

A SURVEY TO INVESTIGATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EFFORTS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR STUDIES

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Abstrak

Artikel ini menerangkan hasil penemuan satu soal selidik berkaitan dengan usaha dan sikap para pelajar terhadap pembelajaran mereka. Data telah dikumpul daripada 200 orang pelajar masing-masing daripada Fakulti Alam Bina (FBE) dan Fakulti Bahasa dan Linguistik (FLL), Universiti Malaya. Mereka terdiri daripada pelajar ijazah dasar dan seorang pelajar ijazah tinggi. Keputusan menunjukkan bahawa lebih daripada 85.0% sampel kajian mengambil nota semasa kuliah dijalankan; 31.0% dan 65.0% pelajar daripada FBE dan FLL, masing-masing, membuat persiapan sebelum menghadiri kuliah atau kelas tutorial; 70.0% pelajar dari kedua-dua fakulti tersebut menggunakan kurang daripada 3 jam sehari bagi membuat ulangkaji; ramai pelajar meluangkan masa lapang mereka untuk membaca suratkhobar/majalah, menonton televisyen/wayang, dan membeli-belah; pelajar-pelajar Cina berminat belajar bersendirian sementara pelajar-pelajar Melayu dan India berminat belajar secara berkumpulan; lebih daripada 62.0% pelajar meminta bantuan rakan apabila menghadapi kesulitan dalam pembelajaran; pelajar Melayu dan India berminat dalam perbincangan kumpulan sebagai persiapan menghadapi peperiksaan, tetapi pelajar Cina memilih untuk belajar soalan-soalan yang 'diteka' atau mengikut tippensyarah.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been public concerns over the drop in the quality of today's university graduates. Indeed, many parents and lecturers had also commented on the change in students' attitudes towards their studies. Students have been accused of not putting in much effort in their studies but instead spending more time in non-academic activities such as watching television and movies, shopping, playing computer games, and surfing the Internet, just to name a few. According to a survey conducted from March-June 2003 on the training needs for the local information technology (IT) undergraduates, the IT industry indicated that the students are not mature enough to see the real world, and they are 'useless' (Ow et al, 2003). Obviously, the quality of university graduates relates in some ways to home education such as parental involvement (Chavkin, 1993; Epstein, 1994; Williams-Hayes, 2005), school education such as instructional and communication

skills of the teachers (Ginsberg, 2005; Jones-Hamilton, 2005) and students' attitudes in their studies such as regular attendance (Davidovitch, 2005). The first two are the responsibilities of the parents and lecturers, respectively, while the latter is the students' responsibility. Undoubtedly, students' efforts and attitudes towards their studies have greater impact than the roles played by parents and lecturers. This study was thus initiated to investigate the students' efforts and attitudes towards their studies in a university.

The sample population for this study comprised 400 students with 200 students each from the Faculty of Built Environment (FBE) and the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics (FLL), University of Malaya.

METHODOLOGY

A survey questionnaire was used to collect data for analysis. The questionnaires were distributed to the students from the Faculty of Built Environment (FBE) and the Faculty of Languages & Linguistics (FLL). The survey was conducted using face-to-face method to ensure the questionnaires could be collected upon completion and that explanations could be given to participants in case of ambiguities. The survey was conducted by 5 people and took three weeks to complete. A pilot test was carried out prior to the actual survey. A few weaknesses in the questionnaire design identified from the pilot test were corrected. The actual survey was conducted at both faculties and the respondents were also chosen at random based on simple random sampling technique (Salant & Dillman, 1994).

Four hundred sets of questionnaires were collected and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. This sample size was determined based on the assumptions that the population is a "50/50 split", and the total number of students in FBE and FLL is 997 (about 1000). A "50/50 split" means the population is relatively varied (Salant & Dillman, 1994), and a sample size of 400 respondents (i.e. between 278 and 516), would make estimates with a sampling error of between $\pm 3\%$ and $\pm 5\%$, at the 95 percent confidence level.

In order to understand and make correct inferences from the survey outcomes, an interview session with an experienced educationist, Professor Dr Suradi Salim, from the Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, was conducted upon completion of data collection and analysis. Professor Suradi interpreted the survey results and gave clear explanations on the undergraduates' attitudes towards their studies. Issues investigated include taking notes during lectures, the amount of time the undergraduates spent on their studies, preparation before attending lectures or tutorial classes, and the purpose of reading, just to name a few. The analyses are presented in the following sections.

