A Study of Students' Perceptions of the Factors Affecting Their Academic Performance: A Case Study at Bangkok University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to look into students' perceptions of the factors affecting their academic performance. To accomplish the purpose, a conceptual framework was developed and tested on a sample of 228 fourth year students majoring in English at the School of Humanities, Bangkok University. This framework included five categories of factors: including five categories of factors: (1) Study Skills, (2) Career and Major Issues, (3) Family and Social Adjustment, (4) Personal Issues and (5) Students' Perceptions of Lecturers. A survey questionnaire was used in gathering the data.

The results of this study shows that lack of study skills, difficult subjects, too heavy course load, pressure, stress, tension and anxiety are the noteworthy factors affecting their academic performance. Career issues, family and social adjustment, personal issues and perceptions of their lecturers do not have a strong impact in the completion of their academic tasks.

Data collected from this research would help lecturers and educators in creating visionary programs, better learning environment, including better ways of relating with students to ensure academic success.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Study Skills, Career and Personal Issues, Family and Social Adjustment, Perceptions of Lecturers

1. Rationale

The motto and mission statement of Bangkok University are "to help students acquire knowledge with virtue" and "to develop its students into graduates having outstanding academic and practical prowess.... and through creativity, vision and flexibility, students will be able to pursue their career confidently in this highly competitive and fast changing world" (Bangkok University International Bulletin, 2010-2011).

While this mission statement reflects the thought or perspective of administrators and educators of the university, little has been done to check how students learn and what factors actually affect their learning. Hence the purpose of this research is to gather students' own perceptions of factors that affect their academic performance.

Educators, philosophers and business leaders share very similar perspectives of education and academic tasks.

Educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey contends that good quality education ought to have both a "societal purpose and purpose for the individual student". He claims that educators are accountable for providing students with experiences that are imperative and enable the students to impart knowledge or skills to society (Dewey, 1997).

Greek philosopher Plato described education to aim at the following: (1) the pursuit of truth, (2) the development of the mind, and (3) the development of character. The role of the teacher is a "midwife of the mind", drawing out innate truths by asking students questions that provoke to think. He posits that education is holistic which includes facts, skills, physical discipline, and music and art (Kemerling, 2011).

Likewise, business leaders of big corporations describe the personality traits and characteristics of students who will be successful in the 21st century, namely: (1) able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information; (2) able to effectively communicate with others; (3) proficient in science, mathematics, computer/technical skills, foreign languages, as well as history, geography, and global awareness; (4) capable of collaboratively working in culturally diverse settings; (5) leaders who see projects through completion; (6) responsible decision makers who are self-motivated and active political participants; and (7) ethical individuals who are committed to their families, communities, and colleagues (Nidds and McGerald, 1996).

But what about the students—what are their perceptions of what they learn and how they learn? What factors actually affect their learning? It is important for educational institutions and educators to also hear what the students think about their learning. It is not enough to set the vision, motto and goals. It is also important to check whether students share all those and whether they have what it takes to achieve those.

The number of students majoring in English at the School of Humanities is growing every year. Former students say that majoring in English has equipped them for life, prepared them for several lines of work, trained them to become effective communicators and presenters, groomed them to be analytical and critical and built a strong foundation for their current careers. Many of them are now working and they are indeed doing well.

However, there are also a number of students who seem to struggle in their studies and some who even lack interest and motivation. They seem to simply trudge on without any vision or ambition. This is the group targeted in this research.

It is therefore essential and fundamental for the School of Humanities at Bangkok University to understand what students are thinking or going through which affect their learning. The educational institution may try to offer the best possible educational experience for these students to guarantee that they do not lose their competitive advantage. But what is the students' experience of learning—what factors influence, hamper or affect their learning?

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the perceptions of fourth-year students majoring in English at the School of Humanities of the factors affecting their academic performance. Academic performance, in this case, refers to the grade point average (GPA) resulting from the general level of grades in exams, homework, projects and class participation.

Academically successful students are more stable in their employment, less dependent on public assistance, less likely to engage in criminal activity and substance abuse, more active citizens and healthy (National Alliance of Business, Inc., 1998).

The demand for professionals in the field is expected to continue to grow. To meet this increasing demand for English-major graduates, we need to make sure that sufficient numbers of students are completing their degrees. One way to ensure this completion is to support the academic performance of students. In order to provide the right support for students, it is the refore important to know and understand what they perceive to be the factors affecting their academic performance.

