

# The Role of Relatedness in Student Learning Experiences

Norhafezah Yusof<sup>1</sup>, Rosna Awang-Hashim<sup>2\*</sup>, Amrita Kaur<sup>3</sup>, Marzura Abdul Malek<sup>4</sup>, S. Kanageswari Suppiah Shanmugam<sup>5</sup>, Nor Aziah Abdul Manaf<sup>6</sup>, Angelina Seow Voon Yee<sup>7</sup>, Ainol Madziah Zubairis<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia,  
06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia  
norhafezah@uum.edu.my

<sup>2, 3, 5</sup>School of Education and Modern Languages, Universiti Utara Malaysia,  
06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia  
rosna@uum.edu.my  
amrita@uum.edu.my

kanageswari@uum.edu.my

<sup>4</sup>School of Media and Communication, Taylor's University,  
47500 Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia  
Marzura.Abdulmalek@taylors.edu.my

<sup>6</sup>Tunku Safinaz School of Accountancy, Universiti Utara Malaysia,  
06010 Sintok, Kedah Malaysia  
aziah960@uum.edu.my

<sup>7</sup>Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham Malaysia,  
43500 Semenyih, Selangor Malaysia  
Angelina.Yee@nottingham.edu.my

<sup>8</sup>Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia,  
50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia  
ainol@iium.edu.my

\*Corresponding Author

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**Abstract:** Failure in addressing students' needs in the context of student learning experiences may lead to negative impact on the image of higher education. Framed in self-determination theory, this study examined students' relatedness on most satisfying experiences in their respective universities. Participants' (N=1974) responses to open-ended questions were inductively coded to understand relatedness principles of student learning experiences to emerge from the data. The findings revealed that students valued the role of lecturers in professional and personal contexts, peers for friendship and teamwork and academic and non-academic experiences resulted from projects and activities. Given this, to provide a positive learning environment for students, university management needs to address and support lecturers' well-being, pay attention to student relations on campus and support academic and non-academic activities. By understanding the roles of connecting students to lecturers, students to students and students to administrative staff, we could build a dynamic and functional campus environment for each party to live and care about each other.

**Keywords:** Learning environment, Learning experience, Relatedness, Student engagement

## **1. Introduction**

Relationships are the heart of teaching experiences. Strong relationships between faculty and students, students and their peers and community offer positive learning experiences for students in a university. The feeling of relatedness in the context of learning experiences is vital to the students in achieving their learning outcomes, building their social skills and developing positive attitudes. Indeed, to have a sustainable relationship in learning experiences requires positive support from university authority, passionate lecturers, a good administrative support system and community and willingness to learn from the students. Self-determination theory (SDT) offers an accurate explanation for what motivates and individual to achieve his or her goals in three related elements; competence, autonomy and relatedness. Deci and Ryan (2000), states that when an individual can relate to others (lecturers, friends and significant others), he or she feels valued and is willing to offer help to others as by doing this, will boost their self-esteem. The feeling of care about others because they care about you defines the term relatedness in this theory.

Thus, relationship matters in shaping student learning experiences (Felten et al., 2016). Establishment of good values begins from social relations during university years. Through learning experiences, students are exposed to diverse knowledge in disciplines whereby they learn how to be respectful in deliberating arguments, to develop teamwork in achieving academic goals and to establish a network for presence and future career plans. In addition, through designed learning experiences, students learn to care about others, open-minded and concern about the well-being of local and global communities. For example, via service learning, students learn how to appreciate climate changes that affect their everyday life and thus other's life. That is why we have to plan the learning experiences in order to facilitate meaningful learning for the learners. Touching the life of the students can be done through academic and non-academic environments. One of the approaches to touch students' life through academic measure is through the implementation of high impact practices pedagogy in courses. The pedagogies are planned instructional strategies that help students in empowering them to gain experiential learning. Studies on the impact of these practices indicated positive development on soft-skills, critical thinking and self-esteem of students as a result of undergoing the practices during their academic years. Among the good high impact practices are undergraduate research, senior capstone projects and service learning (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Felten et al., 2016).

