

Full Length Research Paper

The relationship between students' grades and their occupational goals

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Career goal setting plays a crucial role in one's educational success. In Cambodia, while studying at primary and secondary education levels, a career goal setting does not appear to be very important for many students and parents. Some parents encourage their children to think of their career goals or ask them what they want to do in the future from a very young age, while some others never ask or care about this. Even though the career goals are more likely within the children's own thought, some students change their mind after they learn more about the real world when they grow up. Some learners may need to be well-guided by some elders and schools to set up their career goals. This study attempts to find out whether there is a relationship between the career goals of university students and their achievement. The quantitative method was applied, and a questionnaire technique was used as a tool to collect data from one hundred and twenty respondents who were students of year two, year three and year four of the undergraduate programs at Pannasastra University of Cambodia. The research findings show that the students who came to the university with the occupational goals tended to perform better and achieved higher grades ($M=3.41$) than those who did not have the occupational goals ($M=3.14$). In year two, the students who had the occupational goals ($M=3.70$) keep leading those who did not have the occupational goals ($M=2.82$). The students who did not have the occupation goals when they were in year one achieved lower GPA compared to their own GPA of year two when they had thought of their own occupational goals. Having the occupational goals when entering the university absolutely motivates students to perform well and achieve better grades in the end. Therefore, children and students should be encouraged to set up their own career goals which would be a safe guard for ensuring their academic success.

Keywords: occupational goals, relationship, students' grades

INTRODUCTION

Most individuals' success may be determined by their commitment or self determination, professional goals, motivation, effort, knowledge, skills, and clear plan (Daniel Linden Duke, 1990; Malcolm Tight, 2004). In particular, students who come to the university often have their own clear career goals to reach, too. When their own professional goals and objectives are set, they will become a key motivation tool which will prepare them to achieve successful academic results. Some important guiding questions related to goal settings for academic success of students are found in the website of Southern Maine (Community College Southern Maine, <http://lac.smccme.edu/goalsetting.htm>). Among those questions three important questions are asked: What occupational goals are most suitable for you?

What educational program is most appropriate for you?
What knowledge and skills are required for your chosen career?

The students who come up with answers to the above three questions tend to choose a right university they are going to pursue their studies. In American Speech Language Heritage Association website, one stated:

"Getting a sense of what your goals are can impact where you choose to study and what degree will be necessary to achieve your goals." (ASHA, 1997-2011, Para.2).

When any individual has his or her own professional goals set, they will become more motivated to learn and perform better in school. To have their proper occupational goals may mean that they have set their

own motivation and commitment in their education development while they are at school. Learners pursue goals in order to receive externally administered rewards among which grades, diplomas, scholarships and careers are included, (Brown, 1994, p. 35). Other researcher had a similar view that goals were considered as an important cognitive process effecting student motivation (Ergul, 2004). After having their goals set, an individual needs also to think how they are going to achieve those goals so that they can make their dream careers come true to them. According to Kovach, proper learning strategies and study plan should be created to achieve the goals which had been already set (as cited in Ergul, 2004). Thus, self-regulated learners set academic goals, chose appropriate learning strategies to achieve those goals, and kept monitoring the progress made (Ergul, 2004).

Some learners need some help from their teachers to set some personal goals and use learning strategies (Brown, 1994). Any student who either has his or her own occupational goals set when entering the university, or has been helped to set up their professional goals while pursuing their studies at the university, tend to be more motivated and to prepare themselves well for their academic studies. In the end, they would achieve good grades.

The Career goal is more likely a long term goal which everyone wishes to meet to earn their living; whilst completing the degree programs at the university is considered as a medium goal, and get success in a year, a semester or term period is much more likely a short term one that most university students wish to set up and achieve. When anyone has any of their own goals set up, they will be more likely to be able to set up their own real action plans and objectives to be achieved.

Students need to be taught of how to set their goals which could be the long, medium or short ones. After their goals are set, they need to be taught how to set their objectives and action plans to be achieved and to be implemented (Brown, 1994). The small objectives which are set could be used as indicators to be measured against to see if those goals will be met. Without proper monitoring and self-assessment, any individual will find it difficult to keep track on their achievement or even their own failure. It is similar to a strategic plan of any organization where the policy, goals, objectives, action plans, assessment indicators are set before that organization starts implementing their projects.