Analysis of Survey Outcomes

In this survey, 400 sets of questionnaires were used for analysis, of which 200 sets were collected each from FBE and FLL, respectively. Of the 400 respondents, 63 (31.5%) and 49 (24.5%) are male and 137 (68.5%) and 151 (75.5%) are female from FBE and FLL, respectively (Fig. 1). There are 119 (59.5%) and 52 (26.0%) Malays, 69 (34.5%) and 92 Chinese, none and 51 (25.5%) Indians, and 12 (6.0%) and 5 (2.5%) from other ethnic groups from FBE and FLL, respectively, who participated in this survey (Fig-2).

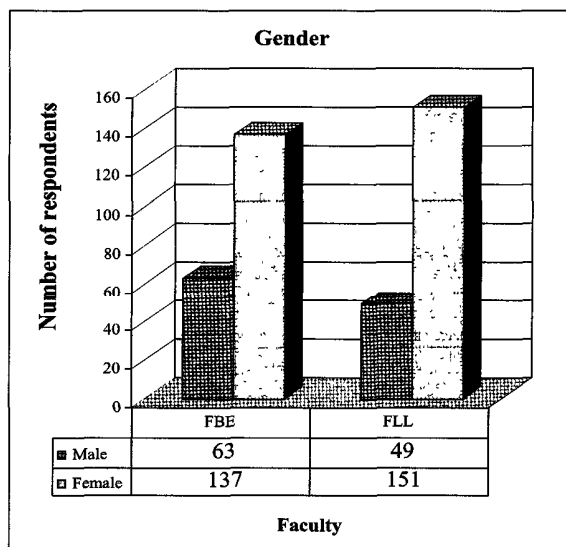


Figure 1: Distribution by gender

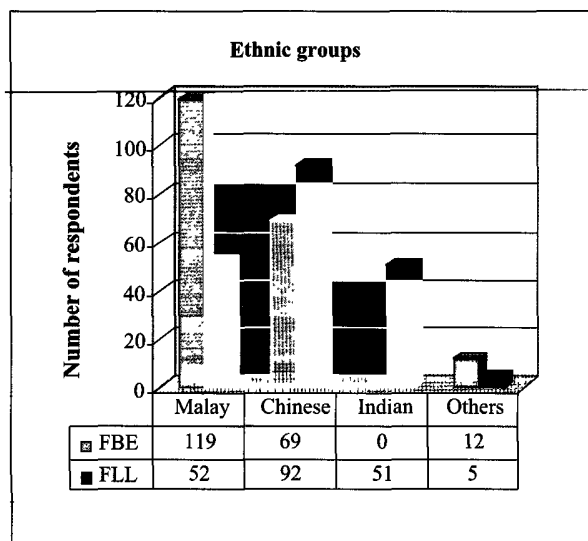


Figure 2: Distribution by ethnic group

The 200 respondents from FBE comprise students from the first year to fifth year, with a majority (108 respondents, 54.0%) in the second year (Fig. 3). Similarly, the majority of the respondents from FLL are also in the second year (73 respondents, 36.5%). However, one (.5%) respondent from FLL is pursuing her master's degree.

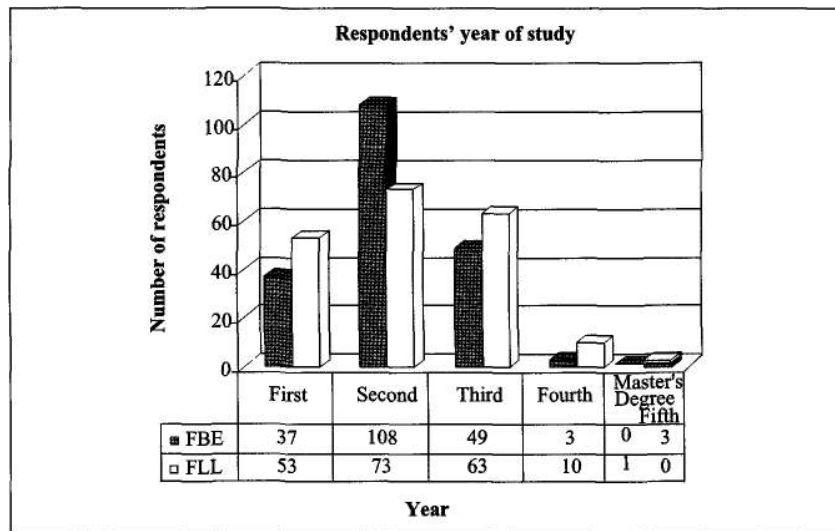


Figure 3: Distribution of respondents according to year of study

Taking Notes During Lectures

As shown in Fig. 4, 171 (85.5%) and 191 (95.5%) respondents from FBE and FLL, respectively, indicated that they took notes during lectures. Only 29 (14.5%) and 9 (4.5%) respondents from both the faculties, respectively, did not take notes during lectures.

