



Key Influencing Factors Affecting Academic Performance: An Exploratory Study of Undergraduate IT Students of UTAS-Shinas in Sultanate of Oman

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ABSTRACT

The issue of academic performance has garnered serious attention in higher education due to its consequences for both the individual learner and the institution. This study employs exploratory analysis research design to investigate the factors which influence the student's academic performance. Data were collected from first year to third year undergraduate IT students for a sample of (N=150) at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS)-Shinas, Sultanate of Oman who were under academic probation using a structured questionnaire. The study mainly focuses on investigating the key factors that led to their poor academic performance. Findings reveal that IT students who are in probation are aware of the academic policy of the university and are satisfied with the academic support services provided by the university generally. However, the results indicated that some academic support services should be enhanced. Results further reveal that first-year participants were less satisfied with their time management skills as compared to higher years. Moreover, intensive requirement of the courses, difficulty of the courses content and lack of basic skills were the academic factors that led to their poor academic performance. The result also shows that personal factors like exhaustion, lack of motivation and passion and inability to manage stress influenced a student's academic performance. The university needs to collect students' feedback on the services offered to better cater to their needs. A periodic review of the university' current practices for the students is

required to help them maintain satisfactory academic standing.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions seek to provide students with the necessary information and abilities so that, considering the quick advancements in technology in many facets of life, they will be confident enough to take on global challenges. Thus, the difficulties facing the educational system must be recognized, investigated, and evaluated in order to raise the level of performance of university students. In the field of higher education, the issue of student's performance has become a significant concern due to its effects on the institution and individual learners. When academic performance is discussed, it usually points to the issue of academic probation. Research shows that up to 35% of students are placed under academic probation after their first semester in college (Tovar & Simon, 2006) especially, after Covid-19 when many higher educational institutes implemented online education to adapt with the global changes, causing an effect in student's performance.

Academic performance is the measurement of student achievement throughout his study. The Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) is a widely used measure of academic performance. Typically, a GPA of 3.0 or above is indicative of strong academic achievement in any university program. Academic performance usually equates to better employability as students with strong academic performance have higher employability than those who are not (Tentama & Abdillah, 2019).

Academic probation is an academic policy which is assigned to students who fail to meet the minimum academic standards set by their institutes (Espinosa, Escandallo, & Muegna, 2023). It is one of the most significant academic disciplinary elements that determines the student's academic status at the end of each semester. According to the bylaws followed by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Article 51, "A full-time student will be under academic probation, if his/her GPA is less than 2.0 in any semester" (Higher College and Colleges of Technology Bylaws, 2004, pp. 42). Academic probationary students could continue in their course of study, but they would have to improve their marks or risk being dismissed from the university. The placement of students in academic probation serves as an intervention (Hoover, 2014) and it aims to discourage poor academic performance, alert students to the seriousness of their academic standing, and identify those at risk of leaving the institution, so that proactive steps must be taken to help them enhance their performance. It is also crucial for educators, administrators, and legislators to comprehend the causes and variables affecting student's academic performance during the higher study period.

As we are all aware, Covid-19 pandemic led to a huge setback and shifted ways of life drastically around the world including education in schools and universities. Particularly this effect made it hard for some students to adapt easily to this major change where teaching has turned to virtual setup instead of the normal physical one. Preliminary evidence suggests that it affected student's performance in terms of lack of communication skills as they spent more time behind the screens (Bradaric & Tresselt, 2022). The gap Covid-19 has created in the education sector leads to the increase in the number of students who fall into academic probation as they lose their basic skills including communication skills, reading, writing, etc.

The awareness of academic policy plays an important role in that it serves as a guideline for students to follow to maintain a good academic standing. Being aware of the academic policy will lead to conscious effort in making sure they do not fall short of the criteria and end up getting dismissed in the university. Since some students struggle academically, institutions strive to improve through programs, services, and policies (Hoover, 2014). Despite the efforts, however, many students who experienced academic difficulty do not seek interventions when faced with problems and those who sought interventions perceive that the services they received are not addressing their problems (Addus, Chen, & Khan, 2007). Some support programs such as counselling, advising, tutoring, study skills, and time management are still very important to meeting the needs of at-risk students (Sage, 2010). Study shows that students who use more than one support service are more likely to graduate than students who use only one academic support service (Rost, 2015). Although there are many studies that have indicated the impact of academic support on student's academic success (Kakada, Deshpande, & Bisen,

2019; Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). In the Sultanate of Oman, the issues of academic supervision from the respective of students and instructors has been examined by ALGhanboosi and Kadhim (2004) which showed that most of the critical student's difficulties were related to insufficient academic advising. But there is no research that has shed light on academic support practices, especially at UTAS.

