An Exploratory Study on the Relationship between Life Satisfaction and Academic Performance among Undergraduate Students of UiTM, Shah Alam

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Abstract

Universities around the globe in this 21st century are facing challenges of globalization, competition and information and communication developments. They are required to prepare their students with knowledge and necessary skills so as to face challenges in the real world scenario such as global economy and global society since qualities are highly valued in an increasing globalized world. These universities students need to cope with complex new roles and the urge to succeed in both academic and soft skills. However, on the other hand, to what extent, these students are happy and satisfied with their life, particularly in handling with new challenges and demands from the university and society. Therefore, this study intends to investigate the relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction among the undergraduate students of UiTM, Shah Alam. A total of 137 undergraduate students participated in this study. Pearson’s Product–Moment Correlation Coefficient (r) was used to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between variables. The finding showed that there is no relationship between life satisfaction and academic performance among the undergraduates’ students. Implications and recommendation were discussed in this paper.

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1. Introduction

Universities in the era of 21st century are facing greater challenges than before in order to produce graduates who can meet the expectation of their respective employees and the society at large. In order to be highly marketable in the career domains, graduates need to possess excellent academic performance as well as strong
and formidable soft skills. Therefore the challenges of the undergraduates nowadays are much more intense than decades ago. They have to fulfil a set of criteria in order to graduate and simultaneously be successful in other multiple life domains. However, are they happy and satisfied with their current lives now? Is life satisfaction achieved with excellent grades and high-flying CGPA? Bradley and Corwyn (2004) state that life satisfaction has become an essential psychological variable prior to adulthood and studies in this area and other related domains such as subjective well-being and quality of life have been significant in further explaining individuals’ reactions to different life circumstances particularly challenging and stressful situations. Therefore it is crucial to examine the levels of life satisfaction among undergraduates before they complete their studies and socialize in a much bigger domain of real society and face real challenges of life. Thus, this study sought to examine the levels of life satisfaction among the UiTM graduates, their academic performance and the relationship between these two variables.

Lyubormirsky et al. (2005) states that individuals that are happy will highly likely achieve desirable goals in life including marriage, friendship, health, and career performance. They propose this notion not simply because success leads to happiness but due to the possibility that positive affect may engender success. Previous literatures on positive psychology domain have noted life satisfaction as a part of happiness. Happiness has been operationally defined as subjective well-being which specifically refers to “an individual’s own assessment of his or her own life – not the judgements of experts – and include satisfaction (both global and satisfaction with specific domains), pleasant affect, and low negative affect” (Diener et al. 2004 p.189, cited in Lewis et al. 2011).

Happiness materializes when basic needs are fulfilled (Bradley & Corwyn 2004). However, looking at today’s world of fast pace and savvy technology, one may require more than the conventional basic needs and thus the term basic needs should be redefined. This leads us to one aspect of happiness which is life satisfaction.

What constitutes life satisfaction? Life satisfaction is a conscious evaluative process that allows individuals to assess his or her own range of life satisfaction levels based on a presumed standard set of criteria that meets the expectation of the individual (Lewis et al 2011; Pavot and Diener 1993). Pavot and Diener (1993) report that individuals tend to possess unique criteria that define what a good life is which may outweigh the common benchmarks of a good life such as health and successful relationships. Individuals may possess different sets of standards to define success in their life domains. Thus ‘global life satisfaction refers to a general evaluation of the quality of an individual’s life that is over and above judgements of specific domains e.g. family, friends’ (Huebner 1991 p.232). Apart from that, life satisfaction is also noted as a worthy construct to be examined due to its ability to provide a holistic index of well-being which is based on characteristics set by individuals themselves and not the researchers (Diener 2000). In other words, there are a number of variables that may influence life satisfaction of individuals depending on their own set of criteria which may be relationships, family, financial status or academic achievement. This brings us to an issue whether academic achievement is a contributor to life satisfaction among university undergraduates.

