

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CHOICES OF CONCENTRATION FIELD AMONG LIBERAL STUDIES STUDENTS IN UKM

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ABSTRACT

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is the first public university in Malaysia which takes up the challenge to offer Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies. This degree is the first personalized curriculum degree which entitles students to choose their own curriculum structure, which is called concentration field in this program. The concentration field is created by students to fulfil their future personal goals and career. This paper will highlight the fields chosen for their concentration and factors contributing to their decision. The study will use self-administered survey to registered Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies students. The data collected will be analyzed descriptively. Findings show that there are 52 combinations of concentrations fields which cross-disciplines of science, technology, humanities, and social science. Three main factors which influence decision in choosing the concentration field are interest, future career, and academic ability. Two lowest factors are parents and peers influence. This study suggests a model of success for Liberal Studies students includes three internal factors i.e., interest, ambition and academic ability, and three external support which are parents, peers and the university. This paper will give insights to other higher education institutions that are interested in offering this future-focused curriculum in line with the aspiration of the Malaysian Education Blueprint.

Keywords: Liberal studies; Concentration, Citra UKM; Malaysian Education Blueprint; Future-focused curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'liberal education' consists of two implicit meanings. First, it is not a local or regional idea, but a western notion. Second, it means the separation from religion. The 19th century, liberal education was advocated by Western rationalists and philosophers, such as John Henry Newman, Thomas Huxley, and F. D. Maurice. Therefore, Liberal Education is a foreign and secular notion imported from abroad. By the late 1800s, college students had the choice of choosing courses for themselves, without having to comply with requirements, and choosing a concentration, or a major, in one particular area of study. Original idea of choosing what suits one's individual interests, needs, and goals. Hence, a change of educational approach was made in America's society in the late eighteenth century due to social forces that called for a more utilitarian and practical education that would prepare students for employment. Teachers were trained in state normal schools for jobs in American schools whereby vocation education became the focus of schools.

Toward the end of the 20th century, hedonistic values of education emerged. A skewed stance toward education no longer for the sake of education. According to many supporters of liberal education, specialized study does not positively impact societal development. Thus, a new movement for liberal education was launched in the early twentieth century. However,

religion is left behind. The idea of secularization retains its importance. A heated debate ensued in 1947 when the President's Commission on Higher Education recommended that students attend a balanced curriculum that offers "specialized training to cater to a thousand careers" while helping them to transmit their common culture toward common citizenship. At the undergraduate level, it often includes a global and pluralistic curriculum that enables students to explore multiple disciplines and learning strategies while studying at least one field in-depth.

American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) characterizes a liberal education this way: "Ideally, a liberal education produces individuals who are free from provincialism, dogma, preconception, and ideology, who are aware of their opinions and judgments, and who are reflective of their actions." Liberally educated individuals tend to be sceptical of their own traditions; they are taught to think independently rather than conform to authority figures. This is in stark contrast to Malaysian values, which are centred on the philosophy of education. On the other hand, liberalism is not popular among the majority of Malaysians.

In Malaysia, the pursuit of knowledge is a tradition in our country, in addition, integrating knowledge is not a foreign concept to us. Muslim scholars have approached this subject in the past and interactions took place between western and Islamic civilization. This interaction, however, is selective in nature. Religion should be a balance between knowledge and wisdom; thus, religious beliefs are not separated, but integrated as explained in the Philosophy of Education (1988):

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"Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large" (Ismail 2015).

A philosophy of liberal education from the UKM point of view, which directly derives from the philosophy of education to which we subscribe. As the core and root of education itself, the word Liberal does not refer to liberating education from religion. We hold the position that a key component of UKM's philosophy is Islam and Liberal studies does not define liberating education from religion, but is defined by liberating the education from a specific field, inter-discipline and multi-discipline of different fields. Many misperception of the term Liberal still exists in Malaysia, therefore, we change the term Liberal to Citra, to refer to name of the program which is offered.

UKM became the first university in Malaysia to introduce the Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies (Hons) program (Program Sarjana Muda Sains Citra dengan Kepujian). UKM's Center for Liberal Studies (Pusat Citra Universiti, UKM) already begun offering the program starting with the 2018/2019 academic year. The unique aspect of the course is that it responds to the community's concerns regarding the future of marketability in light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies (Honours) is the first course that provides students the opportunity to embrace a more flexible and interdisciplinary form of learning instruction. The course is conducted in a manner in which each student constructs and creates his or her own areas of focus (concentration field) in accordance with their personal and career objectives under the guidance of their mentors, student academic planning committee (JKPAP) and SmSn Citra Program Committee.