Time management refers to the ability to schedule time to complete the task. It is useful for students to be able to prepare, organize, manage their lives and complete their academic work on time, which will lead to their academic success. However, it is a skill that students need to learn and practice to be effective and more productive, eventually leading them to success (Cyril, 2015). According to Swart, Lombard, and De Jager (2009), there is a positive correlation between time management approaches and academic success. A study conducted by (Cyril, 2015) indicates that "all the time management behaviors are significantly positively related to academic achievement of students although the relationship is weak" while Razali, Rusiman, Gan, and Arbin (2018) cited that "there is no statistically significant relationship between time management skills and the academic achievement of African engineering students". The study also suggested that time management skills should be taught within the curriculum to offer students a practical understanding of the importance of these skills and the correlation of their academic success. Time management also plays a crucial role in a student's academic performance (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990) citing that it is a one of the fundamental determinants of student's performance along with self-regulation, motivation and self-efficacy.

Boumi and Vela (2024) studies investigated the relationship between student's course load and their academic outcomes, and it has been found that student with high number of courses have the best educational academic outcome of their performance. On the other hand, a study conducted to examine the relationship between semester course load and student performance found that there is no evidence of a negative impact on student performance and full semester load, but there is small positive effectiveness on student performance (Huntington-Klein & Gill, 2020). Another documented factor is absenteeism, and the studies differ on attendance and its impact on the student's academic level. According to a study by Yoo et al. (2022), there is a positive relationship between students' attendance and academic performance while Choi-Lundberg et al. (2019) found that they exhibited minimal correlation. Some research indicates that study habits such as taking notes, reading and conducting study groups play a significant role in student's academic success and improve their performance (Tus et al, 2020; Jafari, Aghaei, & Khatony, 2019).

Personal factors which include study habits, personal condition and attitudes toward school has an effect on student's academic performance (Latoja, 2022). On the other hand, influences in studies include institutional, personal and academic factors. These institutional factors include supportive staff who respect student difference, good assessment practices, resources needed for learning activities, while personal factors include lack of attitudes about the benefits of learning, lack of personal development goals and academic factors include prior knowledge, literacy, numeracy, computer-related skills, ability to access and understand information (Cedere, & Petersone, 2019). Moosa and Ibrahim (2008) conducted a study focusing on the main factors for falling into academic probation from a student's perspective. About 61 male and female students participated on this study to investigate the difficulties they face, their reactions, and how students to overcome these challenges. They found the inability of the students to acclimatize to a new university is the most essential factor that leads to being under probation. Study habits and student's lifestyle were found to be the reasons for failing under academic probation and ultimately affect the overall student's performance. The study proves that these factors were due to student's family education background and its impact on parenting style. Moreover, these students did not gain effective academic supervision in the university environment. Therefore, it has been suggested to conduct a regular awareness session for students, academic faculty and supervisors to discuss and overcome these factors.

In the Sultanate of Oman, student academic probation has been an alarmingly prevalent occurrence in recent years. A study conducted in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) shows that the number of academic probation students are increasing in the Engineering department (Al-Alawi et al., 2023). To date, there is not enough study on the current situation of students under academic probation at the first largest government university in the Sultanate of Oman, the (UTAS). Whereas in fact, the Registration department record shows that (24%) of Information Technology (IT) students fall under

academic probation in the first semester only of academic year 2023-2024 in UTAS-Shinas. Thus, understanding and addressing these factors is crucial for the student's academic success and ultimately the university's success.

In response to gaps identified, this study aims to explore and analyze the factors influencing Information technology (IT) student's academic performance in UTAS-Shinas providing insights into the academic probation situation of the university for the administration to devise interventions to support student's success and foster a culture of academic excellence in education. Specifically, the study aims to i) examine the student's awareness of the policy related to academic performance, ii) support services satisfaction iii) time management and iv) determine the academic and personal factors that influenced the student's academic performance.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed an exploratory research design to investigate the key influencing factors which affect the IT student's academic performance. Examining the responses of the students who are under academic probation will shed light on the academic and personal factors that influence a student's academic performance.

