

Mentoring Communication Practices and Their Relationship with Study Performance
(Amalan Komunikasi Dalam Pementoran dan Hubungannya dengan Prestasi Akademik)

AZMAN ISMAIL, NAJIHAH OMAR & NOR AIN ABDULLAH

ABSTRACT

According to the recent literature connecting to institutions of higher learning, mentoring communication practices have two important features: interpersonal communication and communication openness. These communication practices may lead to an improved mentees' study performance. Although many studies have been done, the role of mentoring communication practices as an essential determinant has been left unexplained in the institutions of higher learning research literature. Therefore, this study was undertaken to examine the effect of mentoring communication practices on study performance. A survey method was employed to collect self-administered questionnaires from undergraduate accounting, economics and management students at a public research university in Malaysia. The results of SmartPLS path model analysis demonstrate that interpersonal communication does not act as an essential determinant of mentees' study performance, while communication openness does act as an essential determinant of mentees' study performance in the organizational sample. Additionally, this study offers discussion, implications and conclusion.

Keywords: Interpersonal communication, communication openness, study performance, SmartPLS

ABSTRAK

Menurut kajian lepas berkaitan institusi pengajian tinggi, amalan komunikasi dalam pementoran mempunyai dua ciri utama: Komunikasi interpersonal dan komunikasi terbuka. Pelaksanaan amalan komunikasi ini dapat membantu meningkatkan prestasi akademik mentee. Walaupun telah banyak kajian dilakukan, namun peranan komunikasi dalam pementoran sebagai pemboleh ubah peramal masih kurang dibincangkan dalam institusi pengajian tinggi. Oleh itu, tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengukur kesan amalan komunikasi dalam pementoran terhadap prestasi akademik. Data kajian diperolehi daripada mahasiswa Ijazah Sarjana Muda dalam pengurusan akaun, ekonomi dan pengurusan di sebuah universiti penyelidikan awam di Malaysia, dengan menggunakan kaedah kaji selidik. Model laluan Smart Partial Least Squares (SmartPLS) telah digunakan untuk melakukan pengujian hipotesis dan keputusan pengujian ini mengesahkan bahawa pelaksanaan komunikasi interpersonal tidak berupaya bertindak sebagai pemboleh ubah peramal yang penting kepada prestasi akademik mentee. Sebaliknya, pelaksanaan komunikasi terbuka berupaya bertindak sebagai pemboleh ubah peramal yang penting kepada prestasi akademik mentee. Justeru itu, perbincangan, implikasi dan kesimpulan turut dihuraikan dalam kajian ini.

Kata kunci: Komunikasi Interpersonal, Komunikasi terbuka, Prestasi Akademik, SmartPLS

INTRODUCTION

One of the first records of a “mentoring” is found in Greek mythology “The Odyssey” written by Homer. A wise man named Mentor is given the task of educating Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. When Odysseus went off to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted the care of his kingdom and his son to Mentor, a wise and trusted counsellor (Abdullah et al., 2015; Ismail et al., 2016). Traditionally, Mentor has been described as a guide, role model, advisor, teacher and supporter (Malik, 2013). Mentoring are present in a variety of disciplines and promote an environment in which mentees can perform and enhance at optimal levels (Boswell, 2015). Therefore, educationists and counsellors practices mentoring as an important non-formal learning method to complement formal teaching-learning program and student development programs in colleges and universities (Cornelius et al., 2016; Bell & Bell, 2016)

In an institution of higher learning mentoring program, mentor is academic staff (i.e., knowledgeable and experienced person) and mentee is students (i.e., less knowledgeable and experienced person). Relationship between mentors and mentees has been important instrument to help mentees set up the right targets, think about career options and progress, and organize learning to enhance their potentials, identities, skills, performance and become the person they want to be. As a result, this may upgrade the capability of mentees to sustain and perform their responsibilities and leadership, use new problem solving techniques, and ease them adapting with future needs and challenges (Dopson et al., 2016, Bell & Bell, 2016; Cummings & Worley, 2009).

In order to achieve the higher education mentoring goals, top management of the institution normally designs two major types of mentoring program: formal mentoring and informal mentoring (Cornelius, 2016; Ismail et al., 2014, 2016). A formal mentoring is often defined as a structure of relationship between mentors and mentees is organized based on uniform norms, continuous action plans, time frame, and particular goals. While, an informal mentoring is usually defined as mentoring relationship is organized based on specific demands, spontaneous and ad-hoc action. A well-designed mentoring program is a necessity, specifically effective communication is clearly determinant to achieve the aims (Abdullah et al., 2015; Cornelius, 2016, Yang et al., 2015).