Gilman and Huebner (2006) found in their study that youth reporting high global life satisfaction reported higher scores on all measures of academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal functioning than youth reporting low life satisfaction. Furthermore, students with high life satisfaction reported more positive school experiences, and higher GPAs than the students with low satisfaction. Their findings suggest that high life satisfaction may be associated with positive academic experiences which also suggest that there may be some ‘conceptual connections between life satisfaction and school context factors’ (Gilman and Huebner 2006, p. 317). On top of that, the findings also indicate that youth with high life satisfaction possessed significantly less social stress and intrapersonal stress, more positive relationships with others, higher levels of hope and a stronger sense of personal control.

A study conducted by Frisch et al. (2005) investigated a large sample of college students who went for counselling services at a university counselling centre for a period of 4 years. Their findings noted that GPA and life satisfaction together and independently were able to predict which students would drop out of school 1 – 3 years in advance. Later, Ou (2008) conducted a study to investigate the outcomes of low income among minority children and as a part of her findings found that students from age 22 to 24 who managed to obtain high school diploma reported higher levels of satisfaction than those who dropped out of school. Another study by Suldo and
Shaffer (2008) investigated middle school students by utilising person-centred research methods report that students with high life satisfaction and low levels of psychopathology possessed significantly high GPAs and standardized test scores as compared with those with low life satisfaction and low levels of psychopathology.

Despite some of the studies done to examine relationships between life satisfaction and academic performance, there are other studies that found a non-significant relationship between life satisfaction and academic performance (see Bradley and Corwyn 2004; Huebner 1991). Bradley and Corwyn (2004) investigated life satisfaction in adolescence among five socio-cultural groups; European American, African American, Chinese American, Mexican American, and Dominican American. They further reported that the inability to have positive relationship between life satisfaction and academic achievement is surprising but may suggest the ‘diversity of interests and goals beyond academics that children have during adolescence’ (p.398). Due to this, they suggested that being brilliant during early adolescence may bring together with it expectations and pressures for achievement and being labelled as smart by peers may then end up in negative feedback and exclusion from some groups and activities (for example African American adolescents). But this explanation may not necessarily account for the lack of relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction among Chinese Americans where academic excellence is highly valued.

The findings from previous literatures indicate inconsistent stands regarding the associations between life satisfaction and academic performance. Therefore as mentioned above, this study sought to answer these research questions:

i) What is the level of life satisfaction among undergraduate students of UiTM?
ii) What is the level of academic performance among undergraduate students of UiTM?
iii) Is there any relationship between the level of life satisfaction and academic performance among undergraduate students of UiTM?

2. Methodology

This study employed a survey method using cross sectional research design. A self report questionnaire was used to gather information related to the objectives of the study. The Satisfaction with Life scale (SWLS) which was adapted from Diener et al. (1985) was used to measure students’ life satisfaction. SWLS assesses the positive side of the individuals’ experiences rather than focusing on unpleasant emotions. In making a life satisfaction judgement, the SWLS emphasizes the person’s own standards of evaluation. This inventory was chosen as it has been used widely. Besides, SWLS is shown to have favourable psychometric properties, including high internal consistency (co-efficient alpha 0.87) and high temporal reliability for numerous studies from 0.79 to 0.89 (Diener et al. 1985; Arrindell et al. 1999). The questionnaires consist of five items with a response format anchor on a six point scale of one (1) with the low satisfaction to six (6) with the high satisfaction. The samples were drawn from the final undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education, Shah Alam. One hundred and thirty seven (137) students participated in this study. Pearson Coefficient correlation was used to analyze the relationships between independent variable, life satisfaction towards the dependable variable namely, academic achievement.
3. Findings

3.1 Analysis on the level of life satisfaction among the undergraduates of students

Table 1: The Levels of life satisfaction among the undergraduates of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 displays the levels of life satisfaction among the undergraduate students of the faculty of Education. The findings revealed that majority of them, that is, 89.5% (119) demonstrated moderate level of life satisfaction and 6% (8) showed high life satisfaction level. On the other hand, only 4.5% (6) of respondents showed low level of life satisfaction. This finding is in line with the study done by Gilman and Huebner (2006). The result suggests that the undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education, UiTM, were moderately happy with their present state of affairs. In this sense, Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) assert that an assessment of a person’s quality of life was based on one’s chosen criteria. They further elaborated that the judgement of how satisfied people are with the present state of affairs is based on a comparison with a standard which each individual sets for him or herself.

