The Causative Factors of Failure among Undergraduate Malaysian Students in Al-Azhar University:
A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose: A worrying number of Malaysian undergraduate students are failing in Al-Azhar University annually. This qualitative case study looks into the reasons behind why a large number of Malaysian students fail. It is to understand and add to our knowledge of the reasons of why this phenomenon is occurring. The study aims to identify what seem to be the contributing factors which cause the Malaysian students to fail in their examinations; based on previous literature, what would be the consequences of not having adequate mastery of Arabic language while studying in a particular setting; and in what could the factors contributing to failure be overcome or minimized.

Methods: Four informants were identified as data-rich consisting of two high ranking officers from the Malaysian Student Department in Cairo (MSD-Cairo) and two Malaysian students studying in Al-Azhar University. Hence, the data gathered provided insights from both perspectives – from educational administrators' and students' point of view – in order to understand the phenomena studied in a more comprehensive manner. The chosen sample was considered as to get multiple realities of the phenomena, and this type of the sampling was considered an adequate representation of the experiences concerned. Even though the number was limited, the information gathered were be more than sufficient as the informants were interviewed and probed with open-ended questions. All four interviews were conducted face to face at different times, and were audio-recorded.

Results: The findings revealed contributing factors to the students' failure are due to the negative attitude of students themselves towards their studies; the students being not proficient in specifically the language of the medium of instruction which is Arabic; the nature of the university's educational system which needs improvement to cater to the issue at hand; and the students' financial stability and in need of financial support. Suggestions were also extracted from this study to help assist in overcoming or at least help in minimizing the intensity of the factors contributing to failure.

Keywords: Academic under achievement, students' failure, factors contributing to failure, qualitative case study

Introduction

Since the 1950's, Al-Azhar has always been one of the most prominent universities among Malaysian Muslim scholars to be admitted to in order to study all sort of branches pertaining to religious studies. Hitherto, most of the *mufti*s, and officers holding religious related posts in Malaysia are graduates from this particular university. In

1958, there were only 40 Malaysian students studying in Al-Azhar, and by 1974, there were 199 of them (Eccel, 1984).

Through the years, the number of Malaysian students increased gradually, and by the year 2000 there were 5,724 students. What is alarming is that half of the amount of the students mentioned failed in their examination and could not be promoted. (This means if the student is in Year 1 – or so forth, he/she will repeat that particular Year, and will not proceed to the following Year). (New Straits Times, September 18, 2000).

If an attempt was made to contemplate the amount of students mentioned who had failed, it is just incomprehensible. Hence, why are a large number of Malaysian students failing? The situation mentioned in year 2000 did not stop there.

Table 1: Percentage of Malaysian Students Who Failed In Al-Azhar University

Session	Percentage of students' failure
2003/2004	54.9%
2005/2006	72.52%

(Source: The Academic Unit, Malaysian Student Department of Cairo, 9th March 2007)

Then, the examination result for the Malaysian students in Al-Azhar for the 2003/2004 session showed that 54.9% of them failed in their examinations. While as for the session of 2005/2006 showed that 72.52% of them failed in their examinations. (The term 'failed' here refers to failing one or more subjects in the examinations, or absent/failing to attend the examinations). The last digits of the total percentage are worrying.

In the related matter, only 5 out of 169 students (only 2.95%) from Negeri Sembilan (one of the states in Malaysia) who are studying in the mentioned university have been identified to have been promoted and passed in their studies without repeating a particular Year until completing their studies. (Utusan Malaysia, June 6, 2006). This implies that 97% of the students failed in their paper(s) in their studies and have to repeat the course they failed.

This matter is part of the issue of the academic under achievement of Malaysian students in local and foreign universities has been a recurrent topic of academicians (Azizah, Sharifah, Ghazali, Arshad & Ahmad, 1996). It is reported that Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad and Professor Awang Had Salleh, Chairman of the Sultan Idris Teaching University (UPSI), also expressed their deep concerns for the poor academic performance of Malays at the tertiary level (Awang Had, 1986).

Professor Awang Had pointed out the Malay student's poor mental stamina as the core of the underachievement issue. He argues, they were neither lazy nor dull. Their underachievement could only be attributed to their lack of persistence. He deplored what he identified as "symptoms of obstinacy" among Malays. New habits, he protested, were so unwelcome in the Malay culture that even small changes would take ages to find their way to the Malays' way of life. Changes were accepted but through an evolutionary process.

In general, this study aims and is designed to identify and understand the reasons why Malaysian students are experiencing failure in Al-Azhar University. The objective of the study is to explore the factors that are contributing to this matter. This study is to answer the following research questions:

1.   What are the contributing factors which cause the Malaysian students to fail in their examinations?
2.   What are the consequences of not having adequate mastery of Arabic language?
3.   How can those factors be overcome or minimized?

Method

The factors contributing to the Malaysian students' failure in Al-Azhar University are numerous, and yet to be identified. Hence, being a qualitative study, methods associated with case study and phenomenology were selected to explore the matter. Basically, a case study is an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection (Creswell, 2005). It is important, as Stake (2000) has noted that 'case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of what is to be studied (a case)'. A case study research focuses, explores, and describes an individual or a group of participants then draw conclusions only about that individual or group in that specific context (Bassey, 1999).