Moreover, many scholars think that interpersonal communication, communication openness and study performance have different meanings, but strongly interconnected constructs. For

example, the willingness of mentors and mentees to properly implement interpersonal communication and communication openness in mentoring relationship may lead to an enhanced mentees’ study performance. However, the role of mentoring communication practices as an important determinant has been little discussed in the higher education mentoring research literature. As such, there is a need to fill in the gap of literature by quantifying the effect of mentoring communication practices on mentees’ study performance. Specifically, the present study is conducted to answer two major objectives: first, to evaluate the relationship between interpersonal communication and mentees’ study performance. Second, to evaluate the relationship between communication openness and mentees’ study performance.

Following this section, this paper discusses five important issues: (1) literature review section aims to establish a theoretical foundation of the interrelation between interpersonal communication, communication openness and study performance; (2) methodology section will discuss the research design undertaken in this study; (3) results of the analysis will be highlighted in the findings section; (4) the implication of result will be discussed in the following section, and (5) conclusion of the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Extant literature has shown that the capability of mentors and mentees to implement effective communication in mentoring program may have a significant impact on mentees’ outcomes, especially study performance (Ismail et al., 2016; Ismail et al., 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005). The role of communication between mentors and mentees as an important determinant of mentees’ study performance is consistent with the essence of organizational behaviour theory. For example, Rogers’ (1951) humanistic theory explains that a good instructor should act as a mentor where he/she only facilitates and avoids threat learners in learning-centered approach to achieve their goals. Meanwhile, Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory describes that identity and intimacy are important during an adolescent stage. If a young adult’s self and personalities is appropriately developed this may lead to be a productive member in society. Application of these psychological theories in a higher learning mentoring program shows that the notion of learning-centered approach and good development of young adults’ self and personalities can be translated as communication between mentors and mentees.

Mentoring Enactment Theory (MET) was proposed by Kalbfleish (2002) which explains on the mentoring relationship and the pivotal role of communication. The theory highlighted that in order to reap the best from the relationship, communication strategy should originate from the students rather than from the mentor. These theories have gained strong support from the higher education mentoring research literature.

Mentoring literature on higher education mentoring highlights that mentors and mentees often implement effective communication in two major forms: interpersonal communication and communication openness (Hernandez, 2016; Johnson et al., 2017; Ismail et al., 2012). Interpersonal communication is broadly seen as the sharing of feelings, knowledge, thought, experiences between mentors and mentees about particular aspects of things (Johnson et al. 2017; Cummings & Worley, 2009). In specific, the importance of the interpersonal communication were evidence in the literature. Sarwari et al. (2016) highlighted that the interpersonal of communication is essential for the higher education students especially when originated from a different cultural background. Meanwhile, communication openness is generally viewed as the willingness to communicate honestly with each other, practice high degree of information sharing in the organisation, and share feelings and thought openly with self-disclosure as an appropriate stimulus (Hernandez, 2016; De Vito, 2008; Troy et al., 2001). Jain et al. (2016) elucidates that open communication enables the mentees to discover their real talent and potential which eventually can be a meaningful resources for the performance. Thus, it was hypothesized that:

H1: Interpersonal communication is positively related to mentees' study performance.

H2: Communication openness is positively related to mentees' study performance.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A cross-sectional method is used as the main procedure to collect data because it is suitable for combining data from the institutions of higher learning mentoring literature, the semi-structured interview and the actual survey. This procedure is able to reduce inadequacy of the single method bias and increase the quality and accuracy of the data being collected (Sekaran & Bougie, 2011; Zikmund, 2000). This study was done

at the Faculty of Economics and Management in a Malaysian public research university. The name of this university was kept anonymous for confidential reasons. This university was established in 1970 and its motto is to inspire futures and nurture opportunities. As one of the strategies to produce competent and marketable undergraduates, mentoring programs are formally planned and implemented at all faculties in the university. The professional development center of the university is responsible to harness the soft skills and strengthen the andragogy principles of the academic staff. These competencies are essential for developing academic staff as effective mentors as they are expected to be able to communicate well and openly with the students. Good interpersonal and open communication skills help undergraduate students (i.e., mentees) to improve in their studies. Although this relationship is imperative, little is known about the influence of mentoring communication practices on mentees' study performance in the university. The paucity of these empirical evidences has inspired the researchers to further explore the relationship.