The principle that guides effective student-faculty interaction is a theory of psychosocial development (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The theory highlighted seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education that need to be undertaken by the management of the university in order to provide meaningful and rich experiences for student self-development. The seven principles are: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose and developing integrity. While there are rich and extensive studies being done in developed countries, there are limited studies on relatedness from developing countries specifically from the viewpoint of self-determination theory using national data. To add peer influence is also vital in developing the character of students in university. Studies have concluded that peers influence each other in their survival in campus environments (Knoster & Goodboy, 2020). Especially with the collectivism culture where group pressure is strong, and individuals tend to follow the pack. Moreover, students thrive on campus activities and projects. They are excited about managing academic and non-academic projects especially with the support of the lecturers and student affairs professionals. Studies indicate that the value of the relationship between students to lecturers and student to student affairs professionals matters when they are entrusted to develop projects that have an impact on the community.

## **2. Self Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory is concerned about how individuals achieve their goals via competency, autonomy and relatedness attributes. Following Deci and Ryan (2000) thoughts on SDT dimensions, competence refers to the feeling of being able to master a skill and feeling confident to achieve the goal. Autonomy assumes that individuals are independent to do what they want to achieve. Relatedness is defined as the capability to relate to others and maintain the relationship.

It is now well established that SDT plays an important role in enriching learning experiences of students. However, the idea of competence, autonomy and relatedness are equally important can be contested depending on the context of a study. In Trenshaw et al. (2016) study on intrinsic motivation to learning among engineering students, the findings indicated that relatedness is more prominent compared to competence and autonomy. The study suggests that social context needs to be considered in developing learning strategies. Whilst it is not negating that fact that autonomy and competence are considerably contributing to learners' motivation in learning, relatedness rises as a prominent factor in motivating learners. Drawing from this point, this study is inspired to understand more about learning experiences among Malaysian students. Thus, we asked this question: What motivates learners to learn in universities?

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Respondents**

Respondents were students from higher learning institutions in Malaysia (N=1974). Respondents averaged 21.39 years (SD=8.80) ranging from 18 to 43 years old. Participants identified as 57.1% Malays, 26.6% Chinese, 3.6% Indians, 5.9% natives, 6.5% international, and 0.3% not identified. Participants were 33.7% male and, 66.2% female. Participants averaged CGPA 3.0 (SD=3.12) ranging from less than 2.00 to 4.0. Highest level of education was 28.3% Diploma, 19.3% Malaysian Higher School Certificate, 1.1% Malaysian Higher School Certificate (Islamic), 18.3%, Matriculation 11%, Foundation 20.7%, 0.8% O-Level, 4.3% A-Level, Bachelor degree 3.6%, Unified Examination Certificate (Chinese) 1.3%. High School 0.5%, Malaysian School Certificate, 0.3, Others 1.1% and did not indicate 0.5%. Majority lived in the university residence 66.5%, while 33.2% lived outside of the university campus. The majority of participants are in Arts and Social Science (53.2%), Information Technology & Communication (10.6%), Education (4.0%), Science (16.5%), Technical (15.1%) and did not indicate (0.5%). Majority is among the non-first of their siblings to go to college (57%) and about 42.8% are first siblings to go to college.

#### **3.2 Procedures**

Participants were recruited from eighteen universities in Malaysia using cluster sampling methods. There are two types for the survey participation namely online via Survey Monkey and hardcopy survey. This study utilized Boud's (1985) Critical Reflection Approach that states there are three steps in these reflecting experiences of individuals. Firstly, the individual will reflect on salient experiences that he or she experiences, secondly, linking the experiences to the positive feeling of the experiences and thirdly, re-assessing the experiences that is relating the new knowledge to the past experiences.

A brief explanation on data confidentiality is stated at the cover of the survey. Upon agreeing to participate, participants were informed about the data would be used for academic purposes only. Their participation is completely voluntary. The instrument is designed bilingual in Malay (national) language and English. The questionnaire began with demographic questions and educational background information. The prompt was, "What are the most satisfying learning experiences at your institution? The participants were given ample time to write their reflection and there is no word limit. They were ensured that their reflection has no implication on their grade standings. As the reflection is part of the research data and the identification of participants was coded in number, i.e., 001.

#### **3.3 Analysis**

To answer the research questions, we conducted thematic analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2013). In this analysis, there are six steps of analysis. First, the researchers read the data and familiarize with the data by understanding the statement of the respondents on the questions asked onto them. Second, the researchers did coding based on the SDT theoretical framework that is used to

guide the data analysis. Third, after coding was done, the researchers decide on the themes that are shaped by the coding of the data. Fourth, the process of searching for themes continues, reflection and discussion from the teams are integrated and themes are more focused for analysis. Fifth, at this stage, the researchers finalized the themes and the team agreed on the designated themes after intense discussion and reflection. Sixth, it is when the researchers designed their writing based on the constructed themes.