Respondents and Data Collection Process

The study focused on first to third year IT students of UTAS-Shinas who were under probation during Fall 2020 to Spring 2024 semesters. A total of 200 students falls under the probation category based on the list from the registration department. All 200 students were selected to have a better understanding of the probation students. These students were sent the structured questionnaire; of those, 162 were returned by respondents successfully, indicating an 81% return rate. To achieve the best results from the data provided, questionnaires were filtered manually, and it appeared that 12 respondents were excluded for missing inputs. Thus, 150 respondents were finally ready for analysis. Data was collected from April to June 2024 leveraging digital platforms to facilitate faster responses after the permit was granted by UTAS-Shinas. Table 1 shows the level-wise distribution of respondents.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents Level-Wise

Level	N	%
1	71	47%
2	54	36%
3	25	17%
Total	150	100%

Instrument

This study utilized a self-designed questionnaire to determine the factors influencing IT student's academic performance. The questionnaire was tested later by three (3) educational staff in the higher education field.

Factors influencing student's academic performance was measured using questions that asked respondents to i) rate their awareness of the policy related to academic performance using a 2-level scale aware and not aware and their satisfaction on the academic support services provided by the university using a 5-level scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, ii) rate their time management satisfaction, and iii) rate the academic and iv) personal factors that influenced their academic performance using the list of factors partially adapted from Latoja (2022) and Birzina et al. (2019) and partially self-generated based on academic experience.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the key influencing factors affecting the student's academic performance. Percentages were analyzed to make the conclusion on the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to stringent ethical standards to protect the privacy of the participants. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures and their right to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymized and securely stored, with the study adhering to ethical guidelines from major academic organizations.

RESULTS

The results are presented below in the order of the study's research questions grouped into four (4) categories: Awareness of the academic policy and support services satisfaction, time management satisfaction, academic factors, and personal factors from the perspective of the participants who were under probation.

Awareness of Academic Policy and Support Services Satisfaction

Table 2 summarizes the IT student's awareness of the academic policy which includes the knowledge of maintaining academic standing and the criteria for getting in and out of probation status. It shows that most of the students, 69% were aware of the academic policy including the need to maintain the CGPA requirement and only a few 31% do not understand it but have some idea on what it means.

Table 2. Awareness of the Academic Policy Summary Results

Awareness	%
Yes	69%
No	31%

Figure 1 shows that 58% of the participants were very satisfied and satisfied with the academic support services provided by the university. Based on the survey, the students used an average of at least two (2) academic support services during a semester.

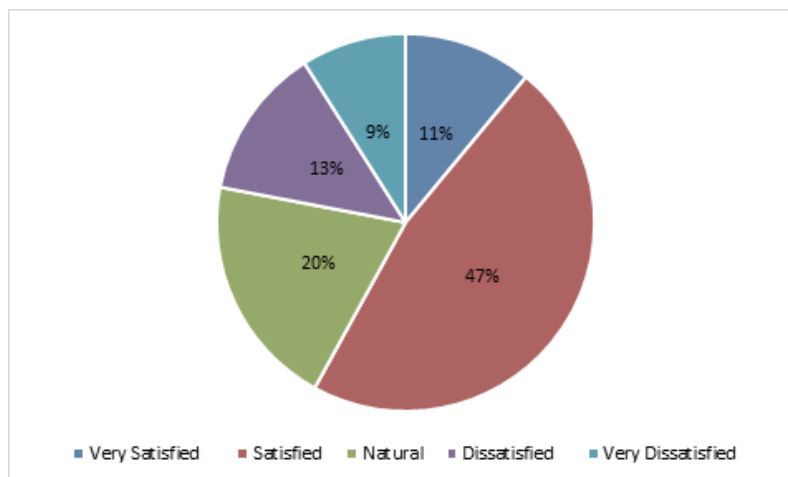


Figure 1. Academic Support Services Satisfaction Summary Result

Table 3 shows a summary of the students' satisfaction with Academic Support Services. The result indicated that students were satisfied primarily with meetings with the academic advisor (88%), followed by personal contact and follow-up from the university (58%) and academic success workshop (52%). The satisfaction rating on the academic success workshop, however, is just a little above 50%. On the other hand, students were dissatisfied with the following academic support services: motivational techniques acquisition to achieve academic goals (91%), career planning (64%), remedial classes and academic skills building sessions (60%), academic goals development (56%), and self-evaluation on personal and academic abilities (51%). This implies that IT students think that these services are not contributing to their academic success, or they think these services are not adequate to support their needs in achieving academic success.

