

Student Engagement among University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract: Student engagement at tertiary education has been discovered as one of the important predictors of their academic performance and soft skill development. Astin's theory of student engagement is often referenced in any studies that investigated student engagement. Based on previous studies, engagement among boys and girls in school student are found to behave differently in terms of their engagement. However, in university setting, several studies indicated that there were gaps between genders in the level of student engagement in higher education in Malaysia. But most of the finding is not consistent with each others. The purpose of this study to examine the significant differences between gender in the level of student engagement dimensions in Malaysian context. Using the survey research method, the study involved 347 final year undergraduates student who gave feedback. A test of Multivariate Analysis (MANOVA) was conducted in order to find out whether there are any significant gender differences in the level of student engagement, based on the four dimensions. The findings showed that there were significant differences for student engagement with academic staffs and student engagement in communities between the male and female students. Even though, there were no significant differences between the male and female students for student engagement with peers and student engagement in academic. The gender patterns of student engagement can be use as a guideline to the government and other stakeholders in education in Malaysia.

Key words: Student engagement, gender, higher education, communities, gender patterns

INTRODUCTION

Student engagement at tertiary education has been discovered as one of the important predictors of their academic performance and soft skill development. A student who is more involved in university life would normally perform better academically and develop himself/herself more holistically in terms of his/her soft skills. Academic achievement of students in their degree is not the only criteria required of them by their future employers. Studies on graduate employability have found that those graduates who are better off in terms of soft skills are more appealing to the employers (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005).

Numerous studies have been carried out to examine student engagement in general (Astin, 1984) or student engagement in school (Jaafer *et al.*, 2012; Hashim and Sani, 2008) and student engagement in courses that were offered at the university (Handelsman *et al.*, 2005). In previous studies, boys and girls are found to behave differently in terms of their engagement in school. In university setting, research found that there were gaps

between females and males in the level of student engagement in higher education institutions in Malaysia. However, there is lack of empirical evidence to support gender differences among Asian students.

Literature review: The underpinning theory that is often used in discussing student engagement is Astin's student involvement theory which was first developed in 1984. The most basic tenet of this theory views that the more physical and psychological energy that the student invests in his/her academic experience, the more engaged he/she is to his/her academic life. This theory also emphasizes that a student has high student engagement if he/she uses more energy to study, spends more time on campus becomes actively involved in any student association and interacts frequently with his/her faculty members and peers.

Student involvement theory of Astin (1984) posits that student involvement in the academic, societies or organisations at the institutions of higher learning and involvement in communities such as faculty members and peers will influence significantly on the student's

psychosocial development throughout his/her university or college life. This theory also proposed five tenets that help to identify student involvement which are engagement refers to investment in terms of physical and psychological energy in every aspect, different levels of student engagement as different individuals are involved in different activities at different times, engagement is divided into two computations which are quantitative (time allocated) and qualitative (how to focus in learning), student engagement in a particular educational programme is measured based on quantity and quality and the effectiveness of a policy or educational practice is directly related to the increase of student engagement. These tenets have to be taken into account as guidelines in observing student engagement on the whole throughout his/her study.

Student engagement dimensions: As mentioned before Astin (1984), student involvement theory is often referred to in studies related to student engagement. Based on the five tenets discussed above, Astin has proposed that the measurement of student involvement includes four important dimensions; student academic engagement, student engagement with faculty members student engagement with peers and student engagement in communities. These four dimensions cover the basic aspects of student involvement in the university because they give the overall picture of the kind of activities students are involved in who they are involved with where and when the activities occur and the purpose of involvement. In other words, they give you some qualitative nature of student involvement. In addition, student's ratings of the frequency of their involvement in each aspect, would give information on the extent of their involvement in their university life in a quantitative manner.

Student academic engagement: Student academic engagement concept refers to the academic planning, strategies and focus that students invested in while they are on campus in order to achieve their academic goals that is to excel in their studies.

Student engagement with academic staff: Student engagement with academic staff could refer to interactions that take place either during the lecture or outside the lecture halls in the computer labs, during office hours or anywhere where interactions between student and academic staff are possible. This kind of engagement is one of the keys that are related to university experience and student development itself (Astin, 1984; Bradley *et al.*, 2002; Sax *et al.*, 2005).