The identified coding are as follows: learning technology, lecturer, teamwork, friend, experiences, skill and others. After three rounds of data analysis, the researchers decided to choose on three main codings that are: student-faculty relationship, friendship and, teamwork and experiences.

## 4. Finding

### 4.1 Student-Faculty Relationship

Students' expression on the importance of student-faculty relationships was excellent. The data informed us that students valued the lecturers' insights and experiences in providing them the best explanation about the subject matter. Student-faculty interaction is emphasized as a pull factor that motivates the students to learn faster and better in their studies (Guerrero & Rod, 2013, Singh, 2019). It is one of the core values of providing best services to the students and engages a high-cognitive level of thinking in delivering curriculum at its best. Most students stated that they are touched and satisfied by the care and efforts taken by the lecturers to teach them in and outside of the classroom, providing professional and social advice and concern about their well-being.

*The teaching staff are really helpful and knowledgeable in the matter of expertise. They provide sufficient examples and real life scenarios to provide better understanding on the topic they teach. (R63)*

*I'd say that I'm able to go beyond the figurative box. My lecturers have allowed me to expand my ideas and implement them in such a creative way, I honestly can say I wouldn't be able to do it at most universities. They've allowed for me to try every possible facet, and learn at every curve, and for that I'm always thankful. (R300)*

The participants stated that they enjoyed their lecturer's teaching strategy. They stated that lecturers who are able to connect to them via teaching and learning left a good impression during their university years. Student-faculty interaction in this study is reflected through various positive statements by the participants. As one of the participants stated: *I value the way the lecturer concern about my learning experiences, I am happy when the lecturer answers my questions about my course and make me understand about the lesson in the classroom (R20)*

Moreover, lecturers who have industrial experiences or who are able to explain well about their subjects and relate to real-life experiences make them enjoy their classes very much. The elements of experiences are often valued much by the participants especially when the subject matter involves concepts, theories and guidelines. The participants feel satisfied when they can understand the lesson of the subjects and are able to practice it by themselves. As highlighted by participants in the engineering program: *Well, I am happy when the lecturer is able to demonstrate the ideas into practical procedure. It helps us a lot (R40)*

Lecturers who are friendly and always being referred to as advisors whether academically or personally are the best according to the participants. The ability to relate to the students while providing them life skills guidance make students appreciate their learning experiences in the university. The findings are aligned with studies (Kalkbrenner et al., 2019; Karaivanova, 2016) that emphasize the importance of student-faculty interaction shaping the learning experiences that lead to positive self-esteem of students in their future life.

The issue is becoming popular at least in Asia due to many factors such as internalization policy, wealth-generation planning of universities and graduate employability (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020). Student-faculty interaction is vital as students normally attribute their success and failure to faculty factors (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020).

## 4.2 Friendship

It is interesting to note in this study, participants appreciate friendship during their study years in the university. The value of friendship makes them survive their campus life. Friendship here means establishing close relationships with course-mates and knowing others who are culturally different from them who are international students.

Most of them stated that having friends in university is important for their survival. As living in a new environment can make a person feel isolated. Even though all of the participants are from Malaysia, they came from different states which have their own unique culture and lifestyle. Coming from all over the country to live in a new place that is the university campus and its surrounding, life is uncertain for new students. Life in Malaysia university campus is unique as not all universities offer in-house accommodation. Due to the challenges, some students live in rented properties at nearby areas of the universities. Our data indicated that the majority lived in the university residence 66.5%, while 33.2% lived outside of the university campus. As living with strangers could be challenging, participants start to establish friendship during their university years. As indicated by one of the participants: *Having friends who are from different backgrounds makes my learning environment more attractive, while helping me to become a person who is able to think about the various perspectives (R1246)*. The statement is further supported by another participant: *Learning in a group with boys and girls while sharing ideas is the best way to understand the lesson (R1305)*

Another element of friendship is building relationships with the international students who study in the campuses. The participants appreciate knowing the others as they are able to know different cultures that are new to them. As stated by one of the participants: *The most satisfying learning experience that I get is I can adapt a new culture in a new place and also I can communicate with foreigners frequently in my daily study (R32)*. The opportunity to socialise with others who are different from them is a great platform for them to exchange ideas and opinions. As indicated by a participant: *Can socialize with friends from different countries (R340)*. The fact that they are able to meet and learn from their international friends is a positive attitude as it will enlarge their social and professional networks in the future. As one the participants mentioned: *Able to meet and learn with others from different countries (R287)*.

