3. Hypothesis 3 (H03): *There is no significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of social support coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems.*

The chi-square analysis was used to determine whether there is a significant difference in the opinion of the students about the effectiveness of social support coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance problems at a significance level $p < .01$. The result shows that there was a significant difference of opinion of students ($\chi^2 = 274.25$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$) about the effectiveness of social support coping strategy in helping them to cope with academic performance problems (Table 4). Based on the chi-square result this hypothesis was rejected.

In analysis the mean of the opinion of the student about the effectiveness of social support coping strategy in helping Malaysian undergraduate students to cope with their academic performance, the result showed that the mean for social coping strategy on academic performance was 1.32 (Table 4).

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis on the Difference Opinions of the Students about the Effectiveness of the Three Scales of Academic Coping Strategies in Helping Malaysian Undergraduate Students to Cope with their Academic Performance (N = 400)

Academic Coping Strategy	Yes (N = 400)		N = 400	(N = 400)	df	p
	N	%	Mean			
Approach	333	83.3	1.33	277.29	1	0
Avoidance	279	69.8	1.18	188.20	1	0
Social Support	329	82.2	1.32	274.54	1	0

The findings imply that there is a strong support that academic coping strategies helped Malaysian undergraduate students to perform better in their academic performance. Overall, Malaysian undergraduate students chose nine items of the approach coping strategy from the 13 items of academic coping strategies (Table 3), these strategies have been practiced by more than 85% of 400 Malaysian undergraduate students facing academic performance problems. These items were arranged according to the three factors of academic coping strategies on academic performance problems. Besides, the results showed that there was not much difference between the three strategies practiced by the undergraduates in the approach coping strategy (83.3%); social support coping strategy (82.2%); avoidance coping strategy (69.8%)(Table 4). However, the approach strategy was popular among them. It proves that Malaysian undergraduates prefer to solve their problems in academic performance by using approach coping strategy and social support coping strategy.

To summarise, the analysis on the effectiveness of the Three Scale of Academic Coping Strategies shows that Malaysian undergraduate students used approach coping strategy more frequency when they face with academic problems. This study found that 333 (83.3%) Malaysian undergraduate students used the approach coping strategy most frequently when they are faced with academic performance problems (Table 4). The finding partially confirmed by several other researches, which revealed that approach coping strategy helped undergraduate students to improve their academic performance by creating specific plan of action for solving the problem [Ahmad et al., 2011]; using active coping, positive reframing, and planning for solving

the problem [Sami et al., 2011]; hoping for miracle would happen or thinking of something good that will come from the problem [Sawang et al., 2010]; adjusting students' priorities and managing time and positive thinking [Redhwan et al., 2009].

In addition, the results in this study showed that 329 (82.2%) Malaysian undergraduate students prefer social support coping strategy when they are faced with academic performance problems (Table 4). Social support coping strategy affects academic performance among undergraduate students. These findings received support from previous studies such by Gloria & Castellanos (2012), which indicated that undergraduate students sought help from family members. This in turn influences the motivation of undergraduate students to pursue higher academic education and affects the academic progress of higher achievers. Moreover, social support coping strategy from friends, and family members, such as guidance feedback, intimacy, positive social interactions and tangible assistance (money or materials) are likely to be able to cope with academic performance problems effectively [Salami, 2011].

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the academic performance among Malaysian undergraduate students, the study suggests the following recommendations.

8.1. Ministry of Education

Ministry of Education should play a big role in helping the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia to produce better and high academic achievers among the Malaysian undergraduates. As a government body with full authority, the Ministry should be able to share their mission and vision with all the professionals in education, in psychology, and in counselling in order to serve better benefits to the undergraduate students.

8.2. The University Itself

The university itself should consider and introduce more quality and relevance programmes involved undergraduate students in all university in Malaysia. This is to make sure that all university would be able to produce the best and quality future leaders.

8.3. Parents

Parents' direct involvement in their children's curriculum and co-curriculum would be more realistic if both parties, the parents and the university play their roles. This study suggests that the parents should also receive training in academic coping strategies with the particular aim to foster positive attitudes, beliefs and actions, not only among themselves but also between them and their children.

8.4. Academic Advisors/Psychologists/Counselors/Mentors

Academic advisors/Psychologists/Counselors/Mentors at the university should introduce academic development programmes which could help their students of low achievers to excel.

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