According to Professor Suradi, taking notes certainly helps in the learning process. A student has to understand the lecture first before he/she can take notes. If the students take notes, they will understand the lectures better. Secondly, they would be able to follow the lectures, and thirdly, they would be able to follow the discussions. Lastly, they would be able to concentrate during the lectures. If the students did not take notes, their minds would be distracted. Professor Suradi also commented that there are students who take notes but do not really understand the lectures. In fact, it is better than not taking notes at all. This is because if they do not understand the lectures, they still can refer to the notes after class when they do their revision. If the students did not take notes, then they would have nothing to refer to after class (Lau et al, 2004).

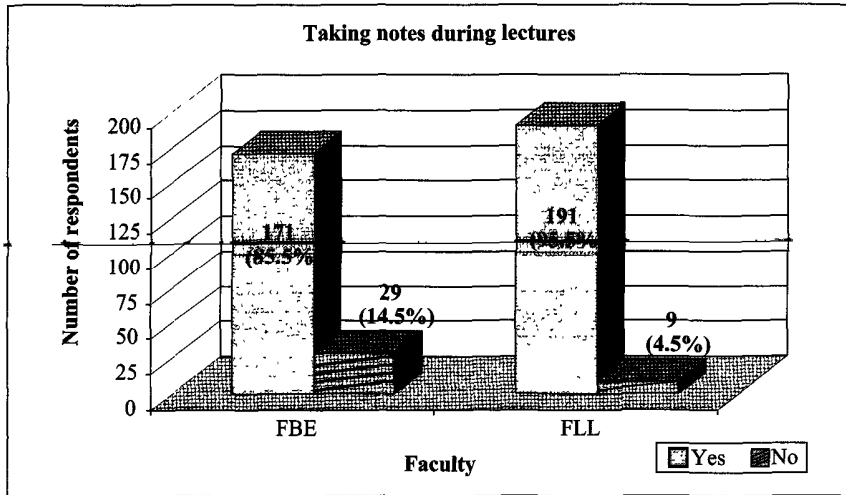


Figure 4: Taking of notes during lectures

Preparation Before Attending Lectures/Tutorial Classes

Irrespective of the discipline of study, it is useful for a student to come well prepared before attending lectures or tutorials. In this survey, 62 (31.0%) out of 200 respondents from FBE indicated that they did prepare before attending lectures or tutorials. The remaining 138 (69.0%) respondents indicated that they did not make preparations before attending lectures or tutorial classes (Fig. 5).

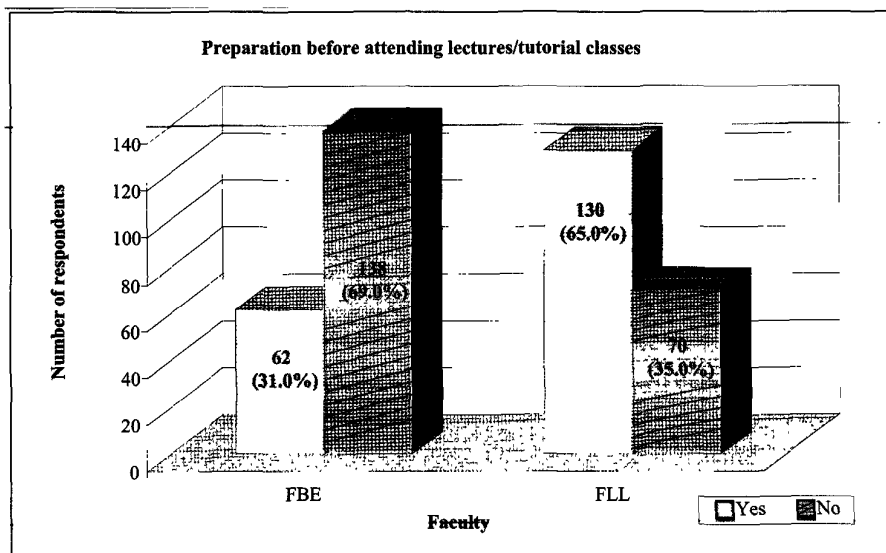


Figure 5: Preparation for lectures or tutorials

On the other hand, the situation is reversed in FLL, where the majority of respondents (130

respondents, 65.0%) indicated that they did make preparation before attending lectures or tutorial classes. Only 70 (35.0%) out of 200 respondents did not prepare before attending lectures or tutorial classes. This implies that the FLL students put in much more effort in their study than FBE students.

Time Spent on Revision Per Day

This survey investigated the time that students spent doing revision per day and not the time spent doing revision during the examination period. In FBE, 74 (37.0%) and 67 (33.5%) out of 200 respondents spent an average of less than 1 hour and 1-2 hours per day on revision, respectively (Fig. 6). In FLL, 48 (24.0%) and 98 (49.0%) out of 200 respondents, spent on average, less than 1 hour and 1-2 hours per day on revision, respectively.