As far as professional goal setting is concerned, the students should have considered about those goals even before they start their college. In the west, goal setting is oriented from very early age in the education system. In contrast, although goal setting exists in Cambodian primary education curriculum (MoEYS, 2006), it was noticed that it has not been taught well in either an elementary school or high school level. That is

why some students who come to a university still have no idea of what career they are going to take after they leave college. Some of them need to be taught how to set their career goals, objectives and plans at the college or a university level. That is also a reason that some students may have their own career goals set in year two or year three at the university. After their career goals are set, their class performance and end-of-year achievement may be better compared to the academic year in which their goals were not set.

However, if students who come to the university without any proper occupational goals, they are more likely to perform less effectively and productively in class and achieve lower grades than the ones who enter the university with the clear professional goals. From one's tremendous classroom teaching and training experience and observations, it is quite obvious that the students who come to the university or training courses with clear personal goals and purposes tend to perform well in class and achieve very good grades.

How about some students who come to the university without the occupational goals, but with other personal interests or reasons? When they come with other personal interests or reasons such as interest in further overseas study, interest in experiencing the student life at the higher education and so forth, it means that they also have their own motivation to study as well. Thus, they may also perform well and achieve good grades, too, in the end.

It appears that there are some other factors which may give an impact on good performance and good grades of those students who come to the university without the occupational goals. Those factors may include parents' encouragement, exemplary models of other people including teachers, the reputation of the university, encouragement of their peers, teaching curriculum and materials, teaching methodologies, rewards given by the teachers and school. Brown (1994) pointed out that learners may have succeeded in their learning if they were given an opportunity to do things for their own personal reasons. On the other hand, to what extent they will succeed in their learning is not known. Again, Brown also acknowledged that positive feedback that learners perceive increases their feelings of competence and self-determination (Brown, 1994). Those students may become more motivated to perform well and achieve good grades if their instructors could arouse their interests through their teaching methods and approaches used in their teaching. Roy Killen (2003) pointed out that learning would be more effective when a teacher made it interesting, enjoyable and challenging for the learners.

In terms of motivation, Ur also mentioned that learner motivation made teaching and learning immeasurably easier and more pleasant, as well as more productive (Ur, 1996). Some other students who come to the university without occupational goals may perform well and achieve good grades when their instructors can

make classroom atmosphere pleasant and friendly. Some other students may perform well and achieve good grades because they find the curriculum, subjects and materials interesting and challenging for them. The fact is although some of the university students who come to the university without proper occupational goals, they may have other personal interests or reasons which could motivate them to stay in school and complete their courses and program successfully.

In conclusion, it is obvious that students who come to the university with the clear occupational goals and other medium and short term goals would achieve better grades than those who do not have their goals. However, there must be some students who definitely have their own clear professional goals, while some others may not have them at all. Some students who come to the university without the occupational goals may definitely have other personal interests and reasons which can motivate them to stay in the university and complete their programs. Otherwise, they should not be at the university at all.

The Problem statement

Goal setting is essentially important and commonly practiced in western educational systems such as in the United States, Canada, Australia, England and so forth due to the fact that careers in those developed countries are well-paid ones and make people live with ease. Unlike Cambodia, one of the poorest countries, where most careers cannot make those career holders survive from them, as they poorly paid. Due to this real situation, goal setting is not taken into account much in most of students' mind, especially the students at the primary and secondary educational levels. Some parents have encouraged their children to think of their career goals from a very young age, while some others just either may not see that as an important tool to motivate their children to become successful in their schooling and in their life, or maybe they do not know anything about goal setting due to the fact that they are not educated. Although the decision on the career goals should be made by children, they somehow need to be well-guided by the elder and schools.

This study needs to be conducted to find real evidence to prove that professional goals that university students have thought of when they enter the university absolutely makes them achieve better grades and become more successful in their education. The researcher strongly believes that its findings would have great significance for schools, universities, their administrative leaders, children and especially for university students in Cambodia and elsewhere. If goal setting is still not encouraged among students in Cambodian schooling system at any relevant level, its unsatisfactory consequences will become huge as the students and pupils will perform less productively. As

being discussed earlier, occupational goals and other medium and short term ones are a kind of effective motivating tool for students at both levels, school and university. It is not a good idea for all, parents, students and school in Cambodia to ignore or neglect goal setting for students and children, as the professional goals they have set could be a powerful motivation tool to make them succeed in school and for the rest of their life.