Table 3. Utilized Academic Support Services Satisfaction Summary Result

Academic Support Services	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
Academic Success Workshop	52%	48%
Meetings with the academic advisor	88%	12%
Remedial classes and academic skills building sessions	40%	60%
Academic goals development sessions	44%	56%
Motivational techniques acquisition to achieve academic goals	9%	91%
Career planning	36%	64%
Self-evaluation on personal academic abilities	49%	51%
Personal contact and follow-up from the college (Student Advising System (SAS), Meetings with HOD)	58%	42%

Time Management Factor

Respondents were asked if they were satisfied with their time management approach. Figure 2 shows the summary of student's satisfaction with their time management skills. The result shows that 49% of responding students reported that they were dissatisfied with their approach to time management in comparison to a little more than half, 51% of them, who were satisfied. This signifies that there is only a 2% gap between the satisfied and dissatisfied students.

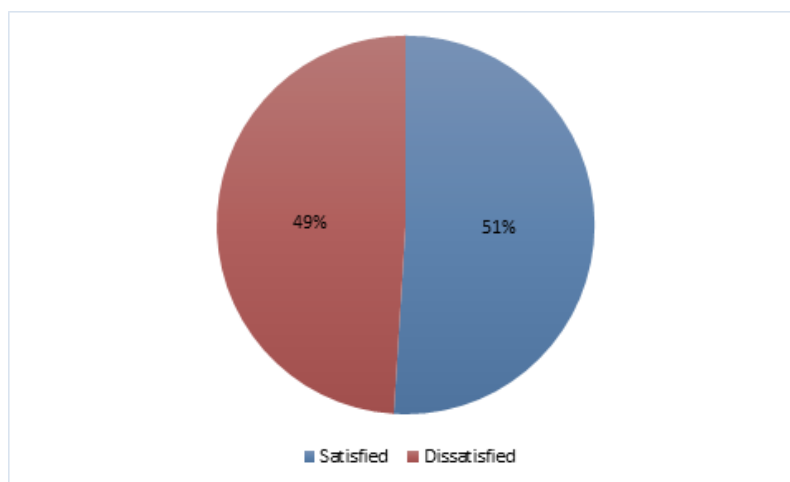


Figure 2. Satisfaction with Time Management Summary Result

Table 4 summarizes the number of students who were satisfied with their time management skills categorized as first, second and third year. The result discloses that the satisfaction with time management skill of the IT students from first year 42% is less compared to second year 56% and third year 73%, respectively. This implies that third year students perceive that they have improved in time

management abilities compared to those in previous years and there is a huge gap in time management skills between first- and third-year probationary students.

Table 4. Satisfaction with Time Management Per Year Level Summary Result

Year Level	Satisfied	Dissatisfied
First year	42%	58%
Second year	56%	44%
Third year	73%	27%

Academic Factors

The students were asked to rate their satisfaction in their academic performance during the pre-probation stage. This is to determine if the IT students were contented with the effort they exerted before they got the probation status. Figure 3 shows the academic performance satisfaction before probation summary result.

The result shows that 46 % of students were satisfied with their academic performance before being placed on probation whereas 54% of them were overall dissatisfied. This shows that students have the knowledge of their poor academic standing before failing to meet the academic requirements and they feel that they were not performing well in their studies.