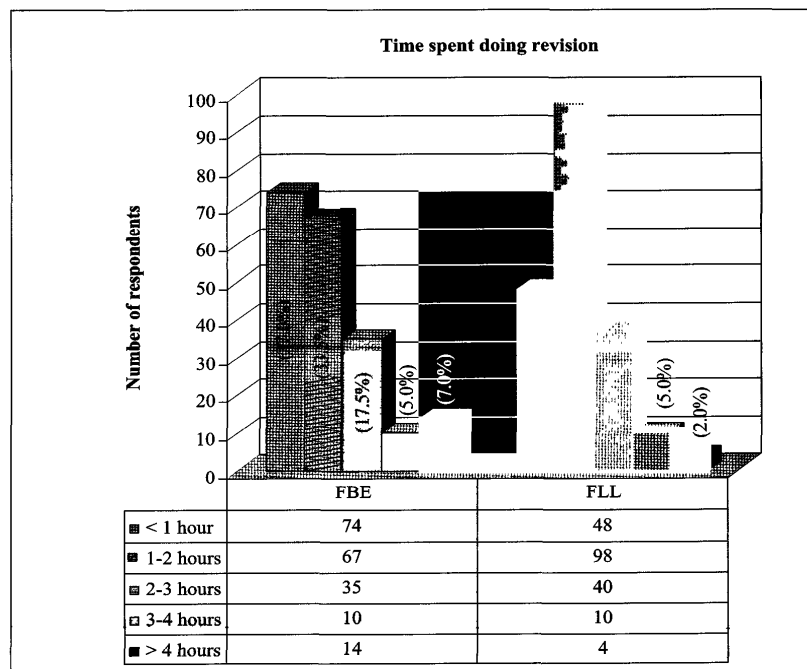


Figure 6: Time spent on revision per day

Indeed, only a very small number of respondents spent, on an average, 3-4 or more than 4 hours on daily revision. This is indicated by 10 (5.0%) and 14 (7.0%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE who spent 3-4 hours and more than 4 hours on revision per day, respectively. Similarly, in FLL, only 10 (5.0%) and 4 (2.0%) out of 200 respondents, spent on an average, 3-4 hours and more than 4 hours on revision per day, respectively. Hence, this implies that almost of the student usually spend, on an average, about 1-2 hours on revision per day and they would spend more time on revision during the examination period.

Asked for comment on the fact that 70.0% of the students spent less than 3 hours per day on revision, Professor Suradi said that based on his more than 25 years of teaching experience, students should spend at least 10 hours per day on their studies, including attending lectures, making preparation and reading. If they spend less than 10 hours, this means they are not fulfilling their responsibilities as students (Lau et al., 2004). Based on Professor Suradi's comments, the drop in the academic performance of the students could possibly be attributed to the students spending insufficient time (i.e. less than 10 hours) per day on their studies.

Ways of Spending Spare Time

This survey also investigated how the students spent their spare time. The respondents were allowed to choose all the options applicable to them in the questionnaire. As shown in Figure 7, of the 200 respondents from FBE, most said they choose to spend their spare time reading newspaper/magazines (116 respondents), shopping (99 respondents), and watching television/movies (98 respondents).

In almost similar fashion, FLL respondents spent their spare time reading newspapers/magazines (121 respondents), watching television/movies (101 respondents), and shopping (78 respondents). A small percentage of respondents from both faculties preferred to do revision during their spare time. This is indicated by 56 and 79 respondents from FBE and FLL, respectively.

The above outcomes support the fact that most students spent their spare time reading newspapers/magazines (237 respondents) and watching television/movies (199 respondents) instead of doing revision (135 respondents) for their studies.