As case study research excels at bringing us to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research, the researcher will make use of this approach in conducting the mentioned study. In addition, since the objective of this study is to understand the reason behind the phenomenon discussed, it is appropriate that the case study approach be used so that the practical problems involved in contributing the failing rates of the students could be indentified and their possible causes discussed.

The phenomenological approach was also used because it is appropriate when one's goal is to explore a phenomenon (i.e. a large number of Malaysian students failing in Al-Azhar University every year) using the informants' own views. According to Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189) "the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved".

Sample - according to Hycner (1999, p. 156) "the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants." (cited from Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, purposive sampling is chosen, as considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants. The sample will be selected based on the purpose of the research, looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988 p. 150).

Thus, four informants were identified as data-rich consisting of two high ranking officers from the Malaysian Student Department in Cairo (MSD-Cairo), which were coded as 'AD1' and 'AD2', and two Malaysian students studying in Al-Azhar University coded as 'ST1' and 'ST2' in this study. Hence, the data gathered provided insights from both perspectives – the educational administrator and the student – in order to understand the phenomena studied in a more holistic manner. The informants were approached before the study was conducted and their consents were obtained beforehand. The aim of the study then, was to get multiple realities of the phenomena, and the type of the sampling was considered an adequate representation of the experiences concerned. Even though the number was limited, the information gathered were be more than sufficient as the informants were interviewed and probed with open-ended questions.

Interview - The primary source of data is verbal response from in-depth and semi-structured interviews with the informants. Interview is seen as a useful method as it can get behind a participant's story. Cohen, Mannion, and Morrison (2000) agree that interviews allow subjects 'to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and express how they regard situations from their own point of view'. Semi-structured interviews were used as it allows for focused, conversational, two-way communication, which is preferable in exploring and discussing one's experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). All four semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one, face to face at the respondents' chosen and convenient venue, following a checklist of topics (Table 2) at different times, and lasted for approximately an hour.

The topic list was constructed based on previous literature pertaining to the discussion, several pilot-interviews, and eventually to answer the research questions. The interviews were audio-recorded using a digital voice recorder with the interviewees' permission. Therefore, the researcher was free to concentrate on the elicitation process and will not be distracted by detailed note-taking.

Data Analysis - as recommended by Hycner (1999), listening repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with the words of the informant in order to develop a holistic sense, the 'gestalt'. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using a form that shows the discourse units and the scripts of

interview. According to Creswell (2005: 233), transcription is the process of converting audiotape recordings or field notes into text data. The data was read through several times to obtain a general sense of the material, and at the identifying the main ideas. Topics and patterns were demonstrated by presenting appropriate narrative textual accounts. After the identification of patterns and descriptions, then coding takes place. Coding is the process of segmenting and labeling text to form descriptions and broad themes in the data (Creswell, 2005: 237).

Table 2:Topic List for Interviews

Major topic	Questions about
Students' attitude	- students' attitudes toward their studies - hard working sufficiently to excel
Contributing factors	- the contributing factors to students' failure annually - how those factors affect academic performance - to what extent the surroundings contribute to students' failure or success - the educational system
Suggestions	- how to reduce failure rate - suggestions to improve the situation

Coding would allow the researcher to identify and extract descriptions, themes, topics, or issues in a more systematic manner. The descriptions were then transferred into a coding template by organizing the descriptions gained according to the sequence of the research questions. From the coding template, main ideas could then be identified from a critical analysis of the discourses. Eventually, from the main ideas, repetition of topics and concepts were categorized into themes, as theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research. (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The transcription of the interviews and the coding template were shown to the respected interviewees to ensure that the transcriptions were transcribed correctly, and to attain their agreement to the main ideas extracted from their interviews.

Results and Discussion

A review of the major findings for each of the research questions will be discussed here. Interpretations of major findings are discussed according to major emergent themes which involves making sense of the data. According to Creswell (2008: 264), 'interpretation in qualitative research means that the researcher steps back and forms some larger meaning about the phenomenon based on personal views, comparisons with past studies, or both'.

Although with the small sample size, as it is typical for a qualitative study, thus the result could not be generalized in a statistical sense, but the respondents who participated in this study had provided an insight of the study. The core points of this study are deduced from two categories of datum; data extracted from admin and data extracted from students. The reasons mentioned by the respondents concerning the factors that are contributing to failure correspond with 4 key themes: students' negative attitude towards study, not proficient in Arabic language, educational system, and financial stability and support. Suggestions for overcoming or minimizing the problems faced are also discussed.