The research purposes

Due to the brief discussion above, it appears that there is a relationship between the students' grades and their professional goals. The grades of students who enter the university with the occupational goals are likely different from the grades of the ones who come to the university without the career goals. The grades of students before the time when their occupational goals were not set up differ from the grades of those after the time when their occupational goals are set up. However, it remains unclear, but is very challenging for the researcher to find out that, first of all, to what extent the professional goals of students give an impact to their end-of-term achievements as well as their continuous classroom performance; second, to what extent the grades of students who enter the university with the occupational goals differ from the grades of the ones who enter the university without professional goals; finally, if there is a difference between the grades of the students before the time when their occupational goals were not set up and the grades of those after the time when their occupational goals have been set up. Other empirical studies of other factors which may give an impact on the grades of the students will not be conducted at this time, but they might be suggested to be conducted to look at those related factors.

The research questions

In order to find out the relationships between the studied variables mentioned in the research purposes above, the following questions are developed to guide this study:

- 1) Is there a difference between the grades of the students who had occupational goals and the grades of the ones who did not have their occupational goals when they entered the university?
- 2) Is there a difference between the grades of the students before the time when their occupational goals were not set up and the grades of those after the time when their occupational goals have been set up?

The Significance of Study

This study will be significant in three ways:

- The finding of the study will let both, the academic

Table 1. The comparison of the mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who have occupational goals and those who don't have the occupational goals

Variable	N	Mean	P
Year-1 students who have occupational goals	54	3.41	
Year-1 students who don't have occupational goals	51	3.14	0.00*

* $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

instructors and students, be aware of different classroom performance and end-of-term achievement between students who enter the university with the occupational goals and the ones without the occupational goals.

- The finding will help the academic instructors as well as administrators to encourage their students to think of and set up their career goals so that they would be able to prepare themselves better for their own future careers.
- The finding will help to encourage new students to think and set up their career goals when they start studying at a university so that they will be become more motivated and able to prepare themselves well for their satisfactory academic achievement.

Defining the terms

The following term needs to be defined.

Occupational goals refer to any paid job which a student can do to earn their living. The other terms such as career goals or professional goals will be used to mean the same as the occupational goals in this study. In addition, it also refers to any kind of available jobs, in general, that can be found, and it makes someone earn enough money and makes them happy. In the questionnaire, the career or occupational goals will be turned into if the students have thought of any kind of job when they entered the university.

GPA is an abbreviation of grade point average. GPA or grade refers to a mark or score each student receives at the end of their academic term. It will be measured by asking the target students to write down their own real GPA of the academic term one and two of year I and year II.

Participants

This study was conducted in Pannasastra University of Cambodia (PUC). A hundred and twenty students of Year II, Year III, and Year IV from different academic programs were used as the population of this study. Several classes of PUC students of Year II, Year III and Year IV were invited to complete the survey questionnaire.

METHODOLOGY

The quantitative research method was used. To collect data on occupational goals and grades of students; a

survey questionnaire is developed. The questionnaire consists of nine questions.

After the data were collected, they were inserted into the SPSS in order to run Independent-Samples T-test to compare (1) the mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who had occupational goals and those who did not have the occupational goals; (2) the mean of the average GPA of Year-2-students who had occupational goals and those who did not have occupational goals; and (3) the mean of average GPA of students who did not have the occupational goals in Year 1 and the means of the average GPA of the same students who had the occupational goals when they started Year 2.

A few other academic instructors of PUC were asked to help to pass on the questionnaire to the second, the third and the fourth year students in their classes. But before the questionnaire is passed on to the target students, the instructors have to make sure if they are in the second, the third and fourth years. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to fill in their GPA of year one and year two they had achieved. To ensure that the grades they were going to fill in were accurate, the target groups were asked to take the questionnaire home to be completed. Due to the end of the academic term, the researcher expected to get around a hundred copies out of a hundred and twenty copies of the questionnaire to be completed accurately and to be analyzed. A hundred and twenty copies of the questionnaire were given to students to be completed. As being expected, a hundred and five copies only were completed accurately, while the other ten copies were uncompleted and uncounted.