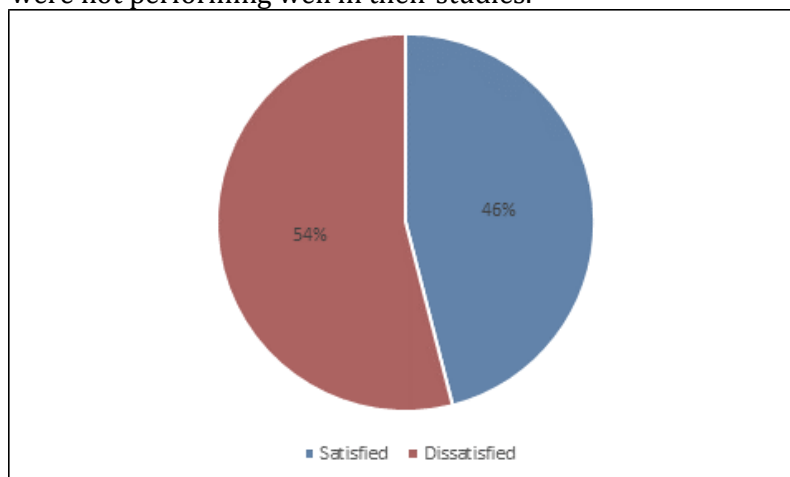


Figure 3. Academic Performance Satisfaction Before Probation Summary Result

Table 5 shows the summary result of the academic factors that influenced student performance. Responding students believed that intensive requirements of courses 67% is the primary obstacle in academic success. This is followed closely by other academic factors which are difficulty of the courses content 51% and lack of basic skills 46%. Literature supports the idea that basic skills which involve reading, writing, speaking, arithmetic, and computing are the core fundamentals of education. IT students believed that lack of these basic skills were the reasons for their low academic performance. Students also think that lack of effective study habits 40% considered as major factors which prevented them from having a structural approach study and completing assignments. The results also show that participants agreed that there are other factors that influenced their academic performance, but the impact is minimal such. Personal factors with the least impact according to the students.

Table 5. Academic factors that Influence the Student’s Academic Performance

Academic Factors	%
Intensive requirements of courses	67%
Difficulty of the courses content	51%
Lack of basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, arithmetic, computing)	46%

Lack of effective study habits	40%
Uncomfortable study environment	39%
Online learning and Covid-19	36%
Conflict with the instructor	32%
Lack of concentrations and taking notes	23%
Regular absenteeism	15%
Poor preparation for exams	12%
Other	12%

Students were asked to choose the most frequent coping strategies they used to maintain an acceptable GPA. Results show that 66% of the IT students seek academic assistance such as getting online materials and library resources and studying with peers to cope with the lessons while 58% of students also stated that attending all classes and completing their commitments such as assignments is a method to bring out best performance. 49% meet with the course teacher to get help with their studies, 38% declared that staying on campus to study between classes and the balance between courses with other commitments were their way to maintain the level of good performance and only few students 19% said they are habitually taking lecture notes during classes and avoiding social media distractions.

Personal Factors

Results show that personal factors (see table 6) also attributed to the academic performance of the students. Students perceive that exhaustion 41%, lack of motivation and passion 37%, and difficulty in managing stress 31% are the three (3) main academic factors that influenced their academic performance. A high percentage of students believe that medical issues 30%, and many commitments, 30%, also affect their academic performance. Also, 27% of students believe that family pressure and 28% were not satisfied with the study program. Personal factors with the least impact according to the students are issues with living situations 20%, reluctance to seek assistance, financial problem 16% and easily distracted by friends or social media 14%.

Table 6. Personal Factors Summary Results

Personal Factors	%
Exhaustion	41%
Lack of motivation and passion	37%
Difficulty managing stress	31%
Medical Issue	30%
Many commitments	30%
Not satisfied about the study program	28%
Family pressure	27%
Issues with living situations	20%
Reluctance to seek assistance	18%
Financial problem	16%
Easily distracted by friends or social media	14%
Other	5%

Emotions play an important role in academic settings and have a significant impact on academic performance. The result showed that students who are in probation frequently experienced negative emotions regarding their academic performance such as anxiety 40%, frustration 25%, sadness 15%, indifference and shame 10%. Table 7 shows the summary result of these emotions. Furthermore, 70% of students answered that these emotions have a negative effect on their self-esteem and self-worth.

Table 7. Negative Emotions Experienced by Students Summary Result

Negative Emotions	%
Anxiety	40%
Frustration	25%
Sadness	15%
Indifference	10%
Shame	10%

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that most IT students have knowledge of academic policy, however the survey was done during the time when the students are already on probation and did not assess their knowledge before they enter probation. This study has uncovered that awareness does not directly affect the student's academic performance. Students were aware about it, but they still end up getting the academic probation status. The university should investigate student's awareness on the academic policy when they are not yet in probation and implement strategies to make students understand the seriousness of academic probation status and its adverse effect on their academic success in the pre-probation stage. Studies on awareness of students on academic policy is scarce and there is not a lot of literature to support or contradict this result.

Moreover, among all the services, meeting with advisor gained high satisfaction which makes it one of the best practices of the university. But only a little more than half of the students exhibit satisfaction with academic support services, which implies that there is a need for an extensive periodic review of the academic support services offered by the university. Though there are many, the students perceived them to be inadequate to support them in their academic goals such as motivational techniques acquisition to achieve academic goals, career planning, remedial classes and academic skills building sessions, academic goals development, and self-evaluation on personal and academic abilities. This finding aligns with the previous research which suggests that students who sought assistance perceived that the services they received are ineffective (Addus, Chen, & Khan, 2007). The university, however, needs to gather student's insights and inputs on current services offered to determine the gaps and implement services that are more suitable to the needs of the students.

