

Influencing factors of academic performance among first-year university students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the factors influencing academic success among first-year university students in Malaysia during their transition to university. Using qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 first- and second-year students to explore their experiences. Thematic analysis identified several key factors affecting academic performance, including family influence, peer relationships, university environment, self-esteem, mental health, study habits, and lifestyle. Positive parenting styles and family support were found to be crucial for academic success, while negative parenting styles, financial difficulties, and lack of parental involvement posed challenges. Supportive peer relationships were linked to enhanced academic outcomes, whereas toxic peer pressure negatively affected performance. A positive university environment, with accessible resources and supportive lecturers, contributed significantly to success. Mental health issues, low self-esteem, and poor study habits, such as procrastination and irregular sleep, had detrimental effects on academic performance. While the study provides valuable insights, it is limited by a small sample size, reliance on subjective self-reports, and a lack of a longitudinal approach. Future research should address these limitations by using larger, diverse samples and incorporating quantitative methods. Additionally, studies should focus on students at risk of underperformance to gain a broader understanding of the factors impacting academic success.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic performance serves as a core indicator of student success in higher education, shaping both immediate academic progress and long-term career opportunities [1]. For first-year university students, this transition presents unique challenges as they move from the structured high school environment to the independence and rigor of university life. During this period, students must navigate new academic expectations, adapt to different learning styles, and develop self-directed learning skills, all of which significantly impact their academic outcomes [2]–[5]. The importance of academic success during this phase is further underscored by its strong links to student retention, mental well-being, and continued positive outcomes in subsequent academic years [6].

Despite its significance, academic performance among first-year students remains a multifaceted issue. Many students encounter substantial barriers that hinder their ability to thrive academically [7]. The transition to university often entails adapting to increased academic workloads, balancing social and

academic responsibilities, and adjusting to unfamiliar learning environments [7], [8]. For instance, the increased workload poses an immediate challenge as students struggle with academic demands that surpass those in high school [7]–[9]. Additionally, differences in instructional methods can overwhelm students accustomed to more traditional teaching styles [5], [10].

Social adjustment further compounds these challenges, as first-year students must build new social networks while managing feelings of isolation [11], [12]. Without strong support systems, the lack of emotional and instrumental support can exacerbate stress and loneliness, negatively impacting academic performance [13]–[17]. Moreover, as students gain newfound independence, they must develop essential life skills such as time management and financial self-sufficiency, which can directly influence their academic and social success [7], [18].

In the Malaysian context, students face similar and unique challenges, particularly in academic and personal adjustments. Studies indicate that Malaysian students often struggle with independent learning, time management, and balancing academic expectations [19]. A notable disconnect exists between students' expectations and the realities of university life, affecting their academic adjustment and overall performance [8]. Additionally, gender differences in adaptation levels highlight the diverse needs of students, with research suggesting that male students generally adjust more readily than female students [20].

Support systems play a crucial role in helping students navigate these challenges [8]. Engagement in academic and non-academic activities has been shown to foster social connections, easing the transition and promoting a supportive learning environment [8]. Given the complex dynamics faced by first-year students in Malaysia, a deeper investigation into the factors influencing their academic performance is essential.

To strengthen the theoretical grounding of this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [21] provides a useful framework for understanding how multiple interconnected systems shape students' academic outcomes. This perspective emphasizes that academic performance is influenced not only by individual characteristics but also by the surrounding microsystems (immediate environment) such as family, peers, and the university environment which directly interact with students' daily experiences. This ecological view is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where collectivist cultural norms highlight the importance of social and familial systems in students' educational adjustment [22].

Although previous studies have examined academic, social, and personal factors influencing first-year students' performance, few have explored how these factors operate together within an ecological system in the Malaysian higher education context. Prior research often isolates individual determinants, whereas this study integrates students' individual characteristics and well-being with multiple microsystems family, peers, and university environment to examine how their interactions shape lived academic experiences. By adopting an ecological lens, the study provides a new perspective that demonstrates how culturally embedded support structures, system-level interactions, and students' internal traits collectively influence academic performance. Despite identifying various factors affecting academic outcomes, there remains a gap in understanding how these ecological systems interact simultaneously, particularly in Malaysia's unique cultural and educational environment, as most prior studies consider these influences in isolation without capturing their combined effect on students lived experiences.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of first-year university students through an ecological lens, examining how academic, social, and personal factors operate across different microsystems to influence academic performance. The research seeks to answer the question: "What factors influence the academic performance of first-year university students in Malaysia?" by addressing this question, the study aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of influences shaping academic achievement and offer practical insights for interventions that support first-year students in Malaysian universities.