Students who take the course will follow the 2u2i or 3u1i method, which means they will spend two or three years at university and another two or one year at the workplace during

work-based learning (WBL). The purpose of working-based learning (WBL) is to provide students with the opportunity to enter the industry after graduation. The benefits of this program over conventional programs, which focus exclusively on one area of expertise, are that graduates will develop a wide range of skills necessary for economic inclusion under the fourth industrial revolution. The program is delivered by adopting the Juke Box model which is flexible, inclusive cross-disciplinary, and transcends the boundaries of the campus and corporate environment.

Objective of this study is to highlight the student's field of concentration and factors that influence their choices. This study is important because this is the first such program offered by a government university and should be the reference for other universities to setup such programs in future.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a small-scale research, and a descriptive research design was used. 176 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies program from three cohorts participated in this study. They have to fill out self-administered survey which consists of closed ended and open-ended questions. The survey includes three different sections which are the students demographic profile, students' concentration and open-ended feedback regarding the study. Observations were also being made to identify the issues and challenges in running the program.

Analysis of the data are analysed descriptively. Objective of this study is to highlight the student's field of concentration and factors that influence their choices, and to identify the main issues and challenges in executing the unique program in a government university setting.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Main findings of the study answer the research objectives which is to identify students' concentration fields and understanding the factors that influences the decision. Results and discussion will be elaborated via two main sub topics i.e., student field of concentration and factors that influence the choice for concentration.

Demography

The study is executed on all cohorts of Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies UKM with total of 177 students. Only one student did not participate in the study (n = 176). The demography of respondents is as presented in Table 1. Majority of the students are female (68.8%, n = 121) and from the Malay ethnic group (89.8%, n=158). Students are also majority Muslim students (96%, n = 169).

Table 1. Demography profile of respondents.

| Demography profile | | % (n) |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 31.3 (55) |
| | Female | 68.8 (121) |
| Ethnic | Malay | 89.9 (158) |
| | Chinese | 1.1 (2) |
| | Indian | 4.5 (8) |
| | Others | 4.5 (8) |
| Religion | Islam | 96 (169) |
| | Hindu | 2.3 (4) |
| | Buddha | 1.1 (2) |
| | Cristian | 0.6 (1) |
| Cohort | 1 (2018/2019) | 43.2 (76) |
| | 2 (2019/2020) | 33.5 (59) |
| | 3 (2020/2021) | 41 (23) |

Student's Field of Concentration

As highlighted in the introduction regarding the Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies, in UKM, it is different from other conventional programs whereby students are free to choose their own concentration field. Concentration fields must consist of two to three different disciplines. Students craft their own curriculum with guidance from mentors and field experts. The concentration courses bears 60 credit from 120 credit in total for the whole program. Minimum credit for one concentration is 18 credits, and maximum is 30 credits.

From the analysis from three cohort of students, the results show that there are 52 different combinations of concentration fields that cross the fields of science, technology, humanities, and social sciences. Majority of the concentration chosen are from the Faculty of Social Science and Humanities (45%), 35% of the concentration are from Faculty of Economy and Management, and the other 20% are concentrations from other faculties. The most popular concentrations are Human Resource Management, Business Administration, Social work and Entrepreneurship. Table 2 describes examples of the combination concentrations taken by students taken randomly as an illustration.

Table 2. Examples of Concentration Combinations

| Student | Concentration 1 | Concentration 2 |
|---------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| A | Human Resource Management | Graphic Design |
| B | Data Science | Marketing |
| C | Business Administration | Digital Construction |
| D | Islamic Banking | Entrepreneurship |
| E | Social work | Marketing |

By having to create their own concentration for the Degree, students will need to explore and study on the field of interest before deciding. As part of the strategy to guide students to explore, their first year of study are designed to be filled by elective courses from across different faculties and areas. Students are encouraged to enrol in all the elective courses that might interest them. After exploring in the first year, students then will have to identify their concentration in year 2 and 3 of the program. These two years are crucial to complete most of their concentration courses, as the final year would be allocated for the Capstone Project and their Work-based learning (WBL).