1. Students' Negative Attitude towards Study

The issue of students' negative attitude towards study had received considerable concern from all informants. All were in a consensus that students portrayed a rather unsatisfying attitude towards study which contributed to their failure. Hence, from the data obtained, seven main ideas related to the students' attitude were extracted and summarized as follows:

(1) Study at the Last Minute

Based from the data of the interviews, it seemed that the students had a tendency to study at the minute before examinations. This sort of attitude had been highlighted by the interviewees. According to one of the educational administrators,

AD2 - In general they do study diligently, but more diligently for exams at the last minute. That is their attitude… but for the exams their focus is only on the last minute, on the last minute for exams. Probably this is the factor among many reasons that caused them not to achieve excellence in their studies.

AD2 - They definitely give focus for exams at the last minute, not in the beginning… they study and very diligent but the focus, as people say that only nearing the exams, usually it is like that.

Then according to one of the students interviewed,

ST2 - And usually during exam time, only then they busy themselves to go to class… it (going to class) was supposed to be from the beginning.

Both of the interviewees quoted above (AD2 and ST2), portrayed the attitude of students giving focus to their studies at the last minute. As the educational system of the university is exam-oriented, thus, in turn the students reacted by taking the exam-oriented approach. This tend to lead the students to only focus on their studies for the exams as it would be the only way of assessing their academic performance. The issue here was their attitude of delaying their preparation for their exams.

Although the institution was implementing a summative type of evaluation in assessing the students, but this does not mean and allow students to neglect their studies all year round and wait for the final moment to prepare themselves to attend the assessments. Relentless efforts should have been made from the start of the course, instead of wasting time, to ready oneself for exams, thus, enhancing one's performance.

Needless to say that such attitude would lead to undesirable consequences. Obviously one does not expect the same outcome from a person who prepares him/herself for six month the same as to those who prepare themselves for six days. Thus, this was considered as one of the factors that impeded students from excelling. In such a case, if this sort of attitude prolongs, thus, the chances of the deterioration of academic achievement among Malaysian students would also prolong.

(2) Not Hardworking

There was another conspicuous attitude of the students that was pointed out which was considered as not hardworking to attain academic excellence. When asked if the students were hardworking enough in order to excel academically, the respond from the educational administrator's side was,

AD2 - No, I think not yet, they have not yet worked hard to attain their achievement.

Referring to the factor mentioned in the previous discussion (Study at the Last Minute), and to complement that factor with the attitude of not working hard would just aggravate the matter. On the related matter, on the student's viewpoint,

ST2 - Lazy. Ok the biggest factor would be laziness.

If this was the case, then it was definitely a factor that contributed to the decline of academic performance, as it would be incomprehensible to neither propose nor agree that this sort of attitude would contribute to academic excellence. There was lack of effort to improve the situation. Many students opted to skip classes instead of finding alternatives to mend differences. This sort of attitude did not help the students, who found mastering foreign language as troublesome, to be complacent and lazy.

ST2 - Sometimes they go to class and sometimes they do not go to class because, they do not understand what the lecturer is saying. Uhh that is what usually is going on among uhh Azhar students.

ST2 - If we go to class every day, God willing there will be no problems. But the problem is they are not diligent in going to class.

ST1 - Probably by coming here, people consider as if we are on a holiday, no problem right, come to Egypt then go back on a holiday, no problem…

Obviously this sort of mindset did not help them to work hard and focus on their academic struggles. The factor of language non-proficiency would be discussed later.

(3)Lacking Interest

Delving into the discussion further, the respondents seem to agree that generally, the attitude of the students themselves was a reflection of their commitment in their studies. From an educational administrator's point of view,

AD2 - … if we (the students) are easily bored, easily fed-up, easily angered by, angered by the Arabs, thus, we cannot interact with them and when this feeling is within the students, thus it contributes to laziness, do not want to, fed-up to study.

From the students' viewpoint,

ST2 - Coming here (to Al-Azhar) also, probably half of those who came because considering… there is no other place (universities) to be enrolled in… uhh and still want to come. Ok they come.

ST2 - Another factor is probably boredom. Boredom causes them to be, they do not have competitions… they think everyone just wants to pass in the exam. So once they only want to pass, so they do not aim for something higher than that…

ST2 - When they come here, something which always happens is that they easily say that they are bored. Come here and say you are bored. Bored and do not know what to do.

ST1 - People (students) just come only to, come to fulfill the requirement to stay and study… when they fail, for me problems will arise, uh, this causes them to be fed-up, and so forth and because of that they play around in their studies.

The students were considered as having lack of interest in their studies, and failing exams aggravated the matter by causing them to lose more of their interest in their studies which they were already lacking of.

(4) Not Focusing on Studies

Academic failure amongst Malaysian students in Al-Azhar is also attributable to the mismanagement of the students in maneuvering their studies. The lack of focus on their academic lives also contributed to the issue at hand. The educational administrators pointed out,

AD1 - There are students who probably take study as a part-time thing, there are students who are registered but, actually they do not focus on their studies, probably because they are involved in other interesting activities.

AD2 - ...the third is focus (on studies), lack of focus at the initial stage.

While one of the students pointed out in a more specific setting,

ST1 - There are those who come here to do business. Uh, there are those who said they want to stay here for some time to do business and they use their studies only as a platform.

