

## Role of Academic Advising in Mitigating the Challenges of Ethnic Minority Students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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### Abstract

The paper investigated the academic advising experiences of ethnic minority students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The main purpose of the paper was to examine the challenges faced and coping strategies used by the ethnic minority students as well as the role of academic advisors to ensure that students from ethnic minorities are able to complete their studies within the stipulated period of time. An in-depth interview was conducted to collect data. The interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data qualitative were analyzed in the form of thematic analysis using NVivo10. The analysis revealed that ethnic minority students experienced many challenges and problems during their studies at UTM. The results revealed that communication barrier is one of the challenges that ethnic students faced during their studies. To overcome, these challenges and problems they learned and applied different coping strategies. In spite of those efforts, the ethnic students still require additional help and support from their academic advisors.

**Keywords:** academic advising for ethnic minority, challenges experienced by ethnic minority, coping strategies for ethnic minority

### 1. Introduction

Higher education in Malaysia is playing a fundamental role to produce citizens who are creative, competitive and innovative. To achieve this noble aim, research universities are asked to take the lead for certain core areas and efforts. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), one of the 20 public universities in Malaysia, with a total enrolment of 25,175 students, is selected to lead the commercialization efforts. There are 20,000 local students and 5,175 international students from 57 countries studying at this technology and engineering based university (UTM, 2014). Students from diverse backgrounds, including ethnic minority students, come and study at UTM. Some of these ethnic minorities are the first child in the family that entering tertiary education. Being the first in the family that enters higher education, they have no role models or idols from their own family to inspire or motivate them. Lack of role models exposes them to multiple and unique challenges to pursue their studies in higher education particularly higher education in foreign countries (Andrade, 2006). The diverse backgrounds (academic, social, cultural, communication, experience, skills, command of English and age) coupled with new environment which is different from their culture and nation provides them with huge challenges that they never experienced before. As a result, they faced more difficulties to adapt to new situation and environment (Clark & Kalionzes, 2008).

Realizing that ethnic minority students may experience difficulty of adjustment, the university appoints academic staff as academic advisors. These local people of academic advisors play important roles in students' learning and development outcomes by providing academic advice, giving help in establishing goals, providing career guidance, clarifying graduation requirements, disseminating information, and assisting students in achieving academic success (Clark & Kalionzes, 2008; Glennen, 2003; Latif, 2006). It is hoped that the appointment of academic advisors can ease ethnic minority students to handle those challenges. Thus, it is important to investigate the experience of ethnic minority students studying at UTM. The study examined the challenges experienced by the ethnic minority students and coping strategies they used to overcome those challenges as well as the roles of academic advising in ensuring that the students from ethnic minorities can complete their studies.

## 2. Literature Review

Throughout this paper, the term “minority students” is used to identify students who are members of racial or ethnic groups in Malaysia or minority international students studying at UTM who belonged to low social economic status (SES). Majority of ethnic minority students in higher education institutions usually falls into low social economic status (SES). These students will try to complete their undergraduate study as soon as possible to get jobs as preparation for their life (Looker & Lowe, 1991; James, 2000; Jamil, 2012; Pong, 2007; Pong, 1995). Many of these ethnic minority students show less confident to enter university and have many things to consider especially on the financial aspects before making decision to enter university. These matters affect their choice of program of study (James, 1999). The literature review is divided into the following sections:

### 2.1 Challenges Faced

Many studies indicated that many ethnic minority students are at risk of dropout from university resulting from low SES (Misran, 2013). This scenario is similar to school going children of ethnic minority groups in many parts of the world. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia, for example, reported that socioeconomic gap is one of the factors which influenced school going students in Malaysia to dropout from school. This gap refers to the difference in health status, discipline quality, student’s welfare, and level of poverty (MOE, 2007). Additionally, many other studies indicated that children of ethnic minority with low SES are at risk of dropout due to failure to perform well. They face many social and cognitive problems as compared to students of moderate and high SES (Mosaku, 2010).

Other studies indicated that ethnic minority students face numerous barriers that hinder their opportunity to study as well as develop and pursue advanced degrees. Additionally, first child in the family of low SES that enters university lacks of sufficient support networks such as families, peers, or mentors that understand the various challenges that the students have to face (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Jas, 2011). Many ethnic minority students experience cultural shock as they faced a multitude of challenges while moving from their culture of home to the culture of university. Alavi and Mansor (2011) found that international students studying at UTM faced problems in social, recreational, curriculum, and method of teaching. This study, however, did not mention about the differences of challenges in ethnic minority student groups and the role of academic advisors in assisting diverse student groups.