3. Conceptual Framework

Educational success is usually measured by academic performance, or how well a student meets standards set by the government and the educational institution. Academic performance refers to how students deal and cope with the different tasks associated with their studies; the ability to study and remember facts and being able to communicate one's knowledge in verbal or written form. When students leave the educational institutions, however, educational success would be measured in how well the graduates are able to apply what they have learned in their career and life.

Numerous studies have investigated on the factors which influence students' academic achievement. Understanding different parameters which contribute to low or high achievement is a frequent topic. Fullana Noel (1995) and Montero Marcos (1990) have sought to understand the factors which account for low achievement. Antonio Diaz (1996) studied the personal, family, and academic factors affecting low achievement in secondary school. May S.C. Chan, Jessie C.K. Yum, Rocky Y.K. Fan, Olugbemiro Jegede and Margaret Taplin (1999) researched on the comparison of study habits and preferences of high achieving and low achieving students in the Open University of Hong Kong.

Past studies suggest that academic achievement can be influenced by a number of factors, which have been classified by some researchers into four broad categories, namely; namely; personal characteristics, organizational skills, cognitive processes and social factors. In the personal characteristics category, three important variables are considered: ability (Schiefele and Csikszentmihalyi, 1995); confidence (Ward, 1994); and motivational factors (Eppler and Harju, 1997).

Previous research also found that student, school and home are major determinants of academic performance (Florencio, 1995). Moreover, academic and test competence (Sansgiry, et. al., 2006), student burnout (Yang, 2004), action-emotion style and study habits (de la Fuente, 2008) also have impacts on academic achievement.

Lawrence and others (1985) studied the organizational characteristics of distance learning students and found that high achievers emphasized understanding of concepts and applying these educational experiences. These students also expressed problems that were task-related, e.g. new concepts to learn, volume of work, shortage of time. They could reorganize and select information and build up their own overview of the material. In contrast, Lawrence and others found that low achievers were more keen on gaining knowledge required by their supervisors. They expressed more personal problems, like anxiety and inability to express themselves. They preferred receiving and using information as previously provided. They also preferred rote learning strategies when preparing for their examinations.

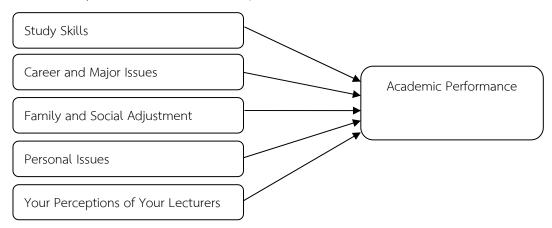
Significant research has also been done in the category of cognitive processes, particularly in the area of students' learning styles and approaches to study. Some of these research studies have identified different categories of learners such as: learners who prefer to study independently, learners who prefer to be guided by the lecturer or tutor, learners who prefer to study for understanding and process information at deep levels, and learners who focus on reproduction of detail at a surface level (Thompson and O'Brien, 1991; Harper and Kember, 1986; Matthews, 1996; Bessant, 1997).

Other research has pointed to certain social factors that can affect students' academic achievement. These factors include work commitments include work commitments (Yamauchi and Li, 1993; Eppler and Harju, 1997), family orientation (Yamauchi and Li, 1993) and learning situation characteristics like a supportive environment (Hough, 1994).

All these preceding paragraphs reveal that many studies have been conducted on the factors that affect students' academic performance in general, across other programs. Factors that have been identified usually have to do with the students' personal characteristics, organizational skills, cognitive processes and social factors. But this study has included students' perceptions of their lecturers, something that has been hardly touched upon by previous research. Consequently, this study sought to answer the question: what are students' perceptions of the factors affecting their academic performance?

In this study, the factors identified to possibly affect academic performance were arranged into five major categories as follows: affecting academic performance were arranged into four major categories as follows: (1) Study Skills, (2) Career and Major Issues, (3) Family and Social Adjustment, (4) Personal Issues and (5) Students' Perceptions of your Lecturers. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study



The subcategories under Study Skills are: (a) lack of study skills, (b) hard classes/difficult subjects, (c) poor high school preparation, (d) difficulty managing time, (e) unhappy with teaching skills of instructor, (f) unable to understand course materials and (g) too heavy a course load.