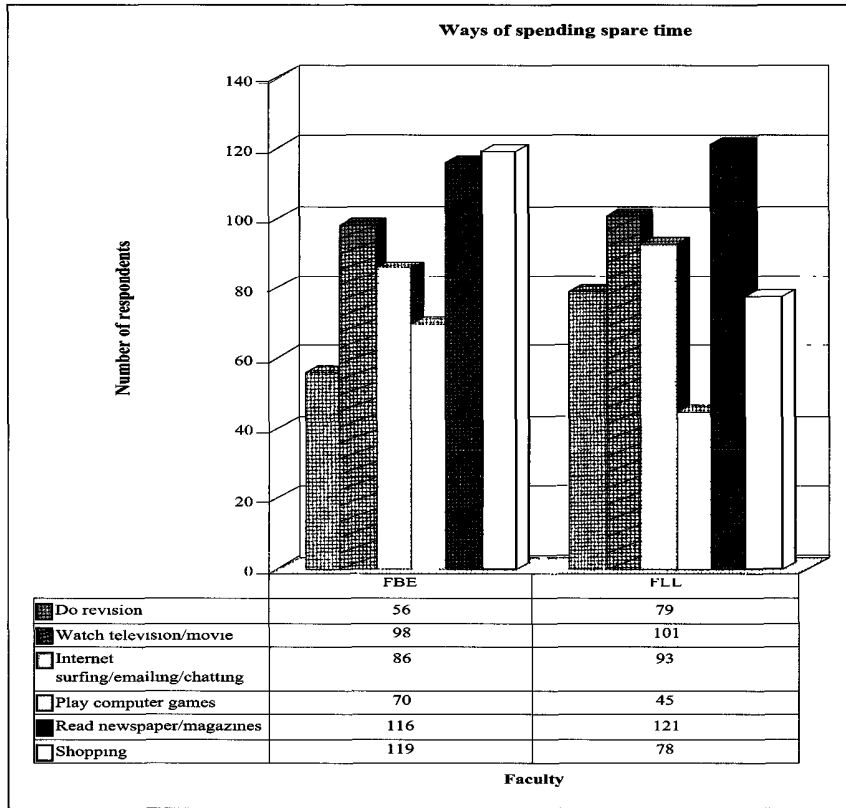


Figure 7: Spare time allocation according to activity

Form/Join A Study Group

The survey also investigated the necessity and benefits of forming and joining a study group. The survey outcomes show that 76 (38.0%) and 71 (35.5%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively, prefer to form and join a study group (Fig. 8). On the other hand, the majority of the respondents, 124 (62.0%) and 129 (64.5%) respondents from FBE and FLL, respectively, do not prefer to form and join a study group. This implies that most of the students (> 62.0%) prefer to study alone.

Of the respondents who prefer to form and join a study group, 40 (59.7%) out of 76 and 22 (31.0%) out of 71 respondents from FBE and FLL, respectively, prefer to study in a group of 5 members and 4 members, respectively (Fig. 9).

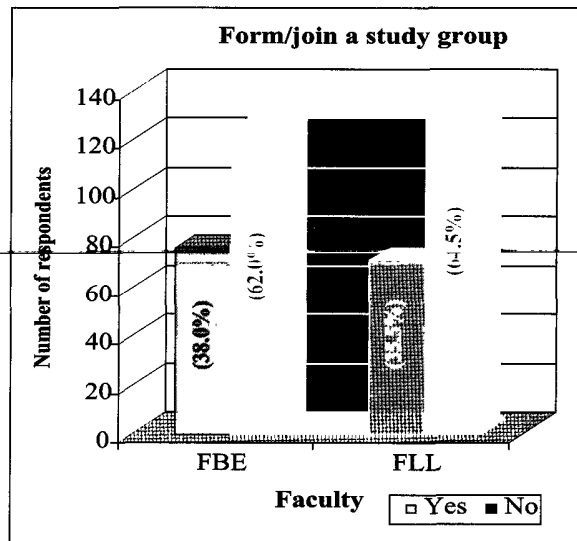


Figure 8: Preference for joining study group

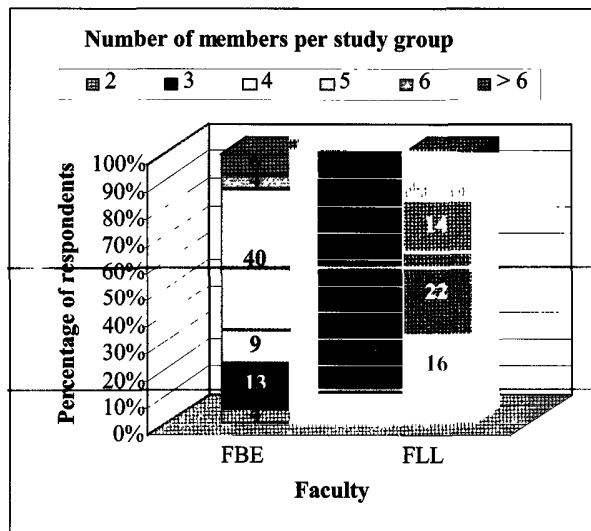


Figure 9: Number of members in study group

When the data were analyzed based on ethnic groups, it is interesting to find that the Chinese students prefer to study alone and not join any study group. On the other hand, among all the other ethnic groups, the Malay students and Indian students prefer to form and join a study group. This is indicated by 90 (52.6%) out of 171 Malay respondents and 31 (60.8%) out of 51 Indian respondents who participated in the survey (Fig. 10).

Asked whether a study group helps in academic performance and the ideal number in such groups, Professor Suradi commented that basically, study groups are good for discussion. Firstly, the students would be able to acquire knowledge in a particular area.