It is interesting to observe how students combine the two or three concentrations together. Some students researched upon a specific career which interests them and decide on the concentration knowledge that they perceive would be important for that career. Others are

interested in both fields and decided to combine the two together. The concentrations fields are chosen by students, and facilitated by mentors. A meticulous process is done to approve the concentration field of a certain student. This is important to make sure that the combinations are relevant to the industry and fulfils a certain body of knowledge of the field to enable students to pursue future careers related.

The meticulous process of approving the concentration fields includes a series of committee meetings which is participated by mentors, invited field experts, industry representatives, Academic Department representative and University Senate representative during the final meeting. All the meetings critically discuss the courses organized in the concentration and the relevancy of the combinations. Feedbacks from each meeting are important as each curriculum is personalised for each student and continuous improvements are pivotal.

A research by Pitt and colleagues (Pitt et al 2017), states that students of liberal arts general education have the options to choose either to combine two similar majoring or two relatively different majors altogether. In this study among 240 undergraduates of liberal arts, identified that hyper-specialization (choosing similar majors) significantly concentrates student learning, whereas hypo-specialization (choosing very different majors) leads to more breadth in knowledge. Both have advantages to the students, but the aspiration of general education to create “all rounded graduates” requires students to have the breadth of multi discipline knowledge.

The Factors that Influence their Decision

A student preference in major field of study in college is being influenced by some factors that could be considered valuable in the success of their journey towards the completion the chosen degree program (Pesigan et al 2019). Due to the personalised curriculum structure of the program, students are required to decide on their concentration field. This study observes the factors which influence students’ decision in choosing their concentrations. Students are asked to rank the factors according to its weightage in making the decision, from 1 to 7. The factors that were listed are 1) interest towards the field, 2) parents influence, 3) future career plan, 4) peers influence, 5) own academic ability, 6) popularity of the field, and 7) concentration field that is easy to pass. Table 3 explains the ranking of factors from the student response, and the frequency being ranked as the first factor of choice.

Table 3. Factors that influence students’ decision making

| No. | Factors | Rank | Ranked as the main factor (n)* |
|-----|----------------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Student interest in the field selected | 1 | 112 |
| 2 | Based on their future career plans | 2 | 64 |
| 3 | Academic ability of the student | 3 | 50 |
| 4 | Popularity of the field | 4 | 35 |
| 5 | Easy field to pass | 5 | 17 |
| 6 | Parental influence | 6 | 17 |
| 7 | Peer influence | 7 | 13 |

*Students are able to choose more than one option as main factor

Many students (n=112) ranked interest in the field as the main factor which influence their concentration decision. Interest towards the field is a crucial factor that will motivate and encourage students to excel in their study as it creates the sense of belonging to the academic community (Pesigan et al 2014). Shin and Lee (2017) illustrated that intrinsic motivation is

formed by an individual's interest or enjoyment and produce individuals that are energetic which enables them to take actions with self-regulated strategies.

A study done on Information System students, show that students choose their majors according to what they perceive as interesting, and not too hard (Burns et al 2014). This corroborate the findings in this study as interest ranked the highest as the first factor for choosing concentration amongs Liberal Studies students in UKM. Although the factor of being 'not too hard' or easy, comes as fifth rank in this study.

In the second rank of the factors are future career plans. As one of an important element in choosing a degree is to fulfil future career plan needs. Several studies emphasized the importance of job prospects and high employability is an important factor to students in choosing a degree (Chavez et al. 2016, Dotong et al. 2017, Felicen & Borbon 2017, Piróg 2018). As unemployment is currently a huge issue, many of these students choose entrepreneurship concentration to able them to pursue an entrepreneurship journey, rather than working in government or private industries. These students are job creators, and not job seekers.

Academic ability is also an important consideration in choosing the field of concentration. In this study it is ranked as the third highest reason of choice. A strong academic background will allow them to succeed in academic pursuits in the future (Poropat 2014, Heaven & Ciarrochi 2012). Students must have skills and habits that assist them with learning, research, writing reports, and presenting. These skills include analysis, communication, interpersonal, planning, study, test-taking, and technical skills. (Ang 2015).

