

# Strategies to prevent dropouts

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SOME of the wealthiest and most influential entrepreneurs in the world such as Apple founder Steve Jobs, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Twitter co-founder Evan Williams and Whatsapp founder Jan Koum dropped out of college.

They called it quits and decided higher education was not for them.

Common reasons given include financial burden for the family and struggles with their courses. Some of them actually worked their way through university, only to quit before graduating.

Back on our shores at the Going Global 2016 Conference, the then Higher Education Ministry secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Noorul Anwar Mohd Nur said that accessibility to tertiary education in Malaysia has improved significantly from 14 per cent in the 1980s to more than 44 per cent in 2016.

However, she added that completing a qualification remains a challenge.

In the Quick Facts 2019: Malaysia Educational Statistics booklet published by the Education Ministry's Educational Planning and Research Division, 538,555 students were enrolled in 20 public universities.

The data also shows that engineering, manufacturing and construction programmes contributed to the highest number of those who did not graduate.

## A STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE

It never crossed Sakinah Atiqah Hazrol's mind that she would drop out of university and later enrol in another tertiary institution due to unfortunate circumstances.

An undergraduate from Universiti Tenaga Nasional (Uniten), Bangi from 2014 till 2017, Sakinah Atiqah studied what she thought was her passion — mechanical engineering.

"After I sat Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia, I was confident that I could pursue engineering even though my results were just adequate.

"I decided to follow my interest in physics and maths. But when I enrolled in the foundation in engineering course, I questioned myself, wondering if I had made the wrong choice.

"But I excelled in the course, proving to myself that I had what it takes to be an engineer," she said.

Then it was time for Sakinah Atiqah to choose her major and she was offered a study loan by MARA and a placement at Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL)-Malaysian France Institute in Bangi to pursue mechanical engineering.



**The problem persists if students are too shy to ask for help.**

**M. IQBAL SARIPAN**  
UPM deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international)



After a semester, her study loan was revoked due to the financial crisis MARA was facing at the time. She left UniKL-Malaysian France Institute and started over at Uniten.

"I enjoyed learning physics and calculus during the first semester but the subjects got more difficult with each semester and I lacked understanding in chemistry, a requirement of the material engineering course.

"My grades dropped but I refused to give up at first. However, I finally accepted the fact that engineering was not meant for me.

"My father decided that it was best for me to leave the discipline entirely and start elsewhere.

"It was hard because I had spent four years of my life in engineering and I did not think I was good in anything else," she added.

After a four-month break, Sakinah Atiqah enrolled in a bachelor's programme majoring in Business Administration (International Business) at International University of Malaysia-Wales. She is now in her second year of studies.

## CAUSES

Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) deputy vice-chancellor (academic and international) Professor Dr M. Iqbal Saripan said the inability to manage time effectively may result in students dropping out of university.

At day school, a student's schedule may be arranged by his parents, while at boarding school, by teachers.

"Some students cannot manage time on their own at university. For example, they may be addicted to online games and do not get enough sleep. They miss classes and, in many cases, fail to sit the examinations.

"As a result, they do not achieve the targeted outcomes for the semester, and eventually they will be terminated from their studies," added Iqbal.

There is a perception that many students decide not to continue their studies due to financial constraints, but Iqbal thinks this may not be true for local students and applies mainly to international students.

"The fees for international students are much higher whereas local students enjoy a subsidy," he said, adding that a small percentage of students drop out due to reasons such as medical and personal issues as well.

Monash University's Department of Economics head Associate Professor Grace Lee said the lack of English proficiency usually takes a toll on academic performance as university courses are challenging even for those whose first language is English.

Many students struggle with coursework due to poor command of English.

"It is hard to learn a second language but it is not unattainable, especially when all Malaysians learn English from Primary One. One simply has to work a bit harder to catch up.

"Even when language is not a barrier, the learning curve is steep at university.

"So the problem boils down to lack of perseverance as some students don't work hard enough and give up easily," said Lee.

"Some do not perform well as they chose the wrong course or had accepted willy-nilly any course offered to them.

"You should not be afraid to change your major or programme if it is not your strength. Sometimes students choose a certain major to please their parents.

"You cannot excel in something that you are not interested in and are not good at.

Meanwhile, her colleague in the Department of Management, senior lecturer Dr Patricia Lau, said that interactive and innovative academic experiences at university engage students in the learning process.

Personal traits and the learner's prior learning experiences connect to the next educational setting such as from secondary school to university.

"If they refrain from asking questions at school and rote learn, they develop to become dependent learners who carry the prior learning experiences to the university. Such learning experiences do not help them to learn at university, which requires them to think critically and independently.

"For example, in my 15 years of teaching in higher education institutions, I have come across students who say they can't find the answers for an assignment from a textbook or reference book, or they can't work with someone for a group assignment.