When their main objective was no longer on their studies, this created abundant of problems. Their interest was not on studying but rather on excelling at whatever their side activities were. Rather than working harder to improve their status, these students felt more inclined to channel their energy on something they found more achievable. As for the case of conducting business, the students could not have found their studies as important and an aspect of their lives that required their full attention and mastery.

(5) Low Academic Aims

The issue at present was also due to unambitious nature of the students as pointed out by one of the students,

ST2 - Usually the desired target by students, most of them say, hopefully just pass. So there is not one target stating that 'I must excel', none. Usually they just want a pass… so once they only want to pass, so they do not aim for something higher than that…

According to what has been quoted concerning low academic aims, consequently the effort put forth by the students in their studies could be considered as minimal and hardly sufficient to accomplish anything favorable.

(6) Not Serious

The problematic state at hand is also blamed on the absence of seriousness of these students in handling their academic lives. It was mentioned by one of the studetns as follow,

ST2 - They (the students) do not take it seriously. Most of them are not taking it seriously. Most of them are just playing around.

The students who are not serious in their studies could be considered as not seeing their academic responsibility as one that requires steady attention and consideration.

(7) Lack Priority

Added to this conundrum is also the students' ineffectiveness in balancing their private and social affairs with their academic affairs. Some of the students devoted their time more to the students' association. When overwhelmed by student association responsibilities, students simply gave their studies a back seat (Song, 2006). The situation among students were discussed by the students,

ST1 - …and other problems probably too many student association activities. Probably the activities, for me, could also be a problem.

ST2 - The students here… are more prone to other things… more focused towards… honestly I can say, more focused towards the association. The association should be prioritized at number ten but instead it is put at number one.

This implied that students were more hardworking in the context of student association comparing to being hardworking in their studies. It was undeniable that participation in associations and societies was good to build up on one's own soft-skill. However, this participation could be troublesome if one was imprudent in managing time. The benefit reaped participating in an association should be considered either it is enough to assist the students in their daily lives as mentioned by one of the students interviewed,

ST2 - …where as they, they, maybe, maybe they were finding excuses that by joining associations perhaps uhhh will uhh help their studies but actually for that, for me, associations help from aspects, certain aspects only.

A student would then have to determine whether the gains derived from this type of affiliation was worth the time spent on it.

2. Not Proficient in Arabic Language

For Malaysian students in Al-Azhar, a good command of Arabic language is regarded as being of utmost importance in order to ensure success in their academic performance. All the informants, however, most frequently identified students' lack of proficiency in the Arabic language as one of the most important contributing factors to failure. The informants consisting of educational administrators mentioned the following,

AD1 - Here, the use of the language, probably our students who come here do not have sufficient skills to keep up with their studies conducted in Arabic (language).

AD2 - The first factor, mastering Arabic language… their proficiency in Arabic language is not yet good, they rarely use the language… mastering Arabic language… The main problems are... studies, problem in mastering Arabic language.

While the informants consisting of students mentioned the following,

ST1 - But if we look from the angle of comprehension perhaps not understanding Arabic language…

ST2 - Umm… Arabic language, one. Lack of proficiency in Arabic language.

This is exactly what was mentioned by Zabidi (2008) reporting on the words of Malaysian Ambassador to Egypt, Datuk Zainal Abidin Ab Kadir on how Al-Azhar University was unsatisfied with the achievement of Malaysian students in mastering Arabic language. This fact nevertheless illustrated that the Arabic language factor has a significant impact on students' academic achievement in Al Azhar.

In addition, the language issue also leads to several consequences which by and large contributed to students' underachievement, and the weakness in mastering the Arabic language could lead to a domino effect, as mentioned by one of the students interviewed,

ST2 - When there is no proficiency in Arabic language, then other things would become difficult.

To generate a better understanding for the matter at hand, some of the consequences of not mastering the Arabic language are discussed below:

Consequences of Students' Lack of Arabic Language Proficiency

From the interviews, several consequences of not having adequate mastery of Arabic language were pointed by the informants. These consequences could be categorized into three major areas;

1. Inability to comprehend lectures.
2. Inability to communicate with lecturers, local students, and Egyptian community.
3. Inability to perform well in examinations which could indirectly contribute to failure.

Inability to comprehend lectures

The basic obvious of what will happen if one do not master the language, in turn would not be able to comprehend what is being taught in class, this was pointed out by both of the students interviewed,

ST2 - …because when proficiency in Arabic language is weak, we (the students) do not know what actually the doctor (lecturer) wants to convey.

ST1 - But if we look from the angle of comprehension perhaps not understanding Arabic language…

Interaction Inability

Lack of Arabic language proficiency was also seen to be a major reason for students' inability to interact. Although Malaysian students were known to have certain personalities that result in their limited interaction with the locals - be it the lecturers, the local students or the Egyptian community- their lack of Arabic language mastery also profoundly contributed to the matter.

Morgul (2007) stated that among the contributing factors to educational stress was the condition of lack of faculty-student rapport which seemed impeding in the students' learning process. Concerning the interactions of students with their educators, one of the educational administrators said,

AD1 - … because they are unable to interact with teachers using Arabic language… which means they are unable to interact with doctors (lecturers).