2. METHOD

2.1. Approach to data collection and participants

This study utilized qualitative, open-ended interviews to examine factors influencing the academic performance of first-year university students. Using purposive sampling, a common method in qualitative research for selecting information-rich participants [23], 15 Malaysian first- and second-year students were recruited, with second-year students providing retrospective insights into their first-year. Participants were contacted via direct outreach and phone, provided informed consent, and participated in interviews conducted in their preferred settings, such as coffee shops or online video calls. A semi-structured format guided discussion with questions like, "What do you feel has influenced your academic performance the most since starting university?" The flexible approach encouraged elaboration, enabling in-depth insights. All interviews were recorded with consent and anonymized, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time.

2.2. Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun and Clarke [24]. The process began with familiarization, which involved transcribing the interviews and thoroughly reviewing the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the data. This was followed by coding, where relevant text segments related to the research questions were identified and labelled. The codes were then organized into broader themes during the theme generation phase. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed to ensure accuracy and distinctiveness. Each theme was then defined and named to clearly capture its essence. Finally, the writing-up stage involved synthesizing the analysis by integrating participant quotes with the researcher's interpretations into a cohesive narrative that highlights the challenges and adjustments students faced during their transition to university life. This approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of students' experiences.

3. RESULTS

The analysis identifies five key themes influencing first-year university students' academic performance. These themes are family influence, peer influence, university environment, self-esteem and mental health, and study habits and lifestyle. Each theme highlights a different aspect of the students' experiences that impact their academic success.

3.1. Family influence

Nearly all the students indicated that family influence plays the most significant role in shaping their academic performance, both positively and negatively. For example, family support, particularly from parents, plays a crucial role by offering emotional and practical assistance that positively influences academic performance. One participant, Student B, stated, "*My family members' emotional support enhances my academic performance.*" Some students highlight how their parents' positive parenting influences their academic performance, for instance, Student D stated, "*My parents' good parenting helped me build character, which supported me in university life and my academic success.*"

However, some students complain that their parents' negative parenting styles, such as being authoritarian, neglectful, and permissive, negatively affect their academic performance. For example, Student A reported, "*My dad is strict or authoritarian and often gets angry, saying harsh things, which makes it hard for me to focus on my studies, and my grades are dropping because of it.*" According to the students, being strict or authoritarian negatively impacts academic performance, but being too permissive showing love and giving freedom without proper guidance can also have a negative effect. Student E mentioned, "*My mom is really loving and lets me make my own decisions. But sometimes I feel I don't have proper guidance, and when I ask for help, she just says, 'Decide for yourself.' It stresses me out and makes it hard to focus on my studies.*"

As mentioned above, being overly strict or overly loving without providing guidance can negatively impact a student's academic performance. Likewise, being unbothered or neglecting a child leads to similar effects. Student F shared, "*My parents don't pay attention to my studies or stress, and I can't rely on them for support. It feels like I'm on my own, which affects my grades.*" Moreover, familial financial issues are also one of the influences on students' academic performance. For example, Student M stated, "*My family's financial struggles worry me constantly, and it's affecting my grades.*"

3.2. Peer influence

Most of the students highlight the role of good friends and peers in providing emotional, social, and academic support, contributing to better academic performance. Student A highlighted, "*I have a close friend at another university who helps me stay calm when I'm stressed about my studies. My supportive classmates also share insights that help me excel.*"

According to students' experiences, having a supportive group of friends and peers is crucial for academic success. However, some students face challenges like peer pressure or toxic friendships that negatively impact their academic performance and lead to feelings of isolation. Student G stated, "*Some university friends pressured me into smoking or vaping, which distracted me from my studies, so I distanced myself from them.*"

3.3. University environment

Most of the students highlighted that access to university libraries, warm lecturers, and a supportive university environment fosters better academic performance. For example, Student A shared, "*I think my university is a great place to study. It feels safe and comfortable, the library and librarians are helpful, and lecturers support us even outside class. All of this helps me succeed academically.*"

