

## Understanding the Struggle of University Students in Indonesia

Jenny Lukito Setiawan

Faculty of Psychology, Ciputra University, Surabaya  
e-mail:jennysetiawan@ciputra.ac.id

**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to describe university students' concern and its complexity. Participants were 68 students from two private universities in Indonesia. In order to achieve deep understanding of the issue, the qualitative approach was adopted. Data were obtained through individual interviews and focus group discussions. Results show that problems related to academic, relationships with others, transitions to university, romantic relationships, and self were frequently reported by students. Academic-related problems were mostly characterised by difficulties in coping with academic demands and difficulties over time management. In regard to problems in romantic relationships, the selection of a partner is a strong issue, which was complicated not only by a lack of social skills to build relationships, but also by parental prohibition from having such relationships before students complete their studies. Self-related problems involve concerns related to self-concept, self-esteem and confidence, uncertainty about values and struggle towards maturity. The interrelations of these issues and the implications for supporting students are further discussed.

**Keywords:** students' concern, academic-related problems, self-related problems.

**Abstrak.** Tujuan studi ini adalah menguraikan keprihatinan mahasiswa dan kompleksitasnya. Partisipan adalah 68 mahasiswa dari dua universitas swasta di Indonesia. Agar diperoleh pengertian yang mendalam, dilakukan pendekatan kualitatif. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara dan diskusi kelompok terpusat. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa masalah terkait akademik, hubungan dengan orang lain, transisi ke perguruan tinggi, hubungan romantis, dan masalah pribadi sering dilaporkan para mahasiswa. Masalah terkait akademik terutama dicirikan oleh kesulitan mengatasi tuntutan akademik dan kesulitan mengatur waktu. Terkait masalah hubungan romantis, pemilihan pasangan merupakan masalah berat, yang makin rumit bukan hanya karena kelemahan keterampilan sosial untuk membangun hubungan, tetapi juga oleh larangan orang tua untuk terlibat hubungan demikian sebelum studi tuntas. Masalah pribadi menyangkut hal-hal terkait konsep-diri, percaya-diri dan keyakinan, ketakpastian tentang nilai dan perjuangan ke arah kematangan. Kesalingterkaitan antar-isu tersebut dan implikasinya untuk mendukung para mahasiswa dibahas lebih lanjut.

**Kata kunci:** keprihatinan mahasiswa, masalah terkait-akademik, masalah pribadi

Several studies (such as Cook et al., 1984; Carney, Peterson, & Moberg, 1990; Soliman, 1993; Grayson, Clarke, & Miller, 1995; Rudowicz & Au, 2001) have been conducted to investigate problems commonly experienced among students. Study by Carney et al. found that self-support finances, career indecision/job search frustration and academic performance difficulties were the area of most common concern to students. Study by Cook et al. showed that education achievement and anxiety came as the

most frequently cited problems. Grayson et al. found that problems with finance, course-related, domestic, interpersonal and personal crisis, and the management of resources and facilities were commonly experienced by university students. Soliman (1993) who conducted his study in Kuwait found the top five most encountered problems, including "need for support in a stressful situation," "need to achieve a goal," "having problems with grades," "needing money," "wanting to understand oneself better." Meanwhile, Rudowicz and Au (2001) did similar research in Hong Kong and found that problems related to study was the one experienced most by students. Other commonly experienced problems were problems related to health, emotional life, peer relationships, and love relationships.

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A study by Setiawan (2004) has also carried out to assess the prevalence and degree of severity of students' concerns during their university career in Indonesian context. The results of this study showed that problems related to academic, self, depression and mood change, romantic relationships, welfare, other relationships, anxiety, loss, and transitions, were experienced by more than 50% of students participating in the study. In regard to degree of severity, academic-related problems and loss scored the highest degree of severity compared to other areas of concern. This study also found that problems related to academic were the most widely experienced and the most serious concern among students. Depression and mood change and romantic relationships were also found to have high prevalence and tend to achieve higher degree of severity compared to other areas of concern.

