Academic Failures Among Accounting Students: Lifting The Veil

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Abstract
This study reveals issues regarding academic failures among accounting students. Employing a qualitative approach, this paper draws on data from open ended questionnaire surveys distributed to those students who failed one of the intermediate accounting courses offered at undergraduate level. A total of 38 undergraduate students form a sample for this study. Key findings centre on issues of the students' opinion regarding the course, their preferred learning style, reasons for failures as well as their suggestions to improve their academic performance. The research findings contribute new dimensions in understanding the reasons behind a high failure rate for the intermediate accounting course. These findings are particularly beneficial to lecturers in planning their teaching methods so as to reduce the percentage of academic failure rate among accounting graduates.

Keywords: Accounting students, academic performance, failure rate, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

A report on the strengthening of the accountancy profession in Malaysia has been gazetted recently (Committee, 2014). One of the important notes in the report is to identify problems faced by future accountants in acquiring accounting knowledge at a higher level of their studies. Evaluate students' academic performance is one of the identification methods to be applied (Sargent, Borthick, & Lederberg, 2011). A high failure rate is a signal to the existence of teaching or learning problems, yet, this signal is given less attention (Young & Aoun, 2008).

According to Young & Aun (2008, p.60), high failure rates provides economic and social consequences for both the failing students and the academic institutions. For example, the high failure rates prevents students from continuing their studies and thus, affects the short term viability of the institutions (Harman, 2004). Therefore, analyzing and synthesizing reasons behind such situation could be a possible solution towards strengthening the accountancy profession (Sargent et al., 2011).

In response to this issue, this paper is designed to achieve the following three objectives: 1) to extract general opinion about an intermediate accounting course from those students who have failed the course, 2) to determine the students' preferred learning style, 3) to reveal possible reasons for their failures, and 3) to highlight suggestions on improving their academic performance based on their own perspectives. The intermediate accounting course is one of the financial accounting courses designed for an undergraduate accounting program in one of the public university in Malaysia. Students are required to sit for this course in the second semester of the programme. Thus far, this course has shown an alarming trend of having a high failure rate. Wooten (1996) reveal a few reasons for high
failure rates such as other curricular activities, intimidating classroom environments, low aptitude and low motivation. It is hope that, findings of this study would help to shed lights regarding the underlying reasons of having a high failure rate for the intermediate accounting course. The unique contribution of this paper is that, the issue of a high failure rate is explored based on students personal experience of failing this course. Furthermore, a qualitative approach using open ended survey method is employed to collect data.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The following section provides a brief review of literature. The research methodology employed is then described. Next, the results of this study are presented and discussed. Finally, future research directions conclude the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, producing a high quality graduates has received much attentions from both the national and international audiences. The ever increasing demand by the stakeholders urged the universities to ensure that the graduates produce met with the expectation of the stakeholders. As such, the demands on higher education institutions in preparing qualified accounting graduates become increasingly important (Young and Aoun, 2008).

Consequently, the issue of academic success becomes prominent to students, educators and as well as higher educational institutions. The academic failure and retention rates has given implications in assessing performance of higher educational institution which are used as key performance indicator as establish university. In keeping abreast with the current scenario, prior research on improving the quality of graduates have investigated the factors determining the academic performance in accounting as well as factors contributing to students failing accounting courses from various counterparts.

Prior studies have explored the issues on students’ proficiency English, prior results in Mathematics and Accounting as well as other students’ learning success factors. For example, Du Plessis et al. (2005) conducted a study on several universities in South Africa to investigate the factors contributing to the passing rate of students in their first year taking accounting courses. They have looked at the possible effects of factors such as the students’ proficiency in English, student’s prior school performance in mathematics and accounting subjects, gender, motivation and personality type. However, their findings have reported varied results. Subsequently, Muller et al. (2007) extended the research work by Du Plessis et al. (2005) by profiling prospective and current students in choosing the right higher education institution. The results indicate that possible predictors of future academic success for first year accounting student validate the profiles of notably student’s prior school performance especially in mathematics and accounting subjects. This might significantly impact the policy on the university admission to accounting programs.