It depends on whether they have studied enough. The study group motivates one to work harder. Secondly, the students would be able to see whether they understand correctly what they read. Thirdly, they can remember better by studying together with others. However, it is important that the students must prepare in advance for a discussion. The discussion will not be productive if no one has any knowledge in a field. In some groups, individual members are assigned a definite role to play. All group members thus gain from one another. Regarding the ideal number of members in a group, Professor Suradi suggests 4 or 5 persons to avoid too many ideas for a topic of discussion. In short, joining a study group is better than studying individually (Lau et al., 2004).

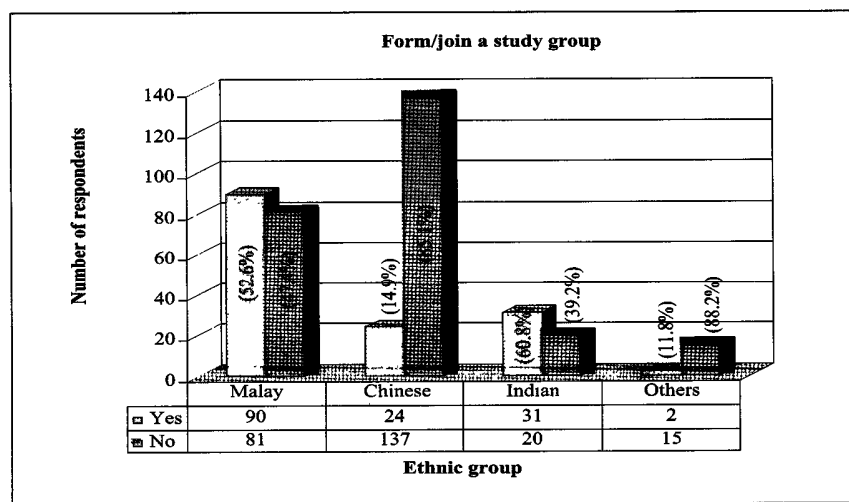


Figure 10: Preference for joining or forming study group by ethnicity

Ways of Solving Study Problems

Students have various ways to solve study problems or difficulties. From the survey, it is obvious that most of the students choose to discuss or ask help from friends as indicated by 139 (69.5%) and 124 (62.0%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively (Fig. 11). On the other hand, only 34 (17.0%) and 53 (26.5%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively, would ask help from the lecturer or tutor. This implies that the relationships between the students and the lecturers are not as close as that between students and their friends. It is also surprising to find that 8 (4.0%) and 4 (2.0%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively, do nothing about the difficulties encountered in their studies. This reluctance to seek help could possibly be another reason for the drop in the quality of today's university graduates.

Professor Suradi suggests that some of the students think that if they were to ask the lecturer questions, the lecturer might think they are stupid. In fact, in the lecturer's eyes, it is the opposite. According to him, it is good that the students ask questions because it

shows the students have already done prior reading. If the students do not ask questions, then it is possible that they do not understand the lectures (Lau et al., 2004).

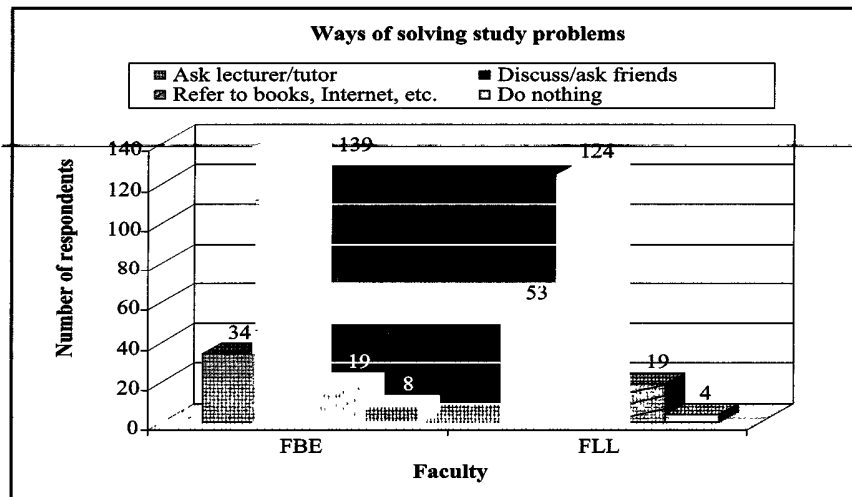


Figure 11: Comparison of ways to solve study problems

Ways of Preparing for Examination

Examination is an integral part of the learning process. It is one of the assessment methods to measure the level of knowledge or technical skills acquired. Usually, most students adopt different approaches in their studies to help them succeed in examinations. These include getting examination tips from the lecturers, trying to 'spot' or forecast examination questions based on the past years' questions, studying all the topics covered in the course, holding group discussions and last minute revision. The survey outcomes "show that most unvcisily students would study all the Lupins cuvciu US llulCdte by 76 (38.0%) and 96 (48.0%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively (Fig. 12).