The two lowest factors are family and peer influence. In positive peer pressure, fellow peers influence students to do things which lead to positive growth. Hence, peers can influence one another positively (Jorien van Hoorn 2014), but it is observed that it does not influence many students in choosing the concentrations. Parental influence is also another factor that has an effect on the choices made by students (Hegna & Smette 2017). Parents should give their opinions, express positive attitudes, and communicate with their children when asked. Parents have a profound influence on their children's values, including religious values and issues related to their future, like educational choices. The closer the relationship with the child, the greater the influence they'll have.

Pesigan et al (2014), highlighted that there are their categories of factors that influence maritime degree students in Philippines to enroll into the degree, which are behavioral factors, environment factors and personal factors. Environmental factor such as; family, friend, career options and enumeration package, has higher level of influence to the decision process of the students in choosing a college degree followed by behavioral factors (character, attitude, ambitions, and personality). This is slightly different from the findings from this study, as environmental factors such as family and peers are two of the lowest ranked factors for UKM Liberal Studies Students.

Personal factors are described by Porter and Umbach (2006) as the alignment of students' personality, interests, beliefs, and even political views in choosing a college degree and is deemed an essential component in order to have most successful outcomes.

Observed upon the overall analysis of the factors, we propose that the students interest towards a certain field of knowledge needs to combine with future career options and also academic ability. These are three important internal factors i.e., personal interests, personal ambitions and academic ability, and three external factors which is important as support i.e., parents, peers and the university support. This is illustrated in the model of success for Liberal Studies students (Figure 1). Having interest alone does not guarantee success if the student has academic inabilities and thus, not being able to cope with the subjects. This is also true if the students only have the ambition towards their career option, academic inability will also create a setback.

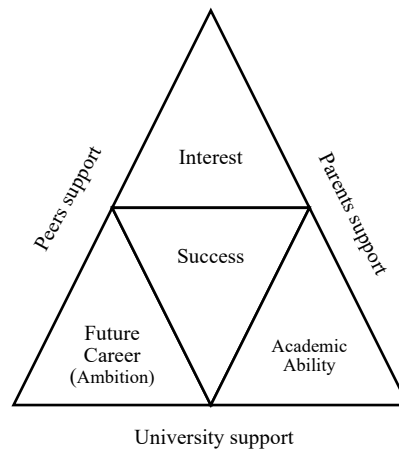


Figure 1. Model for success of Liberal Studies students

Issues and challenges

The implementation of a personalized curriculum requires the cooperation of all parties involved. Concentration fields are offered by other faculties within and outside UKM, so collaboration between departments is necessary for providing advice and allowing students to register for related subjects. Additionally, the lecturer's guidance and monitoring of the students is pivotal, since there are sometimes situations where SmSn Citra (Bachelor of Liberal Studies) students lack a strong foundation, and it may take a while before they fully grasp what is being discussed. Mentoring is defined as "a nurturing relationship that is based on mutual trust that leads to the development and professional growth of both the mentor and mentee" (Russel & Russell 2011). Mentoring can lead to increased academic skillset development and positive attitudes regarding academics, as well as can assist students in transitioning from the classroom to the work environment (Pinion & Hisel 2019).

Apart from that, Citra students should also have good interpersonal skills and high fighting spirit for success because they will have to get along with faculty students and sometimes, they are the only ones who are different (from SmSn Citra) among the faculty students. On top of that, it is equally important that the students are mature spiritually and emotionally. This was due to the fact that they needed to focus on two new fields. This is in line with a study by Pushkina (2020), whereby Liberal Studies is said to stimulate development for life-long learning, critical thinking, nurture the ability to communicate with others; but also views the program as a student-centered innovative pedagogy. In order to succeed, SmSn Citra students should understand and move along with the faculty students at a similar pace. It will sometimes happen that they will be left behind. Those who are weak or weak at heart will give up halfway. Consequently, they will become strong and capable of enduring learning until success occurs through their emotional and spiritual maturity.

CONCLUSION

The Bachelor of Science in Liberal Studies (Honours) enables students to embrace a more flexible and interdisciplinary method of teaching and learning. Students in this course construct their own concentration fields (areas of focus) according to their professional or personal goals. A student's interest, career goals, peer influence, parents influence, and academic talent will all

play major roles in determining the concentration field. The success of this program depends on the students' internal factors and also support from external environments.

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