From the students' comments above, it's clear that a positive university environment, along with supportive staff and lecturers, is crucial for achieving good grades. However, some students have had negative experiences with their lecturers, which have adversely affected their performance. For example, Student O reported, "*Some lecturers give unclear instructions and seem indifferent, which makes it hard for me to perform well.*"

3.4. Self-esteem and mental health

Personal motivation, such as being confident and having high self-esteem, is good for academic performance. Most students highlight that self-esteem plays a crucial role in performing well academically. For example, Student F stated, "*I've always been confident in my learning. Doing well in exams boosted my self-esteem and motivates me to study harder.*"

On the other hand, most of the students mentioned their poor self-esteem and mental health challenges in university, and this makes their academic journey harder. Student K reported, "*My worst university experience was a harshly critiqued presentation. It hurt my self-esteem and mental health, causing stress and panic that affected my academic performance.*"

3.5. Study habits and lifestyle

Some students reported that they have good study habits, and effective note-taking helps them perform well. Student D stated, "*I usually spend most of my time on self-study, note-taking, and preparation for classes, assignments, and exams has mostly influenced my academic performance since starting university.*" Then, several students stated that they chose a negative lifestyle with distractions such as poor sleeping patterns and procrastination to hinder academic performance. Student E highlighted, "*My sleep schedule is irregular because I often stay up late playing games with my roommates, leaving me tired and sometimes missing classes or tests.*"

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined the multifaceted factors influencing first-year university students' academic performance in Malaysian universities, focusing on parenting styles, peer relationships, the university environment, personal habits, and psychological well-being. While previous research has explored these variables independently, limited attention has been given to how these systems interact within a single ecosystem. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [21], the findings illustrate how family, peers, institutional contexts, and individual characteristics collectively shape students' academic trajectories.

This study's findings indicate that students with authoritative parents experienced higher academic success due to the emotional and practical support they received. In contrast, students with authoritarian parents struggled with excessive pressure, while those with permissive or neglectful parents faced difficulties due to a lack of guidance and structure. Some students reported that excessive parental freedom led to confusion and stress, making it harder to focus on academics. This aligns with previous research demonstrating that authoritative parenting fosters academic achievement, while authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful parenting styles tend to hinder academic progress [25]–[27].

Supportive peer relationships helped students cope with academic demands by providing emotional support and practical assistance. Many students credited their friends for keeping them motivated and engaged in their studies. However, negative peer influence was also evident, with some students reporting engagement in procrastination or unhealthy habits due to peer pressure. This supports existing research showing that peer influence significantly affects students' academic behaviors, with both positive and negative consequences [28]. Additionally, studies indicate that students exposed to peers engaging in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) are significantly more likely to adopt similar behaviors, highlighting the risks associated with negative peer environments [29].

This study found that students who perceived their university as supportive, with accessible resources and responsive lecturers, reported greater academic satisfaction and success. Conversely, students who faced unclear academic instructions or disengaged lecturers experienced frustration and a decline in performance. These findings are in line with research suggesting that a well-structured university environment fosters academic achievement by enhancing students' sense of belonging and institutional support [30], [31]. On the other hand, dissatisfaction with the university setting has been shown to negatively impact students' well-being and academic performance [30], [31].

Across the three main microsystems, students' experiences suggest that family support especially from parents plays the most dominant role during the first-year transition. Because many students have just moved out of their homes and are adjusting to hostel life, parental values, reassurance, and regular communication help reduce homesickness and provide emotional stability that supports academic focus [8]. At the same time, a supportive university environment, particularly approachable lecturers who clarify doubts

and strong academic resources such as library services, further strengthens students' academic confidence [30]. Peer relationships also play a critical role: having friends or close peers who are experiencing similar transitions provides emotional comfort and reduces feelings of isolation, even when they are studying at different institutions [32]. However, these same systems can also exert negative effects. Students with authoritarian parents reported feeling unheard or pressured, leading them to depend more heavily on peers sometimes resulting in exposure to unhealthy behaviors such as smoking or vaping. Similarly, when lecturers provided unclear instructions or inconsistent guidance, peers became the primary source of academic help. These patterns show that the family, peer, and university microsystems do not function in isolation; rather, students draw on each system differently depending on the type of support or challenge they encounter.