At the initial stage of data collection, the survey questionnaire was developed based on the mentoring program literature. Next, a semi-structured interview was implemented involving nine undergraduate students who represent economic, accounting and business schools at the Faculty of Economics and Management in a public research university in Malaysia. The interview information helped the researchers to ensure that all questions were important, relevant, clear and suitable for an actual study. Besides, the information was also used to understand the nature and features of interpersonal communication, communication openness and study performance, as well as the relationship between such variables in the organization. Further, a back-to-back translation technique was employed to translate the survey questionnaires into English and Malay languages for the purpose of upgrading the validity and reliability of research results (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010; Zikmund, 2000).

Measures

The survey questionnaire consists of two sections: interpersonal communication (ICN) and communication openness (COP). First, interpersonal communication had three items and communication openness had four items which were adapted from mentoring related communication literature (Foxon, 1993; Ismail et al., 2012; Santos & Reigadas, 2005; Sullivan, 2000; Yamnill & McLean, 2001; Young & Cates, 2005). Second, study performance (SPE) had six items

which were adapted from study performance related mentoring program literature (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Irving *et al.*, 2012; Ismail *et al.*, 2012; Rayle *et al.*, 2006). All questions in the questionnaires were assessed using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree/dissatisfied” (1) to “strongly agree/satisfied” (7). Respondent characteristics were used as controlling variables because this research focused on undergraduate students’ attitudes.

Sample

The targeted population is undergraduate students at the Faculty of Economics and Management in the studied university. A purposive sampling plan was utilized to send out 300 survey questionnaires to the undergraduate students. This sampling plan was selected because the head of the faculty could not provide the list of undergraduate students for confidential reasons, and this situation did not permit the researchers to randomly select participants for this study. Of the number, 136 usable questionnaires were returned to the researchers, yielding 45.3 percent of response rate. The survey questionnaires were answered by the participants based on their consent and a voluntarily basis.

Data Analysis

As recommended by prominent social scientists, namely Henseler *et al.*, (2009) and Hair *et al.* (2017), the SmartPLS is the most appropriate statistical to be used in analysing the survey questionnaire data. The procedure of data analysis is: first, the confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the validity and reliability of survey questionnaire data. Second, the path coefficients (i.e., standardized betas and t statistics) was used to assess the hypothesized model. Third, the overall predictive strength of the model was assessed using the value of R^2 . The strength of model was determined based the criteria: 0.02 (weak), 0.13 (moderate) and 0.26 (substantial) (Cohen, 1988). Finally, the model’s predictive relevance (Q^2) was determined based on the criteria: 0.02 (weak), 0.15 (medium) and 0.35 (large) (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

FINDINGS

Table 1 presents the sample profile. Majority respondents were females (80 %), aged between 19 and 21 years (73 %), matriculation certificate holders (75%), third year students (78 %), had CGPA less than 3.00 (84 %), and management school students (54 %).

TABLE 1. Respondents’ Characteristics (n=136)

Respondents’ Profile	Sub-Profile	Percentage
Gender	Male	20
	Female	80
Age	19 to 21 years old	73
	22 to 24 years old	24
	25 to 27 years old	3
Education	STPM	7
	Diploma	18
	Matriculation	75
Year of Study	First year	13
	Second Year	8
	Third Year	78
	Fourth Year	1
Academic Achievement	CGPA more than 3.0	16
	CGPA less than 3.0	84
School	Management	54
	Economics	21
	Accounting	25

Note: SPM/MCE : *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia/ Malaysia Certificate of Education*
 STPM : *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia/ Higher School Certificate*

Table 2 presents the factor loadings and cross loadings for different constructs. The correlation between items and factors had higher loadings than other items in the different constructs, and the loadings for all items were higher than 0.7 in their own constructs, showing that all items met the acceptable

standard of convergent validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). Meanwhile, the values of composite reliability were greater than 0.8, showing that the instrument had high internal consistency (Henseler *et al.*, 2009; Nunally & Benstein, 1994).

TABLE 2. The Results of Factor Loadings and Cross Loadings for Different Construct

Construct / Item	ICN	COP	SPE	Composite Reliability
<u>ICN</u>				0.912
Enhance knowledge sharing.	0.870			
Upgrade understanding	0.865			
Deliver useful information	0.906			
<u>COP</u>				0.941
Achieve mentoring objectives		0.907		
Inculcate positive values		0.896		
Enhance thinking skills		0.888		
Identify suitable problem solving techniques		0.886		
<u>SPE</u>				0.945
Identify effective learning methods			0.891	
Use suitable methods to complete assignments			0.873	
Enhance skills to answer tests/exam questions			0.873	
Perform responsibilities			0.879	
Complete assignments with the time frame			0.824	
Score higher cumulative grade achievement average			0.817	

Table 3 presents the outcomes of convergent and discriminant validity analyses. The values of average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs higher than 0.50, signifying that all constructs satisfied the acceptable standard of convergent validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009). While, the values of AVE square root

for all constructs in diagonal higher than the squared correlation with other constructs in off diagonal, signifying that all constructs satisfied the criterion of discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2009; Yang, 2009).