Student engagement with peers: Student engagement with peers refers to the frequency of the student and his/her peers in doing activities together such as working together in completing a particular project or assignment either in classrooms or outside the classrooms, working on class presentations and using electronic media to discuss with his/her peers.

Student engagement in communities: Past research (Cooper *et al.*, 1994; Foubert and Urbanski, 2006) has employed the terms organisation and club to denote student engagement in organisations. In this research however the term student engagement in communities is used to summarize student engagement in campus activities, organisations, clubs and associations throughout his/her stay at the institution of higher learning.

Research objectives: Are there significant differences between gender in the level of student engagement dimensions (student engagement with academic staff members, student engagement with peers, student engagement in communities and student academic engagement) in Malaysian higher education setting? To answer the above research question, four null hypotheses were postulated:

- H_{01} : There is no significant gender-based differences in student engagement with academic staff members
- H_{02} : There is no significant gender-based differences in the level of student engagement with peers
- H_{03} : There is no significant gender-based differences in the level of student engagement in communities
- H_{04} : There is no significant gender-based differences in the level of student academic engagement

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample: A total of 375 sets of questionnaires on student engagement were distributed to students of Universiti Utara Malaysia for data collection. The overall response rate was 94.6% with 355 students returning the survey forms. After data screening, the final data set were from a total of 347 students ($n = 347$). Out of this number, 30.4% of them were males ($n = 131$) and 69.6% were females ($n = 216$). All of the respondents were final year University Utara Malaysia students.

Measurement: Astin (1984) Student Engagement theory was used to construct and develop the items. The items were also adapted to fit the Malaysian university context. The instrument set in Malay language which is the

national language of Malaysia was known as the Malaysian University Student Learning Involvement Scale (MUSLIS) (Martin, 2000). The findings from past studies in particular, those carried out by Handelsman *et al.* (2005), Foubert and Urbanski (2006), Allen (1986) were taken into account in developing the 24 items. The items were constructed to measure the four factors in student engagement model. Using a 5-point likert scale that ranged from almost never to always, the respondents were asked to rate the level of their engagements by demonstrating the frequency of their encounters with each condition stated.

Student academic engagement was measured by 5 items. The more highly a student rate himself/herself academically engaged, the more committed he/she to academic-related activities such as planning for the courses to be taken, giving focus to (the content of) the courses and reading related textbooks or references for the courses. Sample item is "I plan the courses that I would take every semester" (Sahil and Hashim, 2011).

Student engagement with academic staff was measured by 7 items. The higher the students score for this dimension, the more frequent they communicate and discuss with the academic staff with regard to their studies, coursework, academic performance and career paths. Sample item is "I discuss about my grades and assignments with my lecturer".

Student engagement with peers was measured by 6 items. If a student rated himself/herself as highly engaged with his/her peers, it would mean that he/she frequently communicate, discuss and collaborate with his/her friends in the university in especially in doing academic-related tasks. Sample item is "I collaborate with other students to do projects or assignments".

Student engagement in communities was measured by 6 items. A student who is rated highly on his/her engagement in university was one who was actively involved in societal or organizational programs including community work or service. Students who are highly engaged in communities are those who normally have sense of leadership in them.

Data analysis: MANOVA analysis was used to test the research hypothesis. The analysis sought to test whether there are any gender differences in the level of student engagement.

RESULTS

The multivariate analysis in Table 1 revealed that there were significant differences between males and females in terms of student engagement with academic

Table 1: Gender differences in student engagement dimensions

Variables	Gender	Mean	SD	F-values	p-values	η^2
SEA	MF	3.23	0.71	15.11	0.001***	0.042
		2.94	0.65			
SEP	MF	4.23	0.54	1.66	0.200	0.005
		4.16	0.51			
SEC	MF	3.79	0.71	42.32	0.001***	0.109
		3.23	0.81			
SAE	MF	4.15	0.58	0.271	0.600	0.001
		4.18	0.49			

SEA: Student Engagement with Academic staff; SEP: Student Engagement with Peer; SEC: Student Engagement in Communities; SAE: Student Academic Engagement

staff members ($F(1,345) = 15.11, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.042$). Male students were more keen in their engagement with members of academic staff ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.71$) compared to their female counterparts ($M = 2.94, SD = 0.65$). There were also significant gender differences in terms of student engagement in communities ($F(1,345) = 42.32, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.109$). Male students were found to be more active in community engagement ($M = 3.79, SD = 0.71$) unlike the female students ($M = 3.23, SD = 0.81$).