The subcategories under Career and Major Issues are: (a) unsure of major, (b) unsure of minor, (c) no clear career goals or plans, (d) unsure of interests, skills and abilities, and (e) did not know that the University had Career Services.

The subcategories under Family and Social Adjustment are: (a) adjustment to Bangkok, (b) adjustment to the University, (c) adjustment to new friends, (d) separation from home, family and friends, (e) housing and roommate issues, (f) home or family problems, and (g) trouble making friends.

The subcategories under Personal Issues are: (a) financial difficulties, (b) physical illness, health problems, injury, (c) use of alcohol or other substance abuse, (d) pressure, stress, tension, anxiety, (e) loneliness, lack of emotional control, (f) can't find meaning for anything, no motivation and (g) conflicts with social obligations/ activities.

The subcategories under Students' Perceptions of Lecturers are whether the lecturers: (a) are warm, caring and friendly (smile frequently), (b) make realistic demands of students, (c) act in a responsible and systematic, (d) are stimulating, imaginative and original, (e) clearly communicate rules, goals and expectations, (f) exhibit high degrees of empathy and self-efficacy, (g) are having materials organized, (h) are encouraging, inspiring and motivating, altruistic, and (i) are relaxed and humorous.

4. Methodology

Participants

The respondents consisted entirely of English majors who voluntarily participated in this study. A total of 228 students, they were enrolled in the undergraduate program (Bachelor of Arts major in English) as continuing students during the first semester of school year 2010-2011 at Bangkok University.

Procedure and instruments

All student measures were administered in the classroom setting and were completed anonymously and voluntarily. A questionnaire was developed to measure five aspects: study skills, career and major issues, family and social adjustment, personal issues and their perceptions of their lecturers.

The survey instrument consisted of a single page, back-to-back, with 36 items and questions to obtain descriptive data. These items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale where 1=Strongly Agree (SA), 2 = Disagree (D), 3 = So-So (SS), 4=Agree (A) and 5=Strongly Agree (SA).

Descriptive statistics using percentile ranks, mean and standard deviation was used in the study.

Results

The results in this section have been divided into five categories. The first will give a general overview of the study skills that the students perceive as most likely to have affected their academic performance. The second will focus on their career or the degree they are pursuing. The third category will be concerned with family and social adjustment; including adjustment to the university and to the country, adjustment to housing, roommates and friends, being separated from family and friends. The fourth category will consider personal issues such as financial difficulties, health problems, alcohol or substance abuse, pressure, and conflict. The fifth category will be concerned with students' perceptions of their teachers that might affect their academic performance. As there are too many subcategories in each major category of factors affecting academic achievement, only the top three ranks will be discussed.

1. Study Skills

Students were asked to rate the extent to which study skills might have affected their studies (Table 2). One hundred two (45.3%) of the respondents reported that their course load was fairly moderate; 96 respondents (42.1%) indicated that their classes or subjects were difficult. Eighty three or 36.4% of the respondents disagreed that they are not happy with instructors teaching skills; while 81 respondents (35.5%) pointed out that it is the students who lack study skills.

Table 2: Study Skills

	Study Skills	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	Lack of study skills	10	49	76	81	12	2.16	0.067
		4.4%	21.5%	33.3%	35.5%	5.3%	- 3.16	0.967
2	Hard classes/difficult subjects	3	26	76	96	27	3.52	0.893
		1.3%	11.4%	33.3%	42.1%	11.8%	- 3.52	0.093
3	Poor high school preparation	13	58	73	52	32	3.14	1.121
		5.7%	25.4%	32.0%	22.8%	14.0%	5.14	1.121
4	Difficulty managing time	10	61	80	59	18	3.06	1.009
		4.4%	26.8%	35.1%	25.9%	7.9%	3.06	1.009

(Table to be continued)

Table 2 (continued): Study Skills

	Study Skills	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
5	Unhappy with teaching skills	35	83	68	33	9	- 2.55	1.042
	of instructor	15.4%	36.4%	29.8%	14.5%	3.9%	- 2.55	1.042
6	Unable to understand course	19	66	79	50	14	- 2.89	1.039
	materials	8.3%	28.9%	34.6%	21.9%	6.1%	2.09	1.039
7	Too heavy a course load	9	34	102	70	10	- 3.17	0.880
		4.0%	15.1%	45.3%	31.1%	4.4%	- J.11	0.000

2. Career Issues

Table 3 shows students career issues which includes: not sure of major course one is pursuing, unsure of minor course one is taking, unclear career goals or plans, unsure of interests, skills and abilities, and no knowledge of University Career Services. Majority of the students perceive their career issues as not affecting their academic performance.