TABLE 3. The Results of Convergent and Discriminant Validity Analyses

Variable	AVE	ICN	COP	SPE
ICN	0.776	0.881		
COP	0.799	0.600	0.894	
SPE	0.740	0.355	0.508	0.860

Table 4 presents that the mean values for the constructs were from 5.41 to 6.06, indicating that the levels of ICN, COP, and SPE ranging from high (4) to highest level (7). The correlation coefficients for the relationship between the independent variable (*i.e.*,

ICN and COP) and the dependent variable (*i.e.*, SPE) were less than 0.50, indicating that the data was not affected by a serious collinearity problem (Hair *et al.*, 2017).

TABLE 4. Variance Inflation Factor and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance Inflation Factor
1. ICN	6.06	.731	3
2. COP	5.72	.809	1.563
3. SPE	5.41	.905	1.563

Note: Significant at $**p < 0.01$

Reliability Estimation is Shown in a Diagonal

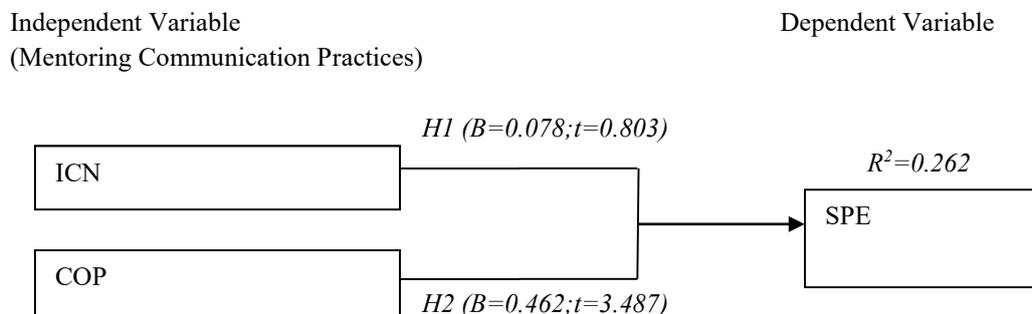
Outcomes of Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2

Figure 2 presents that the inclusion of ICN and COP in the analysis explained 26 percent of the variance in dependent variable. This result provides a strong support for the model. As an extension of testing of the strength of research model, a test of predictive relevance for the reflective endogenous latent variable was further conducted using a Blindfolding procedure. The outcomes of this test displayed that the value of Q^2 for study performance was 0.162, indicating that it was higher than zero for the reflective endogenous latent variable. This result has predictive relevance. In terms

of an explanatory power, the value of Q^2 value for study performance was higher than 0.15 (Hair *et al.*, 2017), indicating that it had medium predictive relevance.

Specifically, the results of the hypothesis testing highlighted two important results: first, ICN was not significantly correlated with SPE ($\beta=0.078;t=0.803$), therefore H1 was not supported. Second, COP was significantly correlated with SPE ($\beta=0.462;t=3.487$), therefore H2 was supported. In overall, the result confirms that ICN does not act as an essential determinant of mentees' study performance. Conversely, COP does act as an essential determinant of mentees' study performance.

FIGURE 2. The Outcomes of Testing Hypotheses 1 and 2



Note: Significant at $t > 1.96$

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm that ICN does not act an important determinant of SPE, but COP does act as an important determinant of SPE. In the context of this study, mentors have taken proactive actions to plan and implement formal and/or informal mentoring relationships according to the broad policies and procedures as established by their stakeholders. According to the majority of respondents, the levels of ICN, COP, and SPE are high. This situation describes that the implementation of interpersonal communication in mentoring relationships may not enhance mentees' study performance. On the contrary, the implementation of communication openness in mentoring relationships may enhance mentees' study performance in the organization.

This study provides three major implications: theoretical contribution, robustness of research methodology and practical contribution. In the aspect of theoretical contribution, the results of this study are consistent with the notion of Rogers' (1951) humanistic theory and Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory, which reveals that the ability of mentors to appropriately implement communication openness in formal and/or informal mentoring activities may lead to higher mentees' study performance (Ismail & Ridzwan, 2012; Jain et al., 2016).