This matter of students' lack of interaction with their lecturers and local friends has become obvious that it prompted the other educational administrator to say,

AD2 - …and they (the students) must diligently ask, diligently discuss, discuss, ask friends, ask other teachers… the second would be to consult a teacher… if someone does not understand, he must consult a teacher.

This educational administrator (AD2) had emphasized the importance to interact especially with the educators in order to improve academically.

Inability to Perform in Examinations

Consequences when students lack proficiency in the language were pointed out by one of the educational administrators interviewed,

AD2 - …language problem, big problem, not being able to answer and answer incorrectly they do not get, do not get high marks, in fact fail.

AD2 - …but what makes one fails is language, although if one studies at the last minute but he/she has the mastery of the language, then no problem.

It could be concluded that, eventually, the inability to master the language used as the medium of instruction in the institution will result in failing academically. Thus, the key to pass examinations seemed to be emphasized on the importance of mastering the language discussed.

3. Educational System

In relation to the educational system that was adopted by the Al Azhar University, the informants pointed that some of the complexities of the system have nevertheless contributed to students' lack of achievement. Concomitantly, Abdul Malik Kahar, the special officer for Negeri Sembilan students' affair, listed the complexity of Al-Azhar educational system as being one of the significant factors that contributed to failure after language (Ainol Amriz, 2006). He was reported to say that Malaysian students had a rough time trying to adjust to a system that he described as 'extraordinary'. He also pointed on the problems of the unfixed examination schedules and the inadequate facilities of the university.

Elaborating on the same matter, Mohd Shah (2008) asserted that the reason why Al-Azhar was not even listed in the Time Higher Education (THE) or in any ranking of the world's best universities was due to its failure in providing good governance to its students. Likewise, the findings of the present study revealed a similar opinion. One of the educational administrators, when discussing the educational setting,

AD1 - The learning environment in Al-Azhar whereby the system is kind of unorganized, attendance is not compulsory, then the facilities at the university are sometimes questioned, sometimes the large number of students

do not have a place to sit on… then the facilities at the university are sometimes questioned, sometimes the large number of students do not have a place to sit on.

While on a student's point of view,

ST1 - ... the learning system in Al-Azhar, with no attendance, no presentation, so this causes the students, probably to be indiligent.

ST1 - The problems with the students in Al-Azhar, first of all is the unorganized schedule or system. So, in such condition, it gives the space for them to attend classes (or not)… But in Al-Azhar it is just exam. It means if today we register for class, it would be ok if we want to go back to Malaysia tomorrow. If the exam is tomorrow, it would be ok to reach here today.

The informants have portrayed that the administration of the discussed university was considered as unorganized, the attendance of students was not a must, the university lack necessary facilities, and the university was exam-oriented. Given these circumstances, and combined with the situations discussed prior to this, it is a wonder how a prolific process of learning could take place. In fact, based on the last statement quoted, the students could literally travel back to their homeland right after registration, and make sure to be back at the university a day before exam starts. Fundamentally, the educational system there assessed students by a summative evaluation, which was the only form of assessment through examinations. This is turn would lead the students to giving focus and attendance only to the time of examinations.

Among other things brought up by one of the students, concerning the improvement needed in the educational system were mentioned as follows, pertaining to the publications and distributions of text books used in classes, and the unfixed examination schedule;

ST2 - If from, from, from Al-Azhar University itself, among them, umm… for example books, the publications of books for classes are sometimes late. A month before exam only then they come out... Uh... that is the problem is the books come out late... Like when exam, umm, sometimes as happened recently, the doctor said, the exam uhh... the exam on the 13th (on a certain month). The students in juriprudence studies, recently, it just happened. (On the) 13th there is an oral exam, i do not know what subject, but an oral exam. All the sudden, it was changed within the day, uh... for example today is the 8th, she said on the 8th I want to do the exam today that is on the 8th. It means she immidiately changed. While actually it should be on the 13th, but she did it on the 8th.

This sort of situation would be unknown to the masses, but definitely would affect greatly the performance of students in their exams. This sort of event would jeopardize students performance, as been discussed earlier that the examination was the only method of assessment to determine if someone fails or passes or even excels, thus, the untiming or late publishing and distribution of text books, and the unfixed date of examinations should be thoroughly considered. Needless to say that students need the text books in order to make early preparation for examinations, and a fixed examination schedule in order to make a proper study plan, unless of course the changes were due to some sort of crisis then it would be comprehensible and accepted.

Based on the mentioned circumstances, students react by conducting studies on their own and only attend themselves to the university compound during exam period, and/or by going on long holidays until exam arrives, and/or by reading only for the sake of exams. These were as mentioned by both educational administrators interviewed in the followings;

AD1 - Uh, so they (the students) conduct their own private studies, and come to the university only for the exams.

AD2 - If the holidays are for six months, then for six month they are on vacation… Because they only want to take the exams. The attitude of wanting to attend exams, then no exams we (the students) do not read for exams.