Table 3: Career Issues

	Career/Major Issues	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	Unsure of major	33	104	51	28	12	- 2.48	1.051
		14.5%	45.6%	22.4%	12.3%	5.3%	2.40	1.051
2	Unsure of minor	38	101	63	21	5	- 2.36	0.940
		16.7%	44.3%	27.6%	9.2%	2.2%	2.30	0.940
3	No clear career goals or plans	15	77	62	60	14	- 2.92	1.052
		6.6%	33.8%	27.2%	26.3%	6.1%	2.92	1.032
4	Unsure of interests, skills and	17	72	68	57	12	2.00	1.020
	abilities	7.5%	31.9%	30.1%	25.2%	5.3%	- 2.89	1.038
5	Did not know that the	25	75	62	45	20	- 2.82	1.139
	University had Career Services	11.0%	33.0%	27.3%	19.8%	8.8%	- 2.02	1.139

3. Family / Social Adjustment

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that students see adjustment problems as not affecting academic performance. For instance, one hundred four (45.6%) students disagree that adjustment to Bangkok affects academic performance. Eighty-eight (38.6%) of participants disagree that separation from relatives and friends have an impact on their studies. Eighty-four (36.8%) students even strongly disagree that family problems have affected their performance.

Table 4: Family and Social Adjustment

	Family/Social Adjustment	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	Adjustment to Bangkok	41	104	55	25	3	222	0.020
		18.0%	45.6%	24.1%	11.0%	1.3%	- 2.32	0.938
2	Adjustment to the University	50	90	53	31	4	- 2.34	1.022
		21.9%	39.5%	23.2%	13.6%	1.8%	- 2.34	1.022
3	Adjustment to new friends	36	75	68	37	12	- 2.62	1.094
		15.8%	32.9%	29.8%	16.2%	5.3%	- 2.02	1.09
4	Separation from home, family	61	88	37	35	7	- 2.29	1.113
	and friends	26.8%	38.6%	16.2%	15.4%	3.1%	- 2.29	1.11.
5	Housing, roommate issues	70	84	41	29	4	- 2.18	1.06
		30.7%	36.8%	18.0%	12.7%	1.8%	- 2.10	1.00
6	Home or family problems	84	76	21	35	12	2.10	1 22
		36.8%	33.3%	9.2%	15.4%	5.3%	- 2.19	1.23
7	Trouble making friends	61	79	47	35	6	2.22	1 10
		26.8%	34.6%	20.6%	15.4%	2.6%	- 2.32	1.10

4. Personal Issues

Table 5 shows students' personal issues. Again, most data do not reveal insights about personal issues that might contribute to academic performance, even the use of alcohol and other substances are strongly disagreed 97 (42.5%) respondents. In this table, though, pressure, stress, tension, and anxiety are agreed by them as affecting academic performance with a total of 64 participants or 28.3%.

Table 5: Personal Issues

	Personal Issues	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
1	Financial difficulties	61	88	47	25	7	2.25	1.064
		26.8%	38.6%	20.6%	11.0%	3.1%	- 2.25	1.064
2	Physical illness, health	53	79	49	32	15	2.46	1 101
	problems, injury	23.2%	34.6%	21.5%	14.0%	6.6%	- 2.46	1.181
3	Use of alcohol or other	97	68	24	27	12	- 2.07	1.216
	substance abuse	42.5%	29.8%	10.5%	11.8%	5.3%		1.210
4	Pressure, stress, tension, anxiety	24	60	56	64	22	2.00	1 170
		10.6%	26.5%	24.8%	28.3%	9.7%	- 3.00	1.170
5	Loneliness, lack of emotional	56	78	46	37	11	0.40	1.164
	control	24.6%	34.2%	20.2%	16.2%	4.8%	- 2.43	
6	Can't find meaning for anything,	40	85	53	39	11	2.54	1 110
	no motivation	17.5%	37.3%	23.2%	17.1%	4.8%	- 2.54	1.112
7	Conflicts with social obligations/	38	93	59	33	5	- 2.45 1	1 002
	activities	16.7%	40.8%	25.9%	14.5%	2.2%		1.003