Furthermore, previous research provides an insight of how higher education institutions may assist in providing support and guidance to ensure the accounting students success rate. For example, few studies conducted in Hong Kong for a non-native English speaking and yet accounting courses were taught in English, found that strong mathematical aptitude perform significantly better in an accountancy degree program as the program demands strong quantitative and numerate skills (Gul & Fong, 1993; Wong & Chia, 1996). In addition, these two studies noted that English proficiency is significantly positively correlated with academic performance.

Recently, Sugahara and Boland (2014) investigated the students’ learning success factors at the Accounting Schools (AS) in Japan using a questionnaire-based survey instrument. The findings reported that students prefer to have experiential accounting learning in real workplace to aspire them to become professional accountants. In particular, this intrinsic goals represents by accounting knowledge requirement, thinking skills requirement, motivation and network development predominate over extrinsic goals such as passing the examination or finding a good job. The study conclude that the students that one day will become as professional accountants were not sufficiently aware of the contemporary importance of thinking or judgment skills, hence educators should integrate unstructured problem-based learning materials with their curriculum.
Likewise, in the western countries, studies have addressed the factors contributing to the examination performance. For example, Eskew and Faley (1988) successfully developed a model to explain student’s examination performance in the stage of the financial accounting course. The results from multiple regression explains 54 per cent of the variance of examination performance due to students’ aptitude and effort. However, high school and previous collegiate performance, as well as previous specific and related academic experience account for a significant portion of the variance in examination performance above that have been explained by aptitude and effort. While Gracia and Jenkins (2002) conducted a study in the United Kingdom and found that factors contributing to the students’ reflection on failures were due to reasoning the choice of study, the impact of the affect, the importance of the role of the tutor, the tutor expectation gap, levels of control and personal responsibility for learning patterns of participation.

Other issues like environmental influential and other factors determining the academic performance of students have been studied. For example, Principe (2005) examined the environmental influential to the academic success factors. In particular, the study investigate the academic performance on first accounting courses from two perspectives: internal classroom factors (i.e large number of students, familiarization of computer, overhead projector, one minute quiz) and external classroom factors (i.e. extra-curricular activities, family and working activities). The study was conducted on 1721 accounting students from both the public and private universities in Puerto Rico. The findings reported that public universities had a higher failure rates compare to private universities. Also, the findings found that students perceived internal classroom factors positively influenced academic performance in first accounting course. On the other hand, the external classroom factors were not statistically significant to explain the academic performance. Wald et al. (1994) revealed the roots of failures in the accounting course such as the lack of study, inability to apply material covered, the speed of coverage of material, and the issues with the instructors.

In Malaysia, little attention has been placed in studying the academic performance of accounting students. For example, Rasimah et al. (2008) examined ways to improve teaching and learning at the higher educational institutions in general. They found that age and learning styles play a major role in determining students’ academic performance. A study by Susilawati and Salwana (2011), reported that foundation in cost accounting (measured by prerequisite fulfillment and hours attending early accounting course classes) and overall level of academic ability (measured by Cumulative GPA) were the important determinants of success in accounting course.

Recently, Nik Zam et al. (2014) employed open-ended survey on 99 accounting students to identify the possible reasons for poor students’ performance from students’ perspective as well as from the teaching lecturers’ perspective. The findings indicate that various teaching approaches have been applied by accounting lecturers but the failure rate in intermediate level accounting course hardly reduced. The study revealed that the highest failure factors cited is limitation of time in which too many information that students need to remember worsen their performance. Another factors identified was difficulty in applying accountings standards. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the failure factors from the undergraduate accounting students’ perspectives is timely and warranted.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed to extract students’ perceptions regarding one of the intermediate financial accounting courses in one of the accounting undergraduate programs in Malaysia. So far, the intermediate accounting course continues to show an alarming trend of having a high failure rate. Accordingly, a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) by adopting thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed.

Based on students’ academic record, all 44 students who failed this course in September 2014 were identified and invited to participate in this study. This group of students was deemed appropriate to form a sample for this study because they were part of the failure rate statistics. A total of 38
responses was received, yielding a response rate of 86.4 per cent. It should be emphasised that for reasons of confidentiality, the students are identified only by using alphanumerical codes (i.e. E1 to E38) in this paper. The data collection process took about one day and was completed at the beginning of the semester December 2014 – Mac 2015. The data collected were analysed using NVivo 10, a software used to analyse qualitative data.