### 2.2 Advising for Diverse Students

In Malaysia, academic advising is considered the delivery of advice and assistance to students concerning the academic, career development and personal development. This academic advising is not part of the content of the degree program. Despite of that, it is an important part of the undergraduate experience at the university. This valuable experience is seen important in ensuring the students can complete their studies successfully (Nor, Zaini, & Zahid, 2013). The general roles of academic advising played by academic advisors are as follows: (1) to teach students about various courses of study available on campus; (2) to advice students to develop strategies for selecting courses, fulfilling program and graduation requirements, and developing educational plans and goals; (3) to introduce students to services available at their institution designed to help them be successful; and (4) as a referral agent (Young, 2008). By performing these roles academic advisors can support ethnic minority students finding the best ways to succeed in their studies. In support of this notion, Schreiner (2009) noted that proper academic advising improves student retention rates through the establishment of relationships with academic staff members who help students to clarify their academic and career goals. The advice renders by academic advisors can ensure the retention of minority students (Schreiner, 2009).

Pargett (2011) indicated the importance of relationship between academic advising and student development. Students who have developed a relationship with their academic advisors reported having more satisfaction with their tertiary education experience and positively develop as students. These students were found to have more satisfaction towards their program of study. They discussed personal and university related issues, career options, university policies, academic deadlines, study skills and tips regularly with their academic advisors (Young, 2008).

Academic advisor should understand that the college experience of ethnic minorities is likely to be different, and perhaps even more difficult, than that of majority’s students. Ethnic minority students may have unique issues to resolve. Academic advisors should be aware of these issues and deal with them directly or refer these students to appropriate campus resources (Kennedy & Ishler, 2008). It is important for academic advisors to understand these trends. Academic advisors will be more successful in their academic advising work with ethnic minority students when they have basic understanding of each population. Knowing the specific background information

about minority students is one of the effective methods in advising.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

The study examined the challenges experienced by ethnic minority students and the coping strategies that they used to overcome those challenges. The study also investigated the roles of academic advisors in ensuring that the students from ethnic minorities can complete their studies. The study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with ethnic minority students to collect data. Each interview session was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

#### *3.2 Participants and Procedure*

A total of 15 ethnic minority students participated in this study. The participants were divided into two main groups. The first group are ethnic minority students located in Malaysia while the second group are international students come from 9 countries (one student from Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, Thailand, Vietnam, and Morocco respectively; two students from Nigeria and Somalia; and three students from Indonesia). The students were selected based on purposive sampling.

#### *3.3 Research Questions*

The in-depth interview was conducted to answer the following questions:

- What are the challenges experienced by ethnic minority students while studying at UTM? And how do those challenges impede their studies?
- How do ethnic minority students overcome those challenges?
- How can academic advisors help them to succeed in their studies despite those challenges?
- What do they expect from their academic advisors in dealing with those challenges?

#### *3.4 Data Analysis*

The qualitative data were analyzed in the form of thematic analysis using NVivo10. Descriptive finding focuses on challenges experienced, ways to overcome, role of academic advising, and student expectations toward academic advising. The discussion emphasizes the most important challenges experienced by each group of students and strategies used for advising students based on the data collected.

### **4. Findings**

Not surprisingly, the analysis of data shows that most of the students sampled in this study indicated that they faced many challenges during their study at UTM particular first year students of ethnic minority. The challenges that concerned them the most can be divided into four groups: academic, culture, finance, and environment.

#### *4.1 Challenges*

The challenges that they experienced are largely due to the new environment that differs with regard to culture, language, and race. Firstly, in the academic aspect, language seems to be the most significant problem impeding effective learning, especially for those students for which English is a distant second or foreign language. At this university, teaching and learning is conducted in English while Malay language was used for daily non-academic communication. Secondly, ethnic minority students undergo foreign teaching and learning styles that is totally different to their accustomed way of teaching and learning during their secondary schools. Despite these challenges, their families often expect them to excel academically and graduate on time, an expectation that exerts significant pressure on the ethnic minority students. Below are responses from students belonging to ethnic minority communities in UTM that illustrate the types of challenges they are facing.

- My biggest problem is not finishing the course in time (Iranian student).
- The academic culture here is different from Indonesia where the study requirements in Indonesia are lower than here (Indonesian student).
- The biggest challenge is language; it is the key to study well in UTM (students from Indonesia, Yemen, Thailand, Vietnam, and Iran).
- The curriculum is heavy with many academic activities and international students must study hard (students from Yemen, Iran, and Vietnam).

The challenges experienced by these ethnic minority students impact their study. They worried about the time taken to complete their education. Barriers of language, learning styles, individual background, and pressure

from families make students feel anxious and not confident in the studying process. This leads to limited academic communication with their lecturers or friends. They commented that they solely thinking about the challenges. This action will lead to stress which eventually impact academic achievement.

