

How Do Academic Issues affect College Students' Performance?

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Abstract— This paper addresses the research conducted by a group of Petroleum Institute (PI) students regarding academic issues and how they affect students' performance. The research was conducted at the PI and was conducted by using survey. A literature review was first initiated and the research question along with the purpose and scope are presented in this paper. The findings of the research were significant. Furthermore, a discussion of these results is presented in this paper as well. The research question was answered and academic issues turned to be having a negative effect on the students' academic performance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Going from a familiar environment like high school to the new atmosphere of college, poses a lot of astounding challenges for students around the world. They will face various issues and they must learn how to cope and deal with them correctly. Academic issues are quite common in college and have a negative effect on students' performance. They can be related to the transition process, language and cultural differences, limited financial support and finally emotional conflicts. To find solutions for these problems, a stepwise manner was adopted. First, the research question and variables are defined and addressed in the following paragraph. Next, a literature review was conducted to obtain background information and provide prior evidence. Then, Surveys were chosen as a method to provide some quantitative data and analyzed. The survey was conducted to validate that these conflicts exist within The Petroleum Institute (PI), Abu Dhabi, UAE. The results gathered from the survey were significant. The findings are clarified in the discussion part of this report. Finally, conclusions are outlined.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Unlike college, during high school, students had sufficient time to understand and comprehend the material clearly. The material covered in college requires an intensive amount of effort and the use of various learning resources. According to [1], "college packs about two years of classes into one." This makes it difficult for the student to stay on track with the material, which might result in a lower grade point average. Therefore:

The curriculum and its delivery should be designed to be consistent and explicit in assisting students' transition from

their previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education and learning in their discipline as part of their lifelong learning [2].

Most students who attend college overseas confront diverse cultural and language differences. For example, foreign students attending The Petroleum Institute face conflicts with adapting to the new language which is Arabic. As [3] demonstrates, "African students are more confident of their English skills than the Southeast Asian students because they studied in English in their home countries." The lack of language skills can drastically affect the student's performance and work with other students in team-based projects. Usually, this requires the students to take additional classes to strengthen their linguistic abilities.

When students start college, they deal with many financial complications that have an impact on their academic performance. [4] affirms that parents are realizing that they cannot continue paying for their children's education. High tuition fees and the expenses of costly learning resources pose a high risk regarding whether the student will continue his education or drop-out at a certain level. Accommodation, food, transportation and leisure also add up to the life expenses of college. Most students are not comfortable with the idea of taking loans from the college or the government itself, because they are afraid of not being able to pay back the debt using the minimum starting salary of their new job.

The prestige and benefits that come with a degree seem to be illusive for some. Many stories are circulated of people having a degree and still earning minimum wage, or hating their jobs. This deters college students from finishing because they think "Why be in debt \$75,000 when I am not going to get ahead." This may be true for some, but the scale is not evenly balanced [4].

According to [5], students also experience a great deal of trouble finding a proper part-time job to help with their financial needs as the article states, "securing a job is very difficult." [4] emphasizes that even if a job is secured, there is a major difficulty balancing academic workload and job requirements.

Furthermore, college is known to bring about emotional issues that represent obstacles in the student's life while affecting academic performance. All the issues discussed earlier in this report play a role in causing feelings of depression, anxiety and desperation. Missing friends and family members makes it hard for the student to adjust to this new social life of college and it puts some sort of desperation on the student at the start of his new life. Students encounter problems with adjusting to the wide changes made in their life [6]. Also, stress and depression can form as a result of parents forcing their children to enroll in programs they dislike [7]. Eventually, all factors mentioned above are going to cause all kinds of stress and depressed psychology. A moderate percentage of students are affected by these emotional issues, because of not being able to understand the meaning of college and significance of a future career [7].