FINDINGS

The result of the Independent Samples T-test analysis shows that the sample mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who have the occupational goals is 3.41, while the sample mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who don't have the occupational goals is only 3.14. The result is statistically significant $M=3.41$, $p < .01$; $M=3.14$, $p < .01$. That is the mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who have the occupational goals is 0.27 higher than the mean of the average GPA of Year-1-students who don't have the occupational goals. The Year-1-students who enter the university with the occupational goals achieve better GPA than those who do not have the occupational goals when entering the university. (table 1 above)

It appears that the Independent Samples T-test analysis shows that the sample mean of the average

Table 2. The comparison of the mean of the average GPA of Year-2-students who have occupational goals and those who don't have occupational goals

Variable	N	Mean	P
Year-2 students who have occupational goals	26	3.70	
Year-2 students who don't have occupational goals	24	2.82	0.00*

*p<.01 (two-tailed)

Table 3. The comparison of the mean of average GPA of students who don't have the occupational goals in Year 1 and the means of the average GPA of the same students who have the occupational goals when they start Year 2

Variable	N	Mean	P
Students who don't have occupational goals in year 1	26	3.24	
Students who have occupational goals in year 2	26	3.70	0.00*

*p<.01 (two-tailed)

GPA of Year-2-students who have the occupational goals is 3.70, while the sample mean of the average GPA of Year-2- students who don't have the occupational goals is only 2.82. The result is statistically significant $M=3.70, p<.01; M=2.82, p<.01$. That is the mean of the average GPA of Year-2-students who have the occupational goals is 0.88 higher than the mean of the average GPA of Year-2-students who don't have the occupational goals. The Year-2-students who have the occupational goals achieve better GPA than those who do not have the occupational goals when they are in year 2.

The result of the Independent Samples T-test analysis shows that the sample mean of the average GPA of students who don't have the occupational goals when they are in Year 1 is 3.24, while the sample mean of the average GPA of students who have the occupational goals when they are in Year 2 is 3.70. The result is statistically significant $M=3.24, p<.01; M=3.70, p<.01$. That is the mean of the average GPA of students who have the occupational goals when they are in Year 2 is 0.46 higher than the mean of the average GPA of students who did not have the occupational goals when they were in Year 1. The students who have the occupational goals when they were in Year 2 achieve better GPA than those who did not have the occupational goals when they are in Year 1.

DISCUSSION

The result of the study shows that it is true that any student who came to the university with the proper occupational goals tended to perform better and achieve higher grades ($M=3.41$) than those who entered the university without the occupational goals ($M=3.14$) (See table 1 above). The ones who had the occupational goals were more motivated and more responsible for their education success as Ergul (2004) and (Penny Ur,

1996) mentioned. In Year two, the students who had the occupational goals ($M=3.70$) keep leading those who did not have the occupational goals ($M=2.82$) (See table 2 above). The students who did not have the occupation goals when they were in Year one achieved lower GPA compared to their own GPA of Year two when they had thought of their own occupational goals (See table 3 above).

It appeared the same as the researcher's teaching experience. During the classroom activities, the students who had a clear idea of what they were going to do as their careers when they leave school seemed to perform very well and were more motivated to learn things. Those students very often achieved very good grades at the end of each academic term.

CONCLUSION

Having the occupational goals when entering the university absolutely motivates students to perform well and achieved better grades in the end. From the findings, it is clear that even the same students achieve higher GPA when comparing their GPA of the term at which their occupational goals were not set up and their GPA of the term at which their occupational goals were set up. Although there were some other factors which played a part in making students perform well and achieved good grades in the end (Brown, 1994), having clear professional goals would give the most significant impact on the students' achievement. Thus, to encourage children and students to decide on what career they would choose to do would be a safe guard for ensuring their academic success in any student's life. Therefore, the results of this small study would be significantly helpful for students, school administrators, parents and teachers who wish to improve university students' learning quality.

Further studies should be conducted to find out if other

factors, such as personal interest, teaching performance, school reputation and so forth would contribute to students' performance and their GPA.

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