Analysis performed on the ethnic groups found that the Chinese students seem to be the largest group with 37 (23.0%) out of 161 Chinese respondents, who chose to 'spot' questions or rely on tips given by the lecturer (Fig. 13). Most of the Malay and Indian students chose to study all the topics covered and have group discussions when preparing for examination. This trend is reflected by 69 (40.4%) and 50 (29.2%) out of 171 Malay students, and 19 (37.3%) and 20 (39.2%) out of 51 Indian students who indicated that they chose to study all the topics covered and have group discussions, respectively. The survey outcomes also reflect the lack of interest among the Chinese students in having group discussion when preparing for examinations, as indicated by only 11 (6.8%) out of 161 Chinese students (Fig. 13).

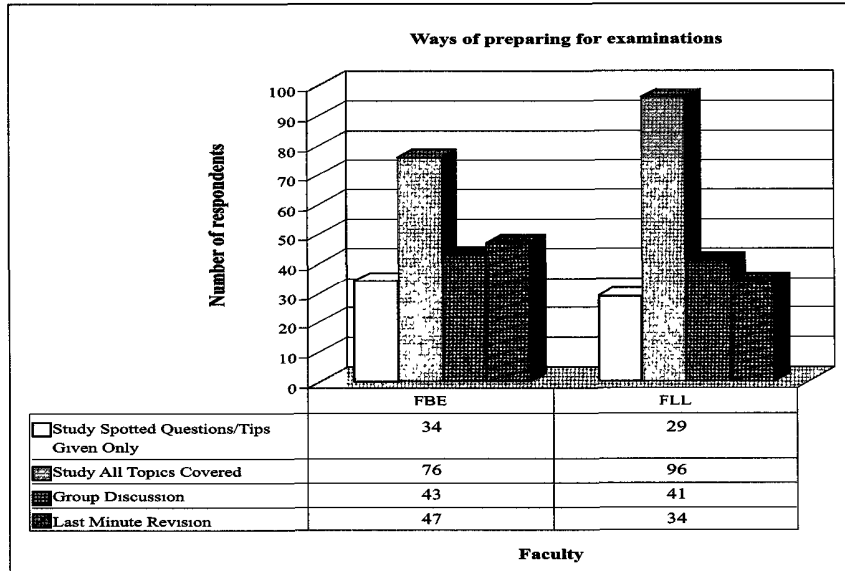


Figure 12: Ways of preparing for examinations according to faculty

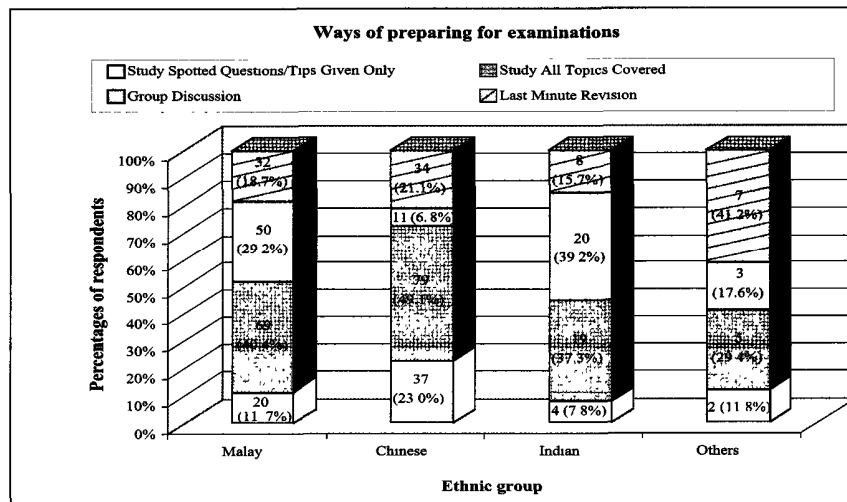


Figure 13: Exam preparation based on ethnic group

On the students' preparation for examinations, Professor Suradi commented that many Chinese students "study smart" by just studying what is necessary. Since the purpose of studying is to pass the examination, they attempt to 'spot' the questions. They do not have to waste time but only concentrate on what they think is important. For the long term, however, they should have the knowledge from what they have studied. As the Malays and the Indians do not adopt a similar approach, they have to study everything. This affects overall performance, as they study too much but cannot remember everything.

Chinese students face problems if the questions they 'spot', did not come out in the examination. Students should look at the past years' questions and discuss with their lecturers. For the long term, gaining knowledge is the purpose of studying. Thus, the students should learn the skills that have been taught (Lau et al, 2004).