Personal motivation, confidence, and self-esteem emerged as significant contributors to academic success [33]. Many students highlighted that high self-esteem bolstered their motivation and ability to perform well. For instance, one student shared that previous academic achievements enhanced their self-confidence, which in turn fuelled a competitive drive to excel in university studies. This aligns with research indicating that self-efficacy and positive self-perception facilitate goal-directed behavior and academic engagement [34]. Conversely, students experiencing low self-esteem and mental health challenges reported difficulties in maintaining focus and achieving academically [33], [35]. One student recounted a stressful presentation where harsh critiques undermined their confidence, resulting in heightened stress, panic, and impaired concentration. These experiences underscore the negative impact of poor mental health on learning outcomes and highlight the interplay between psychological well-being and academic performance. Overall, these findings suggest that interventions supporting students' self-esteem and mental health are essential for fostering resilience, motivation, and academic achievement.

Effective study habits played a crucial role in students' academic performance. Students who engaged in structured note-taking and organization reported better retention and understanding of course materials, which contributed to higher grades. Poor sleep habits were a common barrier to academic success, with many students experiencing daytime fatigue that negatively impacted their focus and productivity. This supports previous research indicating that students who develop structured learning habits tend to perform better academically [36]. Additionally, studies show that approximately 50% of college students experience daytime sleepiness, which affects their ability to concentrate in classes and study sessions [37]–[39].

Taken together, this study demonstrates that academic performance among first-year students emerges from a dynamic interplay of familial, peer, institutional, and individual factors. Authoritative parenting, positive peer networks, supportive university structures, high self-esteem, good mental health, and strong study habits collectively promote academic success. Conversely, restrictive or neglectful parenting, negative peer influence, unsupportive institutional climates, poor self-esteem, and unhealthy routines hinder academic progress. Viewing these findings through an ecological lens highlights the importance of addressing these influences collectively rather than in isolation.

Future studies should examine how parenting styles shape coping mechanisms, how university policies can mitigate negative peer dynamics, and how digital learning environments influence study habits and sleep patterns. Interventions that bolster psychological well-being, foster positive peer communities, and enhance institutional support can help optimise academic adjustment for first-year university students.

4.1. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study, grounded in thematic analysis, provides valuable insights into the factors influencing academic performance among university students. However, several limitations must be considered. The small-scale, qualitative nature of the research, focusing on first- and second-year students, limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, such as selective memory and social desirability. While thematic analysis offers in-depth insights into students' experiences, it does not measure the frequency or scale of the challenges discussed. The volunteer-based participant selection may have also excluded students facing greater difficulties or lacking social support, potentially skewing the results. Furthermore, the study's qualitative design did not explore the relationships between various factors, such as academic challenges and coping mechanisms, nor did it adopt a longitudinal approach to track changes over time.

Future research should incorporate a larger and more diverse sample, including students across different academic years and those facing significant challenges, to enhance the generalizability of findings. Quantitative methods could further assess the broader impact of the identified themes and explore how parenting styles shape students' coping mechanisms. Investigating the effectiveness of university policies in mitigating negative peer influences and examining digital learning environments' role in shaping study habits and sleep patterns could offer deeper insights. A more comprehensive approach would provide a clearer understanding of the factors influencing academic success across a broader student population.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex challenges that first-year university students face during their transition, ranging from academic demands to social, emotional, and mental adjustments. Factors such as family influence, parenting styles, peer influence, university support systems, financial stability, lifestyle, study habits, and time management play critical roles in shaping students' academic performance and overall well-being. While many students develop effective coping mechanisms, others struggle with maladaptive behaviors, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support from family, friends, and the university. These findings underscore the importance of creating supportive environments that foster not only academic success but also personal growth and emotional resilience.

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C : **C**onceptualization

M : **M**ethodology

So : **S**oftware

Va : **V**alidation

Fo : **F**ormal analysis

I : **I**nvestigation

R : **R**esources

D : **D**ata Curation

O : **O**riting - **O**riginal Draft

E : **E**riting - **R**eview & **E**ditng

Vi : **V**isualization

Su : **S**upervision

P : **P**roject administration

Fu : **F**unding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

INFORMED CONSENT

We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research involving human participants complied with all relevant national regulations and institutional policies and adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research (Reference No: UTMREC-2025-159).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [PGS]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

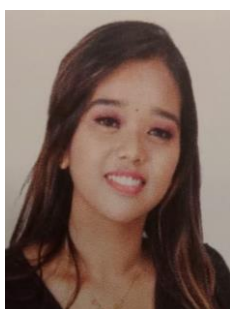
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