This study, however, indicates that when the ethnic minority students have past experiences studying with Malay students prior to this or have studied in Malaysia before going to university, they did not face the same academic challenges as compared to those who are new to Malaysia. Some students commented as follows:

- I studied with Malay, Chinese and Indian students when I was a child, so it is not a problem for me to continue my studies in a Malaysian university (Cham Cambodian student).
- I do not experience problems when studying at higher education, because I know Malay, and I studied in Malaysian school (minority student in Malaysia).
- Although it was not easy to achieve high results in secondary school, I managed to obtain a scholarship from the Malaysian government, so I do not face money problems (Cham Cambodia student).

This finding showed that the government educational policies for multi-cultural society in Malaysia work well. The analysis also indicates the equality of education among ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. Another challenge faced by ethnic minority students from other countries is culture. Among the problems frequently stated are communication, food, clothes fashion, and festivals. Malaysian society is comprised of three main ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Islam is the national religion of the country. This renders Malaysia a multi-cultural and pluralistic society. Most ethnic minority students are struggling with the many cultural differences between their own culture and Malaysian culture. This often causes unnecessary feelings of anxiety and isolation. However, some students from Muslim countries can adapt well to Malaysia culture. This includes students from Nigeria, Iran, and Pakistan among others.

Additionally, sometimes food can also be an issue of differences, thus poses challenges to ethnic minority students. Constant communication with family members at back home is a strategy used to reduce the feeling of isolation or when they are experiencing problems. Some students reported as follows.

- The culture here is not too different from mine because Pakistan is a Muslim country just like Malaysia...but I do not like the food here, too spicy (Student from Pakistan).
- I prefer Malaysian culture (Cham Cambodia student in Malaysia).
- The culture is different, the food is too much (Nigerian and Yemen students).
- I usually call my family when I don't feel well or face problems" (Students from Indonesia, Iran, and Nigeria).

The analysis of data also indicates that ethnic minority students in UTM experience little difficulty in communicating with others particularly Malaysians. Despite of that, the respondents reported that if they do not know the Malay language, they can communicate in English both inside and outside UTM. However, some sampled students indicated that local students only use Malay language to communicate with each other. This presents a barrier to befriend the Malaysians. This situation sometimes brings unnecessary difficult access of better communication:

- Most local students communicate in Malay and it is difficult to make a relationship with them (Students from Pakistan, Iran, Nigeria, and Morocco).
- Different English accent is one of the barriers. Sometimes I do not understand what they are saying (students from Nigeria and Pakistan).
- Although I can understand Malay but I must write and communicate in English in UTM (students from Indonesia).

With regard to finance, ethnic minority students without a scholarship sometimes face financial difficulties. They reported that the problems are not acute because their families help them. To support their expenses, some students seek part-time employment, but this can negatively affect their studies. Additionally, they reported that part-time employment is difficult to get in UTM.

- The scholarship awarded to me is not enough. My supervisor helps me out. But the research is not related to my study. That means little time to study (Indonesian students).
- The tuition fee for international students is much higher than local student (Students from Iran and Pakistan).

- International students are difficult to get scholarship from UTM. It is only for local students (Pakistan and Iranian students).

The above challenges caused minority students to work harder to achieve greater academic results than local students. They must concentrate on graduate employability skills to adapt with studies in UTM. Some students fail to complete their studies on time thereby causing them to feel guilty for the financial pressure they exert on their families (Students from Iran and Pakistan).

With regard to environment, most international students perceived that the weather in Malaysia is hot but still feel comfortable particularly with UTM ecological environment. Although most of sampled students satisfied with the facility in UTM but some complains about technology and limited internet access which operates in a low speed.

- It is hotter than my country and my room is not comfortable and the floor is not clean (Iran student).
- I feel tired when the hot sunshine and the library is so cold. It makes me not good in health (Pakistan student)
- Building in UTM is good but internet or Wi-Fi is not good. Lack of procedure for online system for students (Cambodian student)

Although UTM maintains environment for conducive learning for all students, the plan to improve facility must be given a priority. When students are satisfied with the facilities, it will positively impact on their academic performance.

#### 4.2 Overcoming the Problems

In general, most of the sampled students indicated that they need to independently study and overcome the challenges they face by themselves or with the help of their family members. The students reported that UTM e-learning is a useful tool for studying while internet facility and accessibility is an important tool for conducting research. As for language problem, the students indicated that continuous practice is central to improving their English skills. Some of the comments are listed below.

- I try to practice, practice, talk and talk...to improve my English, and not to be shy (Students from Indonesia).
- I take time and fix problems by myself (Students from Nigeria).
- I share with my friends or I call my family for help (students from Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam).