Also, in Professor Suradi's opinion, discussion groups that indulge in mere social chatting would not help the students to concentrate on their studies. Some of the Chinese students might feel there is not much benefit from the group discussion. Group discussion is sharing. It will be beneficial if the students do some reading before the discussion. Failing to do so would result in non-productive chit chatting and a mere wasting of time. Also, according to him, the Chinese are more individualistic, possibly because they live in the urban areas. They do not have much communication with their neighbors and tend to be independent. They are keen to develop by themselves. Other races are not that confident about themselves and the group discussions make them more confident when preparing for examinations. Malays and Indians care more about their friends than Chinese who tend to be more self-centered (Lau et al., 2004).

Library Usage

University students need to use the library to read, search for references to better understand a subject and to complete assignments, or to enrich their knowledge in various disciplines. This survey investigated library usage by students from FBE and FLL.

In general, it is found that the students from both faculties borrow books when they need references to complete their assignments. This is indicated by 165 (82.5%) and 157 (78,5%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively. Only a very small number of students borrowed books for general reading, as indicated by 17 (8.5%) and 30 (15.0%) out of 200 respondents each from FBE and FLL, respectively. It is also sad to find that some students have not visited the library at all as indicated by 6 (3.0%) out of the 200 respondents each from both the faculties, respectively. This outcome reflects extremely low general reading interest among students from both faculties. Indeed, there is a need to promote interest in reading for knowledge acquisition among the university students.

Professor Suradi is of the opinion that students should read books to broaden their knowledge besides getting more information for reference. This would help them gain better understanding of their lectures, and improve the quality of discussions and assignments. However, there are cases of students who do not borrow books. He added that students should borrow books for general reading and lecturers should ask students to read more books for additional information. Besides that, he said students should review their lecture notes after every lecture and read the relevant reference books suggested (Lau et al., 2004).

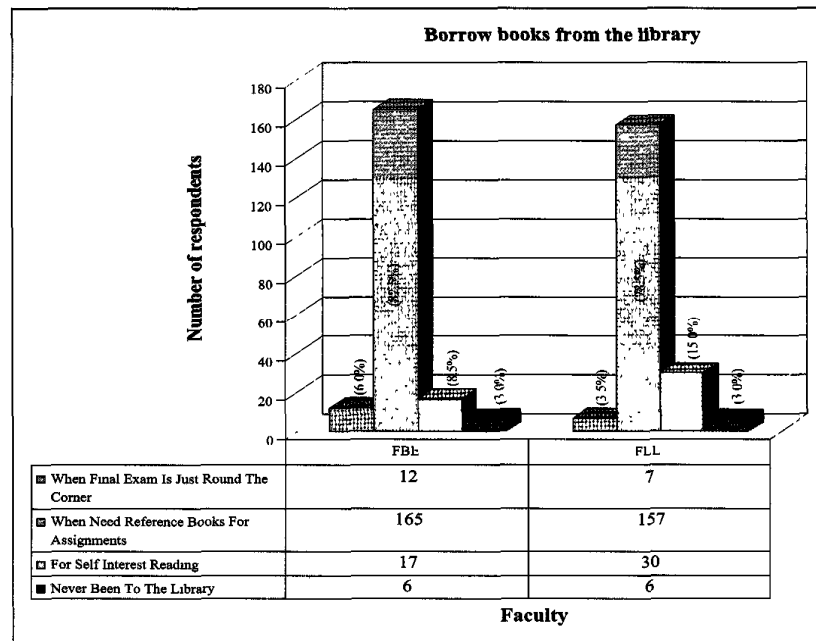


Figure 14: Reasons for borrowing library books

CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the survey reveal aspects related to the effort and attitude of the university students in their studies. The results were reviewed and further analyzed by Professor Suradi Salim, an educationist with more than 25 years of working experience in the education industry. He commented on the importance of taking notes during lectures, making preparation before attending lectures or tutorial classes, and the amount of time that a student should allocate for academic activities each day. He also presented his views on the cultural factors that might have influenced the attitudes of the Malay, Chinese and Indian students towards learning. These include the preference for group study and discussion by the Malay and Indian students, the manner and the people who the students would approach for help to solve study problems, and the approaches that the different ethnic groups would take in preparing for examinations.

Regarding the poor reading rate among the students, Professor Suradi suggested that the lecturers should provide a list of reference books to the students. This would make the students read books which are relevant to the lectures and promote their interest in reading. In this way, the students would be able to understand the lectures and study topics better. However, as the findings are based on 200 respondents only from FBE and FLL, respectively, the implications of the findings cannot be used to generalize the efforts and attitudes of other university students towards their studies in the University of Malaya or other local institutions of higher learning. Overall, the survey outcomes and the comments serve as useful information to both the university students and lecturers.

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