4. Financial Stability and Support

One of the major factors which contributed to students' tendency to failure is financial stress. For instance, Misra, Crist, and Burant (2003), in their study of the international Asian students in US have identified financial stress as one of the three major factors which have been pertinent to Asian students' adjustments problems in US colleges and universities. As for this study, the informants also raised the issue of the students' financial insecurity which seemed to have taken a toll on the students. As a result, their academic performance suffered. One of the educational administrators interviewed emphasized the importance of finance,

AD2 - …and other factors is probably monetary factor also contributes, because if there is no money, no money, how could they survive here, instead they have to find the money… No other things, finance first… finance… it is finance… The second which means, uhh… they, about finance, uh… they focus on finance to find money, not studying, that is it… Finance is that way, many come here, more than 60% of our students that come here do not have financial assistance, which means that they are self-sponsored.

On the view from the students' perspective, the students interviewed mentioned,

ST1 - Then the most frequent problem for example is those who do not receive assistance, alms assistance, personal (assistance) and so on... Probably during the time close to exams, they might have financial problems, so this matter for me it is inevitable and probably affects the academic performance… If we look at those who have failed, their financial assistance is withheld. This will add to more problems for instance, these students who have failed, we are supposed to help them more. So they do not think of problems. Failing is a problem, added by this scholarship, adds more problems.

ST2 - Financial problems usually arise because students in Al-Azhar most of them are not… most of them are not financially stable… First of all from the financial aspect.

Based on what have been said, the situation is not encouraging a large number of percentage of students are not financially stable to support themselves in the duration of their studies, and simultaneously they do not have financial assistance. This condition would undoubtedly affect the students' academic performance, especially if they encounter financial difficulties nearing and/or during the examination period. To worsen the situation of having students not receiving financial assistance, those who *do* receive such assistance but fail in their exams, would have their financial assistance withhold from them. Instead of having to deal with one problem which is failure in the exams, now they have to face another problem of having their privilege of financial support being denied from them.

The situation of lack financial means to fulfill basic needs in life does not without consequences. Inevitably, due to the situation, the students will tend to give their attention on measures to support themselves financially instead of giving full attention to their studies. Considering this is what is going on, no one would even consider to expect any excellent academic outcome.

Consequences of financial problems

- Accommodation

As an extension of the discussed matter, respondents illustrated the next important element needed to support the process of learning among students, which is <u>accommodation</u>, that most of the students due to their ability to support themselves financially, could have only afforded accommodation far from the classes as mentioned by one of the educational administrators interviewed,

AD1 - …then from the students themselves, actually the basic preparation for the lack of affordability towards of the cost of living here, so they live in areas far away from classes, all that influences academic achievement.

The students had to compromise their studies in order to support their living, which in turn resulted in an undesirable academic result. This in turn led to the next element needed to support the process of learning which is <u>transportation</u>.

- Transportation

The trouble with this was when the students needed to travel to the classes as they lived far away from classes. As from this, one of the educational administrators prompted that there should be assistance lent to the students to help them in getting to class, while the other demonstrated the critical condition that most of the students were in when it comes to financial affordability, and how the students would have to compete and struggle to take the bus as they were not even capable to afford cab fares to their respective classes,

AD1 - …so among initiatives strategized are providing transportation and so on to overcome the problems, what… high expenses, fares and the culture of laziness of going to class also, could also, be overcome through that means.

AD2 - We waste a lot of time because if we want to go to study in class in Al-Azhar, a long period of time is needed to get to class, time wasted on the way there, waiting for one, two, three, four buses, for our students to take a cab we do not have extra money, to buy a motorcycle for one's own transportation, of course it is out of reach due to lack of money… they only rely on the bus which they compete with, with what say you the locals of Cairo, and the buses are very, very popular mode of public transport among the locals, Egyptians, because it is cheap, it is cheap, it is cheap, so sometimes that means that the bus is full, you are forced to wait, forced to wait, so you wait, and that causes your time to be wasted, you should have reached and yet you do not.

This matter would be considered as trivial by some, nonetheless, the impact was immense. It was such a pity that these students come half way across the Indian Ocean and were let down on such a paltry affair. The students could have been assisted to allow them to focus their concentration on their studies since that is the objective of them coming to Al-Azhar.

Suggestions for Overcoming or Minimizing the Problems

Elements Needed to Support the Process of Learning

In relation to the elements that are needed to support the process of learning, suggestions provided are mainly meant for the students, whereby students were advised to monitor and adopt elements that are needed to support their study. All in all, the discussion concerning this matter will be tackled from two major elements that were considered crucial by the informants in order to prevent failure among students which are;

- To improve their attitude towards study, and;
- To improve their Arabic language proficiency.

Attitude towards Study

Generally, the respondents interviewed agreed that the foremost reason contributing to the present conundrum was the attitude of the students themselves.

Some of the suggestions that could be benefited by students are as follows;

(a) Early preparation.

One of the educational administrators have emphasized the suggestion of,

AD2 - First of all is, students must, I mean, make early preparations, once the classes start… the focus to study let it be at the beginning, with a must to have a learning strategy… Then they must focus on their studies from the early stage.