The multivariate results also demonstrated that there were no significant differences between the male and female students in student engagement with their peers ($p > 0.01$). The research findings exhibit that there were smaller differences between male and female students with the differences between the two were almost the same. Therefore, H_{02} was accepted.

No significant differences between male and females students were found in student academic engagement ($F(1,345) = 0.271, p > 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.001$). This finding proved that both male and female students did not show any substantial differences in their academic engagement. Hence, H_{04} was accepted.

DISCUSSION

MANOVA was conducted to test where there were any significant gender differences in student engagement factors. The analysis showed that male students were more inclined in their engagement with members of the academic staff. This suggests that male students often meet and discuss with their lecturers on issues related to their assignments, academic performance and future careers.

Male students were also found to be more active in their community engagement unlike the female students. The male students, for instance were more active in attending meetings, becoming members of clubs and student associations and becoming involved in projects both on campus and off campus. The male students also demonstrated leadership qualities in the running of clubs

and student associations. In terms of student engagement with peers, the findings highlighted that there were no significant differences between male and female students. This shows that there both groups were similar in their engagement with peers. The same finding is also seen in the student academic engagement where there were no significant differences between male and female students. This reveals that both male and female students perceive their academic engagement as on the same level.

The following is further discussion on the level of differences in student engagement factors based on gender. This research found that of the four student engagement factors, two factors revealed significant differences while two more factors did not share the same findings. There were significant differences in terms of the level of male student engagement with academic staff members and the level of female student engagement with academic staff members. This indicates that the male students were more inclined in their engagement with the academic staff members compared to the female students. This research finding is similar to previous studies conducted by Bradley *et al.* (2002), Sax (2005), Allen (1986) and Fleming (1984) who also demonstrated that male students were highly engaged with academic staff members compared to their female counterparts (Harper *et al.*, 2004) revealed that male students preferred to meet face-to-face with their academic faculty because they spent less time making preparation before attending lectures and completing the assigned tasks and assignments. Male students also rarely attended additional classes conducted by their lecturers and they also often failed to attend their classes. Therefore, the male students assumed that meetings and discussions with the faculty is a solution that can help them overcome their weakness in terms of their preparation and focus in lecture rooms. This also enable them to obtain better performance academically (Bradley *et al.*, 2002; Sax, 2005; Allen, 1986; Fleming, 1984; Wolf-Wendel *et al.*, 2009)

The same result is found in student engagement in communities. In this factor, findings reveal that male outrank the female students. This research supports studies conducted by Machado *et al.* (2002) which showed that male students superseded female students in both campus and off campus activities because they favour physical activities.

There were no significant differences between male and female students in student engagement with peers. This finding reveals that both male and female engaged similarly with their peers. The ways both male and female students interact and engage with their peers are the same. Both male and female students engage similarly with their peers because their learning environment is

similar that is both male and female students live in hostels, learn at the same institution and enjoy the same facilities together. The finding shows that there were no significant differences between male and female students in academic commitment. However, this finding is unlike studies carried out by Machado *et al.* (2002) which suggested that female students were more commitend in academic matters and with learning. Female students were found to accept new academic environment better when they were at the university unlike their male counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Generally, female and male student behave differently in their engagement in certain aspects of their lives in the university (parallel with studies on boy's and girl's difference in engagement in school context). University should try to get all students regardless of gender to be actively involved with society and academic with related activities, build rapport with academic staff and maintain positive relationship with peers.

Moreover, future studies should also examines the relationship between student involvement and its outcomes such as student psychosocial development. In practice, the information gathered through a survey that measures student involvement in university context would definitely be useful for understanding the kind of activities that students are involved with and how these activities can enhance their academic and self-development which could prepare them for future job market.

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