## 4.3 Teamwork and Experiences (Collaborating with Others)

Working as a team is a meaningful experience for the participants. They appreciate working in a team due to strong collaboration with team members. The teamwork experiences boost their self-esteem. As mentioned by a participant, working in a team trained them to have disciplined life as they have to work in order to meet the deadline of the assigned task: *Students learn teamwork to finish a project at an adequate time frame. Student get to study in a comfortable environment (R63)*. Teamwork works at its best when they are able to learn, discuss and collaborate together in the related learning tasks. As one of the participants stated: *Able to enhance my critical and analytical skills; and meet with different peers from different backgrounds (R1463)*.

Having experiences is another meaningful moment for the participants. The term experiences is coded within the teamwork as the participants clarified that they did activities with their teammates. For example, *“Able to meet someone interesting and work with them, it is a very special experience for me because back to the time when I was still in high school, I was a very shy person. After I joined the community of university, I felt the welcoming vibe of the community and willing to open my mind to join the club or other activities with other ethical differences people (R1471)”*. And they love joining fieldwork that offers them different learning experiences: *“Field trip is a valuable experience for exploring something new and interesting regarding the field that I am studying (R1043)”*. The statement is further supported by another participant: *“When students need to handle a program for a subject by themselves and the community has a chance to learn (R728)”*.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Student-faculty interaction comprise meaningful interactions with between students and lecturers either virtual or face to face interaction as instructional tools. The plans, collaborating with

teaching staff on non-academic activities, discussion on coursework related issues outside of the classroom environment and discussion on student academic performance with any teaching staff are defining activities of student-faculty interaction. Decades of studies on student-faculty interactions have suggested that it is one of the important factors that contribute to the holistic student development (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Mu & Fosnacht, 2019). Kuh and Hu (2001) state that meaningful intensive student-faculty interaction shapes personal and professional goals in students' life. Kuh (2013) in his autobiographical writing on his personal and professional achievements mentions that his life was shaped by advice from his mentor. His writing on 'You do not have to be the smartest in the room' encapsulates his experiences from childhood to an eminent professor and he attributed his success to many factors such as ability to listen, surround oneself with smart groups, positive support groups and relationships. Moreover, interesting work by Mu and Fosnacht (2019) on academic advising brings us to a new understanding of life on campus. They find out that academic advising facilitates students' academic achievement.

Living a collectivist community, the participants are attuned to conform to societal norms. However, living in a new community and having to adapt to new values that are institutional values present a challenging experience for the participants. This is where the students search for a new relationship which in this context is establishing relationships with others that are friends who are normally classmates. They share positive and strong relationships as the relationship is established and strengthened during their classroom learning activities. In addition, relationship establishment with international students opens up the opportunity to extend their network and open their minds. The participants' value diversity as it presents positive experiences on knowing and learning new cultures from others who live within their learning environment.

Situating this research in a cultural context, collectivism is an important element that needs to be considered for this study. Malaysia as a multicultural nation offers collectivism flavor to student experiences in university. According to Hofstede (2001), there are four dimensions of cultural measures: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. Malaysia scores high on power distance (Low et al., 2020). Collectivistic in nature (Hofstede, 2001), practice masculinity values and norms (Hofstede, 2019) and have high uncertainty avoidance in everyday life practices (Hofstede, 2019). Thus, Malaysia is considered as a country with collectivism values. Although it has been debated that Malaysia does not belong to totally collectivism values (Hashim, 2006), most studies that discuss Malaysia in the context of cultural setting, position Malaysia as a collectivism nation. Studies in communication that focus on educational setting, either on the United States of America (Baker et al., 2019) or cross-cultural that involve two countries such as the United States and Turkey (Frisby et al., 2016) and studies that involves more than two countries such as China, Germany, Japan, and the United States (Zhang, 2007) supported that Asia is embracing collectivism culture. Thus, this study is conducted at national level in a collectivistic culture that hopefully can provide new insights how instructional communication can be seen from this perspective. Lecturer is a symbol of a guardian. It has been established in many studies that lecturers possess an important role in guiding the students. Due to high stake positions in a community, an institution such as a university normally adopted a strict recruitment procedure in employing a lecturer into the institution. Oxford university also has been practicing the same tradition where lecturer acts as guardian and helps to mentor a student from novice to expert stage. This is reckoning in the strategic planning of Oxford university in their teaching commitment and how the tradition is still effective till nowadays (Oxford, 2018). Thus, this is aligned with our findings where the students keep on reflecting on their most positive experiences through student-faculty relationships. They feel appreciated by the lecturers who work hard in teaching, mentoring and guiding them in academic and non-academic affairs.