The only thing to mend this situation was to ensure that these students had a target to work for. The target should be formulated at the early stage of their studies in Al-Azhar so that the learning process would have become more viable. From the viewpoint of students,

ST1 - … the most important thing is, we must have a target. We never should not have a target. If we do not have a target, for me maybe, there are those who overstay up to ten years.

ST2 - … it should be from the beginning (of studying). We were more prone to that direction (studying).

(b) Strategic learning.

With effective strategies for learning, nevertheless would have a better chance of succeeding instead of failing. The weakness of lacking effective study skills and learning strategies was seen to affect students' ability to cope with their studies, and thus, contribute to their low academic performance. From an educational administrator's viewpoint on this matter,

AD2 - Then, there is no learning strategy, learning strategy, the strategy to answer questions, they lack in acquiring this skill… I think in a sense, there is no schedule for studying.

From the a student's viewpoint it was said,

ST2 - Uhh… so must study attentively. Must study hard… study smart…all a must…must… must feel that one is unknowledgeable (enough) and need to study.

This sort of element needed to support the process of learning had been hinted that the need is not limited to incorporation of diligence into the students' lives but also by altering their perspective. The students must realize that the burden was on them to improve.

(c) Increase reading.

Other than diligently enquiring concerning academic matters, it is also recommended that the students read more. Both of the students interviewed discussed the matter,

ST1 - … among others is that we establish an operation on books, on books that we study in classes.

ST2 - Meaning do more reading of reading materials uhh… external... newspapers… and so on right, to increase vocabulary.

(d) Search ways to improve understanding.

Students must not easily give up if encountered with lack of understanding or difficulties, and must actively search for alternatives, such as participating in academic discussions, asking for help or using other resources. For example, students were encouraged to ask for help from friends and the lecturers themselves. An educational administrator pointed out,

AD2 - …and they must diligently ask, diligently discuss, discuss, ask friends, ask other teachers, and diligently use the dictionary, use the dictionary… The second thing is they must refer to teachers, if there is a lack of understanding, it must be referred to teachers, either attending tuition classes conducted by organizations, associations, own learning style…

While one of the students suggested,

ST1 - ... we (need to) take the initiatives to invite the lecturers themselves, maybe we pay a little amount of money and so on in order for the lecturers to re-explain to our students.

(e) Study in groups.

Participating in academic discussions and using resources, considering it was best to discuss in groups to fully appreciate the lessons. The lack of understanding could be better overcome by way of a study group set up for the students to discuss their queries and uncertainties. Both of the educational administrators had this to suggest,

AD1 - uhh…try to conduct study group, must study in groups.

AD2 - … study in groups, discuss, and do not handle your own affairs selfishly.

While one of the students suggested,

ST2 - … maybe by means of study groups.

(f) Conduct extra classes.

It is considered as a platform to converse to allow the students to exchange their thoughts. This is another element needed to support the students in the process of learning. One of the educational administrators emphasized the importance of this suggestion as this sort of effort has already and is being implemented,

AD2 - … we (educational administrators) conduct extra classes, classes, uhh… extra classes, classes such as subject clinic… we can assist, within our capabilities, not all of it, and from aspect, from aspect what say you, whatever activities, want to, want to learn language, we organize.

On the other hand, one of the students suggested,

ST1 - … maybe when we (students) go back we can discuss, re-discuss about organizing one *tafaqquh* (additional classes for in depth understanding) class and so on… conduct night classes or else we, we arrange for what say you, group classes… we take the initiative we call the lecturer himself, maybe we pay a little and so forth to explain again among our own students…so we further increase activities more or less discussion, academic discourses, or we set up programmes that are, uhh… what say you more towards, more towards what they learn in classes.

(g) Limit themselves from extra activities.

As some students appeared to devote more of their time and energy towards activities outside of study, one way to end this conundrum was by advising these students to limit or discontinue their co-curricular matters. Both of the educational administrators had this to suggest,

AD1 - … limit programmes which has nothing to do with academics... and avoid from or minimize any involvement with programmes that distract from academic activities, for example the involvement in student association to the extreme, which neglect the academic or distract the focus from studies to other programmes including other activities.

AD2 - … and avoid sensitivities, we do not want to see sensitivities actually, avoid things like these (political activities), focus on academics, not to other things.

It goes without saying that if more time was spent on their academic lives, their success rate may have also increased. This was because the time spent on revising their lessons and study plans was no longer disturbed by other activities.

Improve Arabic Language Proficiency

From previous discussions, it was clear that Arabic language proficiency played a vital role in ensuring students' academic success. In fact, the suggestions proposed by the interviewees showed the urgent need to develop the proficiency of the language. This was put in one of the highest priorities to ensure the development of the

students' academic achievement. This matter should not be approached as if to cure the weakness, instead it must be in a form of a preventive measure before coming to Al-Azhar University to study. Both of the educational administrators suggested,

AD1 - Probably the percentage of failure could be decreased if we resolve the problem at the early stage, which is in the point of language proficiency. It means the students who come here, we provide them with sufficient language skills…they must be more proficient in the language...