Findings of the study provide important information for university counsellors and staff to evaluate academic curriculum and operation as well as to conduct some programs to help students anticipate and deal with problems which are high in prevalence and degree of severity. However, the findings did not provide clear information about the exact and actual problems experienced among students which covered under a certain category of concern. Therefore the aim of the current study was to describe university students' concern and its complexity.

## Method

A qualitative approach was adopted in the current study. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were chosen as data collection methods. The main reason for choosing the one-to-one interview as the data collection method was to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' experience (Seidman, 1998). The semi-structured interview format was utilised because it allows the interviewer to guide the interviewees and probe for extra information when necessary thus leading to more detailed and in-depth (Morgan, 1997; Greenbaum, 2000; Bryman, 2001). With regard to the focus group, it would benefit the research by eliciting a greater range of experience and opinion about the discussed research topic (Morgan & Krueger, 1993;

Bryman, 2001).

Informants of the study were students from two private universities in Indonesia. There were 68 students participating in the study. Thirty-two students participated in the individual interviews. Thirty-six students participated in the focus group interviews, which were grouped into four. Students participating in the study were distributed equally in reference to gender, year of study, and mode of study.

## Results

Results of qualitative study showed that problems related to academic, relationships, transitions, romantic relationships, and self were frequently reported by students. In order to show the actual problems which students experienced, these areas of concerns will be presented in detail.

### *Academic Related*

There were 8 sub-problems identified under academic problems, including difficulty in coping with academic demands, problems with time management, lack of academic motivation, dissatisfaction with academic performance, problems with teaching style, problems with course choice, lack of academic concentration, and problems with academic expectation. However these sub-problems could not be seen as separated one from another. In some cases they could be related one to others. Among these eight sub-problems, difficulties in coping with academic demands and problems with time management were the most frequently reported by students.

*Difficulty in coping with academic demands.* Most of the students reporting difficulties in coping with academic demands complained that the course subjects were hard and the course workload was high. They reported that the number of assignments and presentation of work was high. A great number of students mentioned that educational preparation given at school was insufficient to cope with university study. Some students felt that the educational standard of the university they were attending was high, compared to the one in their hometown. Students especially those who were at the later stage

of their university studies faced difficulties in managing work placements. They lacked a social network and information for work placement. They also encountered difficulties in dealing with dissertation work, such as difficulties in choosing research topics, preparing and carrying out research.

*Problems with time management.* Students found it difficult to manage their time in order to meet the demands of assignments and group work. These difficulties were complicated by students' involvement in the organisation of social activities and in some paid work. The problems with time management were also caused by the course timetable which was totally different what they had experienced in school. The course time table at university level was felt to be loosely structured, so that they could not utilise their time effectively.

The other common academic-related problems were lack of academic motivation and dissatisfaction with academic performance. Students who lacked academic motivation reported that the routine with a high workload made them bored. They also mentioned that their lack of academic motivation was also associated with the influence of friends, lecturer's teaching styles which were unclear, too serious and the failure of students to see the practical relevance of some of the course modules in practice. As a result of low academic motivation, students achieved disappointing academic results.

A few of students complained about the teaching styles of lecturers. They felt that the teaching styles of their lecturers were obscure, difficult to follow and unsystematic. Some other students felt that they had come into the wrong course due to lack of information or family pressure.

### *Other Relationships*

There were four sub-problems identified under this category, including social gap, problems in relationships, difficulties in relationships, and lack of friends. Students in the study reported their dissatisfaction with the nature of relationships with friends in the university environment. They mentioned that the relationships in university were more individualistic and more selfish compared to those in school. Consequently they had difficulties in developing the same quality of relationships with friends on cam-

pus. Social gaps among certain groups of students were also reported, which were associated with differences in ethnicity, social economic status, course subject, intellectual ability and involvement in student organisations.

Problems in relationships reported by students in this study were associated with conflicts as the results of differences in values and characters. In regard to difficulties in building relationships and lack of friends, a few of students had low confidence and poor social skills so that they had difficulties in starting and building relationships with friends. These findings showed that students had poor managing conflict and interpersonal skills.