As we can see, college plays a significant role in developing the student's personality and shaping a reasonable, future career. However, it brings about various issues that a student must work hard to overcome over time. Adapting to this extensive transition from a familiar environment (high-school) to a whole new one (college) is quite a challenge itself. The differences include the academic workload, difficulty of the curriculum, and the ability of coping up with the college system which is new to freshman year students. Language and cultural differences is a difficult problem, but can be adapted to with time. This conflict appears mostly during the first year of college. Lack of financial support is an important issue itself, causing the student to take on multiple jobs while balancing the academic requirements. This generates a large amount of pressure on the student in addition to the existing load. As far as emotional conflicts are concerned, stress and depression represent the majority of them. This depression will eventually lead to a decrease in overall performance.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION, HYPOTHESIS, VARIABLES, PURPOSE

The research addressed the following question 'How do academic issues affect college students' performance?' In this question 'academic issues' is the independent variable and 'student performance' is the dependent variable. The hypothesis was that college students face academic issues which affect their performance in a negative way. This paper is intended to demonstrate the effect of these academic issues on student performance. It covers various conflicts facing students at The Petroleum Institute (PI). These problems include: language and cultural differences, part-time jobs and emotional complications. According to the hypothesis, these issues are known to cause a significant decline in academic performance measured by the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). This study helped to find appropriate solutions to what students are dealing with in their freshman year of university. Furthermore, this problem was chosen, because we believe it represents a significant topic worth examining. In

addition, this analysis provides institutions with aspects of this problem that we did not consider before.

IV. METHODOLOGY

There are two types of data: quantitative and qualitative data. For this study, quantitative data were used, because this kind of data is easily interpreted with appropriate tables and charts. In addition, the data can be analyzed more efficiently to determine the results. This research is focused on male and female undergraduate students studying at the PI. However, it did not include faculty members (teachers, advisors, etc.) and graduate students. Students had been surveyed despite their nationalities, academic status and place of residence. The questions were fairly simple and the details provided by the respondents were confidential, this led to having sincere opinions from the students. However, there were factors that limited the research; namely, the survey was within one college which is, the PI, and only a number of 39 students out of over a thousand participated. Valuable information was obtained, but at the same time it was less accurate. In addition, the survey had to be completed within a limited period of time which had limited opportunity of finding a good number of respondents. The survey had been divided into three sections. The first one consisted of questions that were used to obtain some information on the student (GPA, academic status, residence, nationality, language...etc). For example, "what is your present GPA?" (The choices were less than 1, 1 to 2, 2.1 to 3, 3.1 to 3.5, 3.6 to 4). The second section was used to find out if the student dealt with the suggested problems in their college life (language/cultural differences, part-time jobs, emotional problems). A question of the second section was, "if you have a part-time job, do you find it difficult to balance between academic load and the job requirements?" (The choices were Yes, No). The final section helped finding out how this particular student coped with these issues (time management, writing centers, counseling, etc.). For this section, one question was, "how do you improve your English language skills here at the PI?" (The students had the following choices: attending ILC, reading English books at the library, taking extra courses in English outside the PI, others please specify).

V. RESULTS

The results we gathered from the survey were significant. The data were interpreted into meaningful charts and tables (see Appendix A). The following paragraphs explain the survey results that addressed the research question.

The survey included 39 students; 29 males and 10 females. Analysis led to significant results with regards to the issues which were surveying (language and cultural differences, part-time jobs and emotional conflicts). Figure 1 below shows that 59% of the sample attended governmental high schools- Arabic system and 15% of the sample attended international schools – British system, whereas international schools – American system and private schools – Arabic system represent 13% each.

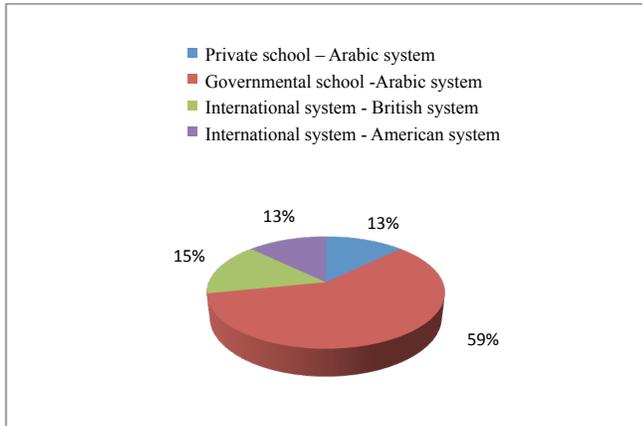


Fig. 1: High school system that students have joined (M= 29, F =10)

Since most of the respondents attended governmental schools – Arabic system, the vast majority of them (92% of the sample) speak Arabic as their first language (see Figure 2).