This is in line with the argument that is fundamentalist of learning principles where knowledge has to be understood fully first by the guidance of lecturers. It is not totally negating constructivism. However, to implement complete constructivism without considering full understanding of fundamental knowledge is a fatal phenomenon. Imagine putting a novice medical student straight to do operation, this type of learning will create a chaotic experience for the student, patient and the university hospital. Arguing from the perspective of Kirschner et al. (2006) in their paper why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: an analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching, students cannot be forced to be involved in constructivism without total understanding of fundamental knowledge of the field. One of the recent works on teaching

and learning in medical education indicates that students need clear instructional guide in their learning even though there are self-regulated learners (Zheng, et al., 2020)

In Malaysia at least, most lecturers are trained to adapt to student centered learning such as conducting problem-based learning, case studies and service learning. However, the question is have we prepared the students to be part of our student centered approach. Thus, based on this finding, we argued that whereas it is not wrong to adopt a constructivism approach, it has to be done with caution. Until and unless the students are prepared to learn in an active learning environment, these types of learning can be conducted by the lecturers. As evidenced in our findings, the students value most when they are able to interact and establish strong positive relationships as they model after the lecturers. This is evident in the collectivism culture where lecturer is seen as a symbol of power.

Peer power is also another important matter in this study. Survival of the fittest is a motto here. Students mostly value their friendship during their university years as it opens to a strong social support system. They are far away from home and live in a new environment. In the volatile, uncertainty, chaos and adventurous environment, life is not easy especially when you learn to be independent on your own. This phenomenon is challenging for collectivist culture where family are close knitted and family members normally provide support to each other. Thus, as an exchange of family bonding, these new friendships with friends offer positive experiences for the students. It has been found in many studies that peer support is vital in ensuring survival of student life (Knoster & Goodboy, 2020) and support peer-learning that may lead to strong bonding with peers (Szteinberg et al., 2020). Moreover, with a diverse community living in the campus, the students are exposed to international counterparts where they learn from each other on ideas and practices in life. Having positive emotional and social skills in stabling relationships with international counterparts offer them wider social and professional networks in the future.

Teamwork is another important aspect in student life. Through teamwork, they develop strong life skills and enhance their self-esteem. In addition to providing them with positive social support, it also helps to discipline them in managing their tasks. The positive impact of teamwork can enhance their social and working collaboration with others (Moore et al., 2020). It has been determined in many studies that teamwork promotes social network and strong bonding among group members (Al-Hammouri et al., 2020). Another crucial factor is experiences where the students highlight their best moments while working with others. They cherish the experiences as they are able to achieve the outcome of the task by working together.

The findings indicate that relationship with lecturers, peers and teamwork contribute to meaningful learning experiences in universities. This is in line with SDT theory assumptions that link the findings to relatedness experiences of students in motivating themselves to learn in their respective universities. As most of the students are in their final years, they have observed the behavioural patterns of their lecturers, classmates and seniors in campus. From there, they learn how to adapt to the campus environment with the support of lecturers, friends and classmates when they enter the university. And they learn through interpreting the patterns of the behavioural and make moral and ethical judgements on each disposition outcome towards their life. Thus, through constant relationships and support from the lectures, friends, classmates and administrators, they manage to sustain their motivation in learning during their university years. Relatedness matters in determining the students' achievements in universities. As indicated by Hång et al. (2017), teachers and administrators support are important in ensuring positive learning experiences in colleges and prevent dropouts.

The relationship with faculty members, peers and the community help the students to enhance their self-esteem, social skills and importantly provide professional and social support during their university years. This study attempts to provide insights on indicators that help Malaysia students to survive in campus life. It comes back to the role of relatedness in attaining trust and building confident in learning while they are in university. It indicates the importance of the communication network of lecturers, peers and community to the students. It is like back to basics where we have to tackle the human aspect in learning before we go to the advanced pedagogy and technology. The role of a lecturer as facilitator where knowledge is being transferred through mentoring approach is fundamental to build strong knowledge in the field. It has been indicated in East and West literature that traditional approach in learning is still vital before we embark on a constructivism approach. Then, with the support of peers and community, students are able to build strong characters and grow a positive mind set. Future studies

need to look further into why traditional learning strategy is still important as currently we are embracing constructivism on a large scale. The question worth asking: Are we blinded by the light?

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