The open-ended survey questionnaire consists of two sections. Section 1 was designed to gain demographic background, such as gender and age of the respondents. In Section 2, respondents were required to answer a few open-ended questions with the aim to get insights of their perceptions about the intermediate accounting course. For instance, respondents were asked to explain their general opinion about the course and their preferred learning technique. Then, based on their experience taking the course, respondents were required to identify contributing factors to the high failure rate. Finally, respondents were allowed to provide suggestions to improve academic performance from their own perspectives as well as lecturers’ perspectives.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are four main objectives of this study: 1) to extract general opinion about an intermediate accounting course from those students who have failed the course, 2) to determine the students’ preferred learning style, 3) to reveal possible reasons for their failures, and 4) to highlight suggestions on improving their academic performance based on their own perspectives.

A total of 38 students formed a sample of this study representing a response rate of 86.4 per cent. Table 1 displays the demographic profile of the respondents. The majority of the respondents is 19 years old (73.3 per cent) and most of them are female (21.1 per cent). About 60 per cent of the respondents declared that an undergraduate accountancy program was their first choice during the application to the university.

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<th>Table 1: Demographics of Respondents</th>
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<td>Number of Respondents</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19 years</td>
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<td>Undergraduate Accountancy Program is my first choice</td>
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Diagram 1 illustrates respondents’ general opinion regarding the intermediate accounting course. Despite the fact that they have failed the course, surprisingly, almost half of the respondents (48.4%) indicate that the course is an easy course and 12.9 per cent of the respondents consider it as an interesting course. Only a small number of students (9.7%) consider the course as a difficult course to pass. Other respondents (9.7%) describe the intermediate accounting course as a course which introduces students to company accounts and has a moderate difficulty. However, 19.3 per cent of them believe that in order to pass, students need to revise this course consistently throughout the semester, as one respondent wrote:
“….is an easy subject, but students need to have extra effort and do revision continuously throughout the semester” (E3).

Another respondent confessed that:

“ If only I started my revision earlier, I think I can pass this course….. Frankly, it is quite an interesting course” (E14).

Diagram 1: General Opinion about the Intermediate Accounting Course

As for their preferred learning approaches, most of the respondents employ either an individual or a group learning approaches. Those who preferred to study this course individually, claimed that they are more comfortable employing this approach because they could plan their own revision time without having to consult others. As such, they believed that, this approach is the fastest and most efficient way to do revision:

“ I prefer to study alone, I can focus and no time wasted” (E1).
“ Individual study method….. because I feel more comfortable” (E4).
“ I like to revise this course alone as I need to memorize certain things”( E10).
“ Study alone could help me to concentrate... fastest way to do revision” (E5).

On the other hand, quite a number of respondents prefer a group study approach on the basis that they could discuss their problems with other colleagues. They can help each other and thus learning process becomes more interesting:

“ Study in a group is better…. I can ask questions to other students” (E28).
“ Group study helps me to understand the course..... We can share on how to solve tutorial questions” (E13).
“ I do my revision in the group.... My friends could explain difficult chapters to me” (E8).

When reflecting on their own failure to get through this course, the respondents cite a myriad of the underlying reasons (Diagram 2). Common rationales include poor time management, do not put full effort to study, overconfidence, lack of adequate revision, not focus in class and poor teaching methods:

“ I didn’t do enough revision” (E2).
“I think I am overconfidence... always think that FAR 160 is an easy course to pass” (E9).
“ I left things to the last minute... I just ran out of time to revise” (E31).
“ The lecturer teaches too fast... I could not cope with the teaching method” (E1).

Diagram 2: Reasons for Failure

Respondents provide a few suggestions to improve their academic performance (Diagram 3). The most prominent suggestions (54.8%) given by students is to do more exercises related to the course, including tutorial exercises given by lecturers. Most of them think that doing extra exercises could stimulate their self-confidence in solving exam questions which eventually help them feeling more mentally prepared during the exam. For instance, some of them wrote:

“Next semester, I will do my revision early..... I will be more prepared for the exam” (E20).
“I need to do lots of tutorial exercises.... will help to improve my understanding about the course” (E15).

Nearly 20 per cent believed that doing last minute revision is the major contribution to their failure. As such, starting an early revision could be the best way to improve their academic performance. Further, 16.1% of the respondents plan to have a frequent consultation with their lecturers in order to improve their grades for this course. Few other suggestions (9.7%) for academic improvements include focus more in class, attend all classes and make short notes for each chapter.