### *Transitions*

Three sub-problems have been identified under transitional areas, including problems with change in academic environment, problems with separation from family and problem with change in living environment. Students reported that the academic systems and ways of teaching at university level were very different from those at school level. At university level, they were also expected to be independent in study and in collecting information for their studies and to take responsibility for their own study. They reported that these new systems and ways of teaching cause problems for them as they were not prepared to face this.

Fewer number of students reported that they had problems with separation from family as they had to live separately from their family. They mentioned that separation from family meant that they had to self-manage in their independent living. In their independent living, no more parents to care for them or to support them. They had to be responsible for their own life.

Some students who were originally from other parts of Indonesia also faced changes in living environment such as the weather, local language, habit and life styles. They found to be pressured to adjust to all of these in order to be socially accepted.

### *Romantic Relationships*

It was found that students tended to be shy or

uneasy in talking about romantic relationships. There were two main problems identified in the category of romantic relationships, including difficulties in seeking a boy- or girlfriend and problems in relationships with a boy- or girlfriend. The first subproblem was associated with a lack of social skills to build a romantic relationship, difficulty in intimacy and a lack of parental consent to find a boy- or girlfriend. The second subproblem included problems in adjustment with a boy- or girlfriend and being forbidden by parents to continue their relationships.

### *Self-related Problems*

Data revealed that self-related problems were dominated by problems of poor self-esteem and lack of self-confidence. Some students had inferiority feelings in terms of intellectual capacity, social economic status and their family situation. As a result, their poor self-esteem and lack of confidence had prevented them from developing relationships with others and seeking help with their academic difficulties. A minority of students reported uncertainty with personal value and goal and problems with maturity.

## Discussion and Recommendations

Findings showed that academic-related problems were mostly characterised by difficulties in coping with academic demands and difficulties over time management. The difficulties in coping with academic demands were partly related to a lack of readiness to study independently. The issue of lack of readiness to study or live independently was also reported when students were mentioning their problem in transition to university.

This kind of problem is common among students, not only among students participating in the current study, but also students from other societies because transition to university involves major changes in life-style, as pointed out by Wittenberg (2001). However, it seems that the cultural characteristics of Indonesian society might make the transition process more difficult among Indonesian students. In Indonesian society as a large power distance society (Hofstede, 1997, 2001), students are culturally de-

pendent on teachers and the process of learning is led by the teacher (Labour, Juwah, White, & Tolley, 2000). Being used to a high dependence in relation to teachers in their educational process at primary and secondary levels, a sudden expectation to be independent at university level brings some difficulties in the psychological adjustment of Indonesian students. Therefore, it is argued that universities are called upon to find ways to support students in this transitional period. Previous studies (Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995; Rickinson, 1998) found that support received from the environment during a transition stage is vital to help students to adjust to their new environment. It is also argued that students need to be encouraged to show independence and responsibility even before they move to the university.

Difficulties in time management were also revealed in this study. Therefore, workshop on time management needs to be held in order to help students manage their work load and utilise their time effectively in response to loosely structured time table in university life.

Problems related to romantic relationships were widely experienced by students. This is understandable as part of their developmental tasks is to choose a partner and explore the possibilities of establishing relationships (Santrock, 2002). However, it seemed the problems were complicated not only by a lack of social skills to build relationships, but also by parental prohibition from having such relationships before students have finished their study. The parental involvement in this issue could be understood considering the cultural characteristics of Indonesian society. It is not uncommon students face dilematic situation between breaking off their romantic relationships – which in turn create depression and a sense of loss, or stand their ground and have poor relationships with their parents. In response to problems with romantic relationships, it is suggested that university make some workshop to help students improve their interpersonal and decision making skills.

The data also revealed that low self-esteem and feeling inferiority prevented students from building relationships with others and to seek help when they have difficulties. Therefore, university counsellors need not only think of ways of improving student's interpersonal skills but also improving their self-esteem.

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