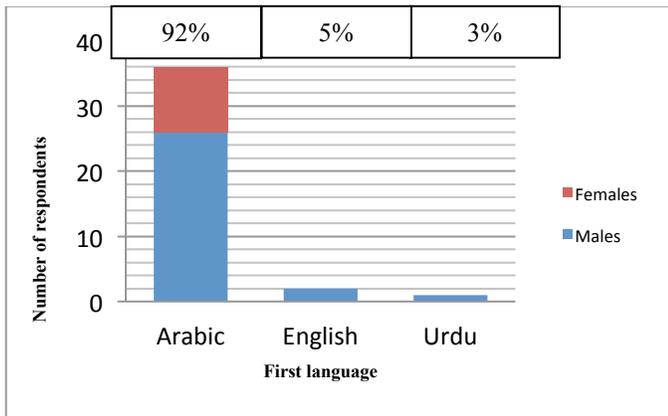


Fig. 2: Students' first language (M=29, F= 10)

This majority of non-English native speakers had an English level varied from elementary stage to advanced stage. Interestingly, results indicate that 36% of the students tend to choose mechanical engineering as their major. Nevertheless, the rest of the percentage (64%) is divided among the other majors (Figure 3).

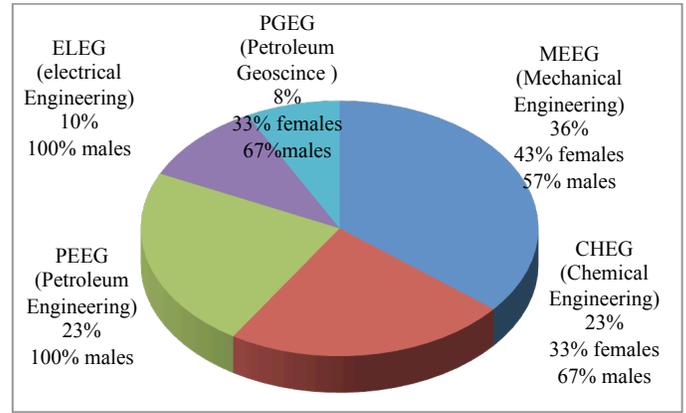


Fig. 3 Major population within the PI (M= 29, F= 10)

Furthermore, Figure 4 reveals that students with average credit hours of less than 12 and more than 19 credits had the highest GPA (3.5 to 4.0). However, the GPA of a student seems to increase rapidly as the average credit hours increases in between 12 and 19 credits per semester. As 29% of the respondents who answered "we have an average GPA of 2.1 to 3" had an average of 12 to 15 credit hours per semester. While another 29% of students who were surveyed had an average GPA of 3.1 to 3.5 with an academic load of 15.5 to 19 credit hours per semester.

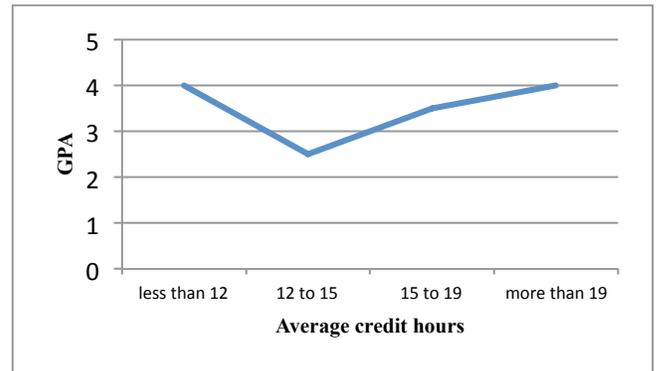


Fig. 4: Credit hours Vs GPA (M= 29, F= 10)

As for the language issue, it is noticed from Figure 5 that the most difficult course in terms of language is Overview of the Petroleum Industry (PEEG 151) with a percentage of 33%, followed by Communication (COMM 101) which got 25% of the responses.