The analysis of data indicated that minority students at UTM try to solve their challenges by themselves. Being independence is the aim for most students especially in academic domain. These actions showed that ethnic minority students at college going level are different from secondary school students. These tertiary education ethnic minority students learn to make decisions by themselves. However, some of them still contact their family members or friends to get advice or help to overcome those challenges.

#### 4.3 Role of Academic Advisor

Although most of the students assumed that their academic advisors play important roles to help them academically, their responses varied. Few students indicated that their advisors encouraged them to study, give them support and advice, and guide them to use UTM resources. The students indicated as follows.

- When I have problems I come to see my academic advisor, he gives good advice...and even gives me money if I face financial difficulties (Malay/Cham student).
- My supervisor is very kind and supports me academically (Student from Somalia).
- In general, he is very good but only in academics and I do not think academic advisor can help students in other areas, such as personal problems (Nigerian student).

In contrast, several students complained that their advisors did not render them adequate support that they need. Some students commented that their advisors are too busy to meet them. Their comments are as follows.

- The advisor only signs the form, students must study independently (student from Morocco).
- In the first meeting, he is very friendly to help to understand something about what I need to do when studying in UTM, but up to now, I have never seen him again (Students from Thailand and Indonesia).
- He made an appointment with me then he was busy so it is not easy to see the advisor (Students from Iran and Indonesia).

The study indicated that ethnic minority students have mixed perceptions towards the roles of academic advisors. Some students said that academic advisors are necessary for them, especially when they face problems. Students can communicate with their academic advisors to get good advices and to find adaptable solutions to solve the problems. However, some argued that the role of academic advisors is not clear. This indicates that different characteristic, perception, pedagogy and attitude of academic advisors cause the different opinions from students. Therefore, enhancing cognitive, value, and methodology of academic advising are important to improve the quality of academic advising.

#### *4.4 Student Expectations towards Academic Advisors*

The sampled students expected that their academic advisors would assist them in improving their academic performance. These minority students hope that their academic advisors should understand their culture and background to find the best ways to help them. They particularly look for respectful communication with the academic advisors. Some of students' comments are listed below.

- I hope my academic advisors can guide me and communicate respectfully with all students, especially ethnic minority students (student from Yemen, Thailand, and Nigeria).
- I expect that academic advisors should be aware of other cultures to better understand minority students (Indonesian student).
- I hope that when I have problems I can go to see my academic advisor without hesitation. All she needs to do is to listen to me although I was not a good student (Student from Indonesia).

Students hope that academic advisors should be close to students in mentoring and helping with their personal development and not only serve to solve problems. They argued that academic advisors need to have good characteristics and abilities to assist ethnic minority students. The students feel obligated to honestly express their abilities and interests to the academic advisors. Thus, expect the academic advisors to guide them appropriately. They commented that:

- I would tell them what I am looking for. They tell me what's wrong with what I'm looking for (Cham Cambodian student).
- I want my advisor to be able to tell me, ok, this isn't high school anymore, hope he/she helps me more, not only academically (Pakistani student).
- I hope advisors do not think students are not good when we come to see advisors (student from Indonesia).

In general, students expect academic advising in the university to put more emphasis on identity development, and to promote equal opportunities to students of different backgrounds and create a multicultural competence to motivate all students in their studies.

## **5. Discussion**

Ethnic minority students in UTM are facing many challenges especially on academic, culture, finance, and environment. Different ethnic minority groups experienced different kind of challenges. Ethnic minority students who live in remote areas in Malaysia do not pose many difficulties in academic and finance because they are able to use Malay language in communicating with friends and lecturers to get extra support. Additionally, many get scholarship from Government for studying. Unlike local students, ethnic minorities from other countries studying at UTM experienced many challenges resulting from different culture and environment from their hometown. However, they can overcome those challenges either by themselves or by contacting their family members for support. For them, the psychological barriers are still existing but minimal.

## **6. Conclusion**

Academic advising plays an important role in promoting the success of ethnic minority students. In order to advise students effectively, academic advisors need to use specific approaches, and culturally aware of the background of their students. Given that ethnic minority students' presence of campus increases and complex, academic advisors should pay careful attention, be open minded, and be willingness to learn in order to render effective advice (Clark & Kalionzes, 2008). Academic advisors must concentrate on culture and background of students that affect academic achievement. This study illustrated the challenges faced and coping strategies used by ethnic minority students while furthering their studies in UTM. The study also explored the expectations of ethnic minority students toward academic advising in UTM. Understanding the cultural contexts and advising perception of ethnic minority students will help academic advisors to provide guidance to cope with their studies.

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