



Perceptions of New Students' Coping Skills During Their First Year in the University: A Case Study

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1. Introduction

The transition from school/college to higher education is the most stressful period for the first year university students. They will experience many unexpected circumstances adjusting to the new environment. Some examples of these unexpected circumstances include coping with different levels and workload such as assignments, varied teaching methods, and working with other students and lecturers. The learning environment needs to be conducive for effective learning to take place. Lowe and Cook [1] indicated that the relationships between students and the learning environment could influence and enhance the quality and affect students' learning and ultimately their achievements within higher education. Such university environment provides students to accept personal responsibility for both academic and social aspects [2]. According to Biggs [3], learning approaches are dynamic and are influenced by the learning environment and an array of personal factors. The style of teaching in the university plays an important role for successful learning. However, many lecturers remained in their conventional teaching strategies and approaches [1]. Thus, lecturers need to encourage deep approaches to learning, rather than surface approaches, among students (Beattie et al., 1997 in [4]).

Many students with little preparation, having little idea of what to expect and little understanding of how the university environment can affect their lives suffer the inability to make the necessary academic, social and personal adjustments to life at universities [5]. According to Harris & Palmer [6], the first year students will be affected by a lack of experience in carrying out intellectual tasks such as analysis and critical evaluation. The quality of learning can be improved and enhanced through guidance and feedback of their tasks. Success is also dependent on the individual attributes of new students [5]. Strong and good individual attributes of new students may lead to the success as a first year students in higher education.

2. Methodology

The main purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of first year's students studying at a local university in Malaysia. A qualitative case study approach was implemented to gather data from a purposeful sample of 40 first years' students studying at the faculties of Education and Social Sciences. Data collection tools utilized in this study was individual interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews (written journals in the form of diary entries by individual students). Data was coded and transcribed. Constant comparison approach was used to code the data and triangulation of the different data sources was employed to discover commonalities and differences and the consistencies of the findings. In addition to this, triangulation of different types of data sources from individual interviews, focus group discussions and document reviews were also employed to further determined the trustworthiness of the data.

3. Findings and Discussions

The overall experienced by the first year students in this study was varied but generally positive. Majority of the students extended the range of their learning strategies and skills, collaborative group learning, parental involvement, lecturers' involvement and peer coaching. The students also gained in development of insights into their own ability; their ability to plan in discussions; and their use of resources during their first year in the university. They also gained in self-awareness; communication skills, use of positive reinforcement; relationship building communication skills, interpersonal skills; reflective abilities, and developing skills in approaching and working with senior students and lecturers. It should be emphasized here, however, that positive experiences of the students mostly occurred sometime in the middle of their first year in the university. Lecturers' guidance and advice on knowledge and organization of content and availability of resources, identifying individual learning styles, some form of mentoring and coaching by lecturers, senior students, peers and parental involvement, interpersonal communication were major contributors to manage their coping skills during the first year.

Majority of the students preferred tutorials rather than mass lectures. They indicated they learned better in a small group, interact with students and lecturers, and establish effective rapport and communication. Where discussions with groups were conducted, they were characterized by positive rapport and constructive outcomes for most of the students. They reported positive developments in their learning process skills, increased self-awareness, and a sense of renewal and revaluing of their own learning. The students also agreed that that their abilities to self-reflect and to



think critically and creatively were heightened by their use of reflective practices during discussions which were employed by some of the lecturers.

More than half of the students agreed that teaching strategies used by lecturers were more centred on using deep learning approaches. The students preferred this teaching approach as they are able to construct previous knowledge with current learning by thinking creatively and critically. However, some students found this approach difficult as they were used to surface learning strategies. For some of them, this forced them to learn to develop their own learning styles to cope with this teaching approach. Towards the end of the first semester, majority of the students believe that they managed to build their learning styles to become self-regulated learners.

Provision of resources varied, with some students being provided with adequate resources such as lecture notes, books by their lecturers, majority of the students having to rely on their own initiative or the assistance of senior students and peers in this area. Through this collaboration, the students too seem to have gained in their ability to use resources as aids to build their knowledge and understanding of the respective courses they have undertaken during their first year. These also assisted them to become more aware and familiar with the university culture and policies. The students agreed that they became self-reliant and more autonomous particularly later at the end of the first year. However, some students faced problems using reference books in English. They think that they needed more time to read and understand sources written in English. For some of them, this has taken up much of their time in translation.

The majority of the students agreed that completing assignments was a challenge and difficult to cope at the initial period. They reported that the requirements to meet different needs, demands, quality, vague instructions, and expectations caused uncertainty, concerns, confusions, frustrations and stress to meet these demands. Subsequently, some students agreed that they were over burdened with too many assignments which needed to be turned in almost at the same time. Managing time efficiently was found to be a major factor. Some students found working in groups to complete their assignments posed a challenge for them as some students were not keen to work collaboratively.

The students in general agreed that one of the ways to cope during their first year is to adapt by learning or changing new learning styles to facilitate their own learning process. Some of the students admitted they studied at the last minute especially for quizzes and examinations. Majority agreed that they did not have a consistent studying pattern at the initial stage. However, as they proceeded to learn, they figured out their own respective pattern to study. Both learning and emotional support occurred simultaneously throughout the first year for the students. Some of the students agreed that developing relationship and communication should be emphasized during the first year. Incorporating interpersonal communication skills was essential to extend and sustain effective learning environment in the campus. The building of effective relationships also depended greatly on the interpersonal skills of the students. The most successful relationships were collegial, collaborative, and democratic. Where lecturers, peers, parents, siblings brought warmth, diplomacy, sensitivity and positive approaches and reinforcement, the relationship flourished. This was particularly so when complemented by positive attitudes, receptiveness to advice, adaptability, and flexibility in the students. For most of the students, adjustment period only became effective in the middle of their first year. Regular, ongoing and continuous social and emotional support is vital for the first year students. The availability of lecturer, friends, peers, siblings and parents to provide social and emotional support particularly in communication, discussions about their courses, doing assignments, familiarizations of the university, resources was a major factor in the providing this support.

4. Implications and Conclusions

Underpinning the learning support, teaching strategies which include deep and surface learning approaches, availability of resources, assignment, and learning styles emerged as some of areas which the first year students found to impact on their coping skills to adapt to the university environment during their first year. The social emotional support includes support provided by lecturers, peers, parents, and siblings. Generally, the students agreed that they also became more matured especially in developing positive personal attitudes to adjust to the campus environment. These also include increased skills in establishing relationships by using interpersonal communicative skills to interact within the environment.

These factors will provide insights for first years' students to anticipate of how to cope by using different skills, experiences, and attitudes during the initial first year in the university. The students generally indicated that both learning support and social emotional support were needed more in the initial period. All these factors were important contributing factors in creating environments that were conducive, for secure and more relaxed effective learning to take place. Lecturers, parents, and peers involvement will enhance the affective domain of student learning. An effective student mentoring program would be a good suggestion to fulfill the students' affective and cognitive needs.



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