5. Students' Perception of their Lecturers

Students were asked to rate the extent to which their concept or image of their lecturers might affect their performance in school (Table 6). Interestingly, a majority of the students agree that characteristics of teachers as perceived by the students will affect academic performance. Many students (151 or 66.8%) perceive that teachers' responsible and systematic actions will affect their fulfillment of academic tasks. The mean scores for all subcategories in this category ranging from 3.82 to 4.18 are also very remarkable.

Table 6: Students' Perception of their Lecturers

	Your Perceptions of	SD	D	SS	Α	SA	MEAN	S.D.
	Your Lecturers							
1	Warm, caring and friendly (smile	-	2	29	123	73	4.18	0.675
	frequently)	-	.9%	12.8%	54.2%	32.2%	4.10	0.673
2	Make realistic demands of	-	2	62	136	25	- 3.82	0.60
	students	-	.9%	27.6%	60.4%	11.1%		0.62
3	Act in a responsible and	-	1	25	151	49	- 4.10	0.58
	systematic manner	-	.4%	11.1%	66.8%	21.7%		0.56
4	Stimulating, imaginative and	-	5	69	131	22	3.75	0.65
	original .	-	2.2%	30.4%	57.7%	9.7%	5.15	0.03
5	Clearly communicate rules,	-	7	50	129	41	2.00	0.71
	goals and expectations	-	3.1%	22.0%	56.8%	18.1%	- 3.90	0.710
6	Exhibit high degrees of empathy	1	4	71	124	26	3 .75	0.69
	and self-efficacy	.4%	1.8%	31.4%	54.9%	11.5%	5.15	0.69
7	Having materials organized	-	1	42	142	42	3.99	0.62
	•	-	.4%	18.5%	62.6%	18.5%	5.99	0.62
8	Encouraging, inspiring and	1	6	59	126	34	3.82	0.72
	motivating	.4%	2.7%	26.1%	55.8%	15.0%	5.02	0.72
9	Altruistic (helpful/unselfish)	-	5	51	114	57	2.00	0.75
	•	-	2.2%	22.5%	50.2%	25.1%	3.98	0.75
10	Relaxed and humorous	-	5	60	103	59	2 OF	0.70
	•	-	2.2%	26.4%	45.4%	26.0%	3.95	0.78

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study has presented an assessment of students' perceptions of the factors affecting their academic performance. A case study at Bangkok University, this research considered five factors: study skills, career issues, family/social adjustment, personal issues, and students' perception of their teachers. A number of implications arise from statistically significant outcomes of this study warrant further attention.

- 1. Lack of study skills and difficult subjects surfaced as factors affecting academic performance as perceived by the students. Poor high school preparation, difficulty managing time and too heavy course load subcategories shouldn't be ignored. A mechanism in the university may be necessary to assist students in improving their study skills.
- 2. The subcategory of pressure, stress, tension and anxiety is also perceived as a factor that affects academic performance. Programs and activities that address stress management for students may be planned and implemented.
- 3. Finally, the characteristics or qualities of lecturers as perceived by the students have an impact on academic performance. Positive characteristics or qualities of lecturers tend to be more favorable. Lecturers must be encouraged to be aware of student characteristics such as study habits and motivation to learn, which enable them to monitor and evaluate their student's performance. Lecturers also need to understand and be more conscious about learning styles and that there are as many different learning styles represented by the different students that they have in a class. Awareness of these different learning styles can challenge them to be more creative in their methodology and to address the needs of their students accordingly.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will contribute some valuable information about the factors that affect academic performance among English major college students at the School of Humanities, Bangkok University.

6. Implications for Further Research

This study is limited only to a group of fourth year English major college students at the School of Humanities. In the future, a bigger sample from various colleges with varying year levels and majors should be drawn to get a better perspective of the factors affecting academic performance. Other factors like grade point average (GPA) which is the primary indicator of academic performance, gender, socio-economic background, learning styles, study habits and levels of anxiety should also be taken into consideration.

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