"The situation is aggravated when the formal primary and secondary education system emphasises academic achievement, thus leaving students little time to build on generic skills such as interpersonal skills which are not stressed in the



*Every student must aim to graduate within the normal time frame required for a course, not to graduate quickly.*

classroom," added Lau.

Iqbal said that at UPM, it is more common for students to drop out of foundation and postgraduate programmes.

"The foundation course is the entry level to university and if the students can't adapt to the environment and demands, they will fail in their studies.

"At the bachelor's level, there is no conclusive trend to indicate that there are more dropouts in certain programmes than others. Most of the time, it is due to the individual's problems rather than academic rigour."

But for disciplines such as medicine and engineering, the standard of passing is set higher compared to others.

"However, we monitor this very closely, and the academic advisers work closely with the management to notify the members if there are any cases that require further action.

"As for postgraduate students, the problem lies in thinking that the master's or doctoral programme is similar to an undergraduate course. Challenged with higher order research questions, postgraduate students fail to critically analyse and provide answers."

Lee said every major or course has its own challenges and it all boils down to the students' strengths and weaknesses.

Lau added that the student attrition rate continues to remain a concern of higher education institutions in the country.

## ASSISTANCE

UPM assists students by offering counselling and setting up peer support groups to alert the management to intervene and solve the problem before students drop out.

"Furthermore, all students are assigned academic advisers," said Iqbal, adding that students must learn to live in the real world and not be too dependent on assistance and gadgets.

"The level of resilience is low and it translates into lack of confidence in their own decisions. They must own their decisions and be responsible for them. They must face all the consequences of the

## ENTRANTS AT PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES BY FIELDS OF STUDY AND GENDER

NO	FIELDS OF STUDY	ENTRANT			GRADUATE		
		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
1	Education	2,604	6,916	9,520	2,304	6,381	8,685
2	Arts and Humanities	4,425	11,475	17,900	3,513	8,720	10,233
3	Social Sciences, Business and Law	19,053	41,447	60,500	12,017	28,634	40,651
4	Science, Mathematics and Computer	11,146	19,049	30,195	8,264	13,866	22,130
5	Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction	20,497	16,701	37,198	14,008	12,698	26,706
6	Agriculture and Veterinary	1,822	2,562	4,384	933	1,434	2,367
7	Health and Welfare	2,423	6,554	8,977	1,747	5,056	6,803
8	Seminar	3,041	3,948	6,989	1,426	2,277	3,703

Source: Planning, Research and Data Coordination Division, Higher Education Sector, Education Ministry Data as at Dec 31, 2017

decision because at university, we treat them as adults, not children.

"In the case of international students, the university has offered financial assistance to excellent scholars but we are not in a position to provide support to all of them.

"We also provide part-time working opportunities for them. The problem persists if students are too shy to ask for help."

The university also gives financial assistance that includes zakat and endowment for local students.

Lee said higher education institutions should monitor students' progress to better help those who are at risk, provide academic support and create an inviting learning environment to prevent dropouts.

Monash University has an Academic Progression Committee which identifies students at risk.

Lee added: "We look into their problems individually and provide personalised solutions. For instance, some students are advised to change their major and most of them are assigned a mentor (an academic staff) while some of them are required to see their subject lecturers every week.

"In addition, full-time counsellors work around the clock on campus to help students with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety.

"Students can choose their career path and employer. But they cannot choose their team or departmental members in the workplace.

"Hence, they need to learn to work together at university which provides the suitable place to practise the skills.

"The challenges will persist unless certain interventions are taken to assist first-year students to overcome them before they embark on higher levels of academic experiences."

Lau added: "In one of my research interests, I found that two three-day field trips for first-year business management students to explore rainforests in the country were effective to expand their thinking beyond classroom learning, and work together as a team to provide viable solutions for deforestation.

"During the field trips, students participated in learning activities such as jungle trekking and case studies related to deforestation. They were encouraged to reflect on their learning by keeping learning logs on both field trips.

"They acquired cognitive, emotional and social competencies after the field trips.

"In other words, university students engage in

learning when the academic experience is relevant and meaningful to them. This leads to better university student retention, employability and value-added learning."

Students should be open to learning, be more proactive to participate in learning activities in class and beyond it, as well as try to boost their interpersonal skills.

"An independent learner has the ability to take charge of his learning including what to learn and how to learn while a critical learner has the ability to evaluate information in different contexts and time.

"Ask more questions and engage in group discussions with the instructors and peers. Instructors can support students with knowledge, peers can motivate students to learn."



Classroom discussions help students learn and increase engagement with the course content and coursemates.

## TIPS TO AVOID BEING A DROPOUT

- Do not overestimate yourself and the coursework
- Do not procrastinate
- Do not get addicted to online games / television series that can potentially affect your studies
- Do not be afraid to change your major if you are struggling with the subjects
- Do not be afraid to seek help