Contrarily, the implementation of interpersonal communication has not enhanced mentees' study performance. A careful observation of the semi-structured interview outcomes shows that the results may be influenced by external factors: first, diversity of respondents' backgrounds may affect their views and judgements about the significance of implementing interpersonal communication in mentoring programs. Second, formal meeting hours between mentors and mentees for every semester is only four times and these meeting hours may not be enough to encourage mentors and mentees to discuss new learning techniques, demonstrate new strategies to overcome academic problems, and share useful experiences in the mentoring programs. Third, faculties' research and publication policies may cause academic staff to give a more priority to achieve their key performance indicators rather than spending time creating personal bond with mentees. Four, faculties take excellent students from matriculation, higher secondary school, and/or diploma programs. These students already have strong academic backgrounds, can learn independently and therefore less dependent on mentoring programs to excel in their studies. These factors may have overruled the effectiveness of interpersonal communication in the

mentoring program models of the organization.

In terms of the robustness of research methodology, the survey questionnaires used in this study has fulfilled the requirements of validity and reliability analyses. This condition could lead to produced accurate and reliable research results.

With respect to practical contribution, findings from this study can be used as important guidelines by practitioners to improve mentoring programs management in institutions of higher learning. The objective may be achieved if the management focuses on the following issues: firstly, update mentoring training curriculums for all mentors. For example, the content of training should focus on understanding student psychology, andragogy and interaction skills. In order to strengthen this content, case studies and team building methods should be used to upgrade mentors' skills in exploring student potentials and guide them to choose appropriate careers in future. Second, group mentees according to their academic performance. For example, faculties should group mentees according to the same level of cumulative grade point average because it may ease mentors to meet the needs and expectations of mentees. Third, improve rewards for committed mentees. For example, mentees who commit with mentoring activities should be given better rewards such as recognition certificates, given a priority to stay in campus, and register more credit hours in learning semesters. Finally, diversify learning activities in mentoring relationships. For example, learning activities should be done outside formal schedules such as picnics and tournaments with other mentoring groups in order to create warm relationship and knowledge sharing. This environment may enhance mentees' psychosocial such as sociability, solidarity and proactive personality. If these suggestions are considered this may motivate mentees to support the organizational mentoring goals.

CONCLUSION

This study verified a conceptual framework developed based on the institutions of higher learning mentoring research literature. The results of confirmatory factor analysis confirmed that the survey questionnaire data satisfied the requirements of validity and reliability analyses. The results of testing the research hypotheses via Smart PLS path model analysis displayed two important findings: firstly, communication openness was an important determinant of mentees' study performance. This result also has supported and extended the institutions of higher learning mentoring

literature published in Western countries and Asian countries. Secondly, interpersonal communication was not an important determinant of mentees' study performance. A careful observation of the semi-structured interview outcomes shows that this result may be overruled by external factors, that are 1) different respondent backgrounds may have different views and judgements about the effect and advantages of implementing interpersonal communication in mentoring programs; 2) formal meetings are not enough to enable mentors and mentees to discuss learning techniques, demonstrate new strategies to overcome academic problems and share useful experiences in the mentoring programs; 3) high standard for the university's key performance indicators in research and publication have strongly motivated lecturers to give a priority in achieving their job targets and this may decrease their times to build personal bond with mentees; and 4) undergraduate student intake for the university is excellent students graduated from matriculation, higher secondary school, and/or diploma. They already have strong academic backgrounds, can learn independently and less dependent on mentoring programs to perform their studies. Therefore, current research and practice within institutions of higher learning sector needs to incorporate interpersonal communication and communication openness as crucial dimensions of the mentoring program domain. This research further suggests that the willingness of mentors and mentees to properly implement interpersonal communication and communication openness in mentoring relationships will strongly invoke positive mentee outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, career choice and leadership skills). Thus, these positive behavior may lead to maintained and supported the academic strategic vision and missions of higher learning education in an era of global economy.

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- Azman Ismail (Prof. Madya Dr.)
Faculty of Economics and Management,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
43600 Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. MALAYSIA
E-mel: azisma08@gmail.com / azisma12@ukm.edu.my
- Najihah Omar (Cik)
Faculty of Economics and Management,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
43600 Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. MALAYSIA
E-mel: najihahomar777@yahoo.com
- Nor' Ain Abdullah (Cik)
Institute of Islam Hadhari, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
43600 Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. MALAYSIA
E-mel: norainabdullah_ukm@yahoo.com