AD2 - And the second is the interaction with Egyptian community I think, for me, actually it is positive, it helps us to master Arabic language…then during holidays, they must develop their language skills, do more, make time, use the time they have, to learn the language, develop the language (proficiency).

One of the students suggested,

ST2 - I think first of all is to master the Arabic language.

This proposition was also highly recommended by Abdul Malik Kahar, in a newspaper report suggesting students to master the Arabic language before delving into their studies in Al-Azhar (Ainol Amriz, 2006). According to Abdul Malik, students must strive to master both forms of Arabic language, the Modern Standard Arabic and the Colloquial Arabic in order to succeed in Al-Azhar.

Actions and Interventions from the Higher Authorities Involved

This second part of discussion was organized to list several suggestions highlighted by the informants that were addressed mainly to the higher authorities involved concerning support in academic matters are as follows;

(a) Provide assistance at early stage – this includes early exposure to new students of the learning system in Al-Azhar.
(b) Supervise and monitor students' learning - provide supervision and guidance on students' learning, and develop more activities which could help students improve academically.
(c) Supervise attendance - supervise the students to ensure that they attend classes and not saunter their time away in slumber, and conduct of academic campaigns which could encourage students to attend classes.
(d) Conduct activities that support learning - organize constructive programmes/courses, and extra classes for the sake of academic improvement.
(e) Financial support - regarding this matter, the higher authorities were seen of being capable to provide considerable help. Students' financial problems could be lessened through the provision of fund, means of transportation and cost of living.
(f) Social Support - any support that could be provided in order to lessen students' educational stress, such as;
   - Initiate cooperation with related parties - Cooperation with other parties that are relevant was considered as beneficial in ensuring better assistance for students. Therefore, cooperation with the state officers, the Al-Azhar university and also the students association was deemed of utmost importance.
   - Overcome problems caused by the educational system - as mentioned earlier, the complexity of the Al-Azhar educational system has put a great strain on students, thus impeding their performance. For that reason, a way of solving this issue was by facilitating these students in their process to adapt so that the transition period was shortened. Higher authorities can help lessen the burden by exposing students about the system at an initial stage so that students could be more prepared to adjust to the difficulties that they are going to face; physically and mentally.
   - Provide assistance in official matters - the bureaucratic system in Egypt in general which involved the students was also an issue that begs attention. The frustration of psychological entanglement spent on getting through bureaucracy could exhaust the energy that could have been better spent on studying.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The lack of language proficiency had been discussed as one of the many potential factors contributing to academic deterioration. This sort of defect was considered as the root of the problem, when it came to the process of learning, as the medium of instruction in the university was Arabic language. Books, lectures, and exam questions and answers were all in Arabic. The lack proficiency in such matter resulted in the undesirable outcomes. As the proverb goes, "Language is life", thus, the preparations and efforts taken to ready oneself to be proficient in this language should had been taken long before the students ventured and departure to the university mentioned.

Financial affordability of the students and the financial support for the students should have been given priority and attention by all parties involved which included the students themselves. One must consider his/her financial stability before enrolling into the university. Once in a tight spot, students tend to be demoralized or demotivated to study, and/or tend to give more focus, attention, and time to find money in order to survive and to support him/herself in studies, thus, this in turn caused the student to neglect, if not, at least made academic achievement only as a secondary goal instead of a primary one.

There was always room for improvement, and Al-Azhar educational system was no exception. Improvement and adjustment in the university's disorganized system could have been made to assist and support the worrying number of students who had failed. On part of Malaysia, emphasis should had been made on the development in learning and teaching Arabic language to those who were groomed to further their studies in Al-Azhar, also the exposure to the system in Al-Azhar, and other supportive efforts which would have assisted the situation.

Students should give their full and undivided attention, focus, determination and seriousness with deep interest in their studies. With these elements mentioned, such attitude of studying at the final moment before exams, refusing to strive for academic excellence, lacking interest, focusing on other things rather than their studies, and having low academic aims could have been avoided. As the university was considered as an exam-oriented educational institution, thus, the students' approach or preparation must have adapted to such orientation.

Based on the findings, the followings are the recommendations proposed:

1. The students, curriculum designers, teachers, and those who are responsible and involved directly or indirectly with the admission of the students into Al-Azhar University must take strict and efficient measures to ensure the students are given ample education and sufficient training to develop their Arabic Language proficiency, both the formal/classical Arabic, and the colloquial dialect.
2. The students should be trained, educated, and nurtured to be able to prepare for, and give absolute focus and attention to the examinations. Emphasis should be made to avoid any activities which are considered as irrelevant to the success in the academic aspects. Students themselves must manage time well so they will have more than enough time to make thorough preparation before entering the examination hall.
3. The students should get more information, learn and reflect on previous experience through the alumni, students' associations, senior students in order to identify problems that they faced at the initial stage, thus, solutions would be thought through beforehand, and efforts could be taken to overcome the problems before it is too late.
4. Those who are going there to study, or those who are sending students there must planned out and obtain sufficient financial support.

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