While the student's time management skills gradually improved over time from their first year to third year, a little more than half of the respondents were satisfied with their time management skills, however, almost half were dissatisfied. There is a fine delineation between satisfaction and dissatisfaction results which obscures the interpretation. Students who are satisfied with their time management skills still get into probation which suggests that time management is not a key influencing factor in the student's academic performance as (Razali, Rusiman, Gan, & Arbin, 2018) pointed that there is no statistically significant relationship between time management skills and academic achievement. Moreover, first and second year IT students found difficulty in keeping the balance between their study and leisure time, which could be attributed to their lack of adaption ability and time management skills unlike third year students who have demonstrated better time management and better academic competence. This is due to gaining experience that enabled them to deal with academic life. Therefore, early intervention during early years may help students through providing them enough support to avoid academic probation.

The student's perception of the academic factors can be attributed to their readiness in the program they decide to pursue. The courses of IT students require fundamental knowledge and skills which if not possessed by the student, will have a negative impact on the course of their study. Though the intensive courses requirements was the main obstacle for students to achieve academic success, it is part of the curriculum and ensures quality education to meet the learning outcomes. This issue reflects

the importance of student's time management skills development. This study supports the idea that absenteeism has minimal effect on academic performance, which proves the findings of Choi-Lundberg et al. (2019). Participants indicated that they were using multiple techniques of studying. This study shows that despite the coping strategies they use, they still found themselves getting poor academic standing. Thus, students need to constantly evaluate their own study habits and practices and always try to develop them to improve their overall GPA. Writing notes is an essential strategy for academic success as cited by Tus, Lubo, Rayo, and Cruz (2020) and (Jafari, Aghaei, & Khatony, 2019). Unfortunately, results indicated that there are only a few students who would rely on this strategy for academic achievement.

Exhaustion was the main personal factor; however, this is solely dependent on the student's lifestyle which includes personal habits, sleep patterns, nutrition, exercise among others (Mulaudzi, 2023). Moreover, motivation plays a crucial role in academic success (Yoo et al., 2022) and this study demonstrated that the second personal factor was the lack of motivation and passion although Tus, Lubo, Rayo, and Cruz (2020) found that there is no significant relationship between motivation and academic performance. As mentioned previously, career planning in academic support services turned out to be important for IT undergraduate students, but they were not adequate for them. The university should give extensive information and guidance on the career paths of the students to ensure that they have chosen according to their interest and skills. This could address the motivation issue of students. Furthermore, this study has looked at low achiever's emotions such as anxiety, frustration, sadness, indifference and shame after entering probation which signifies that student interpreted low GPA as a failure which affects their belief on their capability to be successful. These findings proved to be relevant because self-efficacy has consistently been connected to academic achievement (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Taking a closer look at students' beliefs in their capabilities to perform well academically might lead to better ways of assisting academically struggling students, and eventually help them move from academic probation to good academic standing.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate the reasons that led to students falling under academic probation. The results showed that the main reasons were not directly related to students' awareness of the university's academic probation policies. Rather, the main reasons were the lack of awareness of time management practices and also academic and personal factors. The results showed that diploma first year students have poor time management skills, but it gradually improved over time in the succeeding years. From the students' perspectives, the intensive courses requirement was the main academic obstacle to achieving success, and exhaustion was the main personal factor. The study also showed some shortcomings in terms of academic support services in the university. According to students, academic support services were inadequate to support them in achieving their academic goals. Academic support services that need to be improved include motivational techniques acquisition, career planning, remedial classes and academic skills building sessions, academic goals development, and self-evaluation on personal and academic abilities. Of all the academic support services, meeting with the advisor gained the highest satisfaction.

This study relies on self-reported data and focuses on only one (1) UTAS-Shinas branch, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research is necessary to explore other factors affecting student's performance and including a broader range of universities and disciplines and examining ways to address these factors to support student's success in higher education may extend the use of this research. Future research can be beneficial by incorporating qualitative methods to gain deeper understanding into the contextual factors influencing student's academic success. A prediction model analysis may also give early insights to identify at-risk students a semester prior. Students could be more confident academically if regular workshops about strategic studying and managing their time and anxiety were conducted. Furthermore, encouragement is believed to be a powerful tool for reinforcement. When low achievers are rewarded for their improvements, it works as boosting their self-esteem, revive the passion and motivation.

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