3.2 Analysis on the level of academic achievement among the undergraduates’ students

Table 2: The Levels of academic achievement among the undergraduates of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate low</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate high</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>64.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 displays the levels of academic achievement among the undergraduates’ students of the Faculty of Education. The findings revealed that majority of them, that is, 64.9% (85) demonstrated moderate level of academic achievement and 23.7% (31) showed high academic level. On the other hand, only 11.5% (15) of respondents showed low level of academic achievement.

3.3 Analysis on the relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction among the undergraduates students

Table 3: Correlation Matrix between academic achievement and life satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic achievement</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction</td>
<td>-0.128</td>
<td>.149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The finding from the above table 3 shows that there is no relationship between academic achievement and life satisfaction among the undergraduates students of the Faculty of Education, UiTM, where $r= -0.128$, $p=0.149$. This finding is consistent with the study done by Huebner and Alderman (1993). However, Quinn and Duckworth (2007) found that life satisfaction and academic achievement are mutually reinforcing. Their studies showed that students with higher well-being were more likely to earn higher final grades, even controlling for IQ, and academic achievement. This may be due to the fact that students who are more satisfied with their lives perform better and by achieving good results they become happier.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The result of this study reveals that majority of final year undergraduates students of the Faculty of Education were having a moderate life satisfaction. The present findings are also parallel with studies investigating life satisfaction levels among adults (Gilman and Huebner 2006; Diener and Seligman, 2002). Life satisfaction was viewed to have connection with emotional fluctuations (Diener and Diener, 1996), can influence changes in behaviour (Lewis et al. 2011) and is free of social desirability bias (Diener 1994). Thus, the finding may suggest that having high satisfaction in life could reflect of having positive mental health and wellness. Nevertheless, Gilman and Huebner (2006) claim that maintaining a positive outlook of life may serve as a signal against the backdrop of ongoing cognitive appraisals, affective states and environmental circumstances. Undergraduates who are happier will highly likely produce better work, have good interpersonal relationship with others and possess a healthier mental state and more endurance to stress and challenging situations. This will assist them in their future undertakings after graduation especially when applying for career positions. Subsequently Gilman and Huebner (2006) found in their studies that youth with high life satisfaction correlates with high academic performance, high interpersonal and intrapersonal functioning than youth reporting with low life satisfaction. They also reveal that high levels of life satisfaction and various indices of positive behavioural and psychological adjustment are interrelated.

This study also intends to examine the relationship between life satisfaction and academic achievement. The result reveals that there is no relationship between the two variables. The result suggests that life satisfaction does not enhance academic achievement among the final year undergraduates’ students of UiTM and vice versa. In other words, academic achievement may be influenced by other factors such as desires to earn good grades in order to secure career path and family expectations especially among Asian families (see Bradley and Corwyn 2004) There may be other factors that enhance life satisfaction among these undergraduates apart from academic achievement. Life satisfaction may be enhanced by positive relationships, family environment, peer acceptance and good health (Bradley and Corwyn 2004). This is also in line with the operational definition of life satisfaction as proposed in Lewis et al. (2011) and Pavot & Diener (1993). In this sense, even though academic achievement may be desirable, individual may place different values on them (Diener 1985). Another point that may be observed is that the undergraduates who participated in this study reported moderate life satisfaction and therefore this may contribute a portion to the non-significant relationship between life satisfaction and academic achievement. Gilman and Huebner (2006) notice that youth reporting low life satisfaction reported higher level of intrapersonal and interpersonal distress and less positive academic experiences than youth reporting higher levels of satisfaction. In this context, Diener et al. (1985) states that although there may be some agreement about the important components of the good life such as good health and successful relationship, individuals are likely to assign different weight to these components. Therefore, Pavot and Diener (1993) suggest that researchers should also assess an individual’s global judgement of his or her life rather than only his or her satisfaction with specific domains.

Thus, future research should also examine other variables that have potential in enhancing life satisfaction such as relationship among peers and family, good health, family environment and also personality factors. Diener et al. (1999) concluded that personality factors have more tendencies to be more consistent in relating to life satisfaction than contextual factors. In addition, personality factors may enhance how ones perceive life and that may contribute to life satisfaction and overall happiness.
References