In summary, the above findings reflect that the main reason for the high failure rate for the intermediate accounting course was not due to the degree of difficulty of this course but more on students’ personal perception and study approach towards this course. Overconfidence could be the major underlying reason behind their failures because majority of them (48.4%) thinks that the intermediate accounting course is an easy course. Their overconfidence attitude towards this course appears to be linked to other reasons for their failures such as poor time management, do not put full effort to study, lack of adequate revision, not focus in class as well as blaming lecturers for poor teaching methods. There is some support for this within this data:

“I think ..(intermediate accounting course) is an easy subject... I didn’t do enough work” (E16).
“Actually the intermediate accounting course is an easy subject, but students’ need to revise frequently” (E32).

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Without even knowing it, their overconfidence attitude towards this course has successfully created a failure path for them. For instance, although findings indicate the existence of two common study approaches (group and individual) among the respondents, they seem not to have a clear reason of choosing the approach and a proper plan in employing their chosen approach. This raises the possibility that a wrong choice of study approaches could somehow adversely affects their academic performance. Some of their responses reflect this fact:

“Supposedly group study is better... but sometimes we tend to talk about other things” (E38).

“I study alone... I don’t know...probably not found the right group yet” (E25).

“I do my revision individually... but when I get bored I try to join my friends and study in group” (E11).

A possible explanatory factor regarding their overconfidence attitude towards the intermediate accounting course could be due to the fact that all of them have passed the earlier financial accounting paper without much problem. Perhaps they have the preconceive idea that they are going to have the same experience with course. In other words, they perceive that the course will be as easy as the earlier financial accounting paper which they have taken in the first semester. They failed to consider one important fact about this intermediate accounting course. Unlike the earlier financial accounting paper, almost all of the topics covered in this course were not included in the accounting syllabus in the secondary school. This course is the first paper which introduces and prepare students to a higher level of accounting knowledge. Topics such as issuance of shares and debentures, partnership, publish accounts and statement of cash flow could be considered as difficult topics for students because their previous experience and knowledge in accounting might not be able to help them much in passing this course. In short, students need to start from scratch to get through this course.

Another interesting fact worth to note is that some of the respondents perceive failure as a personal failing regardless of the reasons underlying their failure. This rationale for failure could in a long term
colour the attitude of the respondents towards their studies which could negatively affect their academic performance. In short, some of the respondents view failure as part of personal deficiency:

“This intermediate accounting course is an easy subject.... Nothing is wrong with the lecturer... it is just me” (E33).
"I fail because of my study method.... I didn’t do enough revision” (E26).
"I am a lazy student.... I just aim to pass this course so I didn’t put effort to study hard” (E36).
"I don’t understand and don’t ask questions in class... I am not a good student” (E6).

Finally, the respondents provide a list of suggestions in an attempt to improve their academic performance particularly to pass this course. These suggestions may only work if the lecturers are willing to co-operate with them. Reorganizing the teaching materials by providing and discussing more tutorial exercises in class could be a good way to help students. Identification of weak students at the very early stage and monitoring their work systematically throughout the semester, possibly could help to reduce the failure rate. Application of a variety of teaching techniques could further sustain students’ concentration in class. Finally, ability to play a role as a good motivator may serve to facilitate students in preparing themselves when faced with academic challenges.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides further understanding regarding reasons behind a high failure rate for the intermediate accounting course. Surprisingly, the findings of this study proved that the main reason for the high failure rate was not because of the difficulty of this course, but more on the overconfidence attitudes of students towards this course. This finding is a valuable input to the lecturers in planning their teaching methods. Lecturers should incorporate a motivational method in their teaching style as well as doing close monitoring of students’ work so that the students would know their performance at a very early stage when they start the course. Failure to inform students about their actual performance may somehow allow students to feel that they are doing fine with the course which could subsequently lead them to have the overconfidence attitudes.

The data collection method of this study was purely based on the open-ended survey. Perhaps, application of a mixed method research methodology in the future could help to provide a more rigorous finding. A comparative study among all campuses could also be a good research prospect. It would be interesting to find out as to whether all campuses have similar reasons behind a high failure rate of this course.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Accountancy, UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Kedah and the management of UniversitiTeknologi MARA (UiTM) Kedah for supporting this research. However, all the contents in this paper are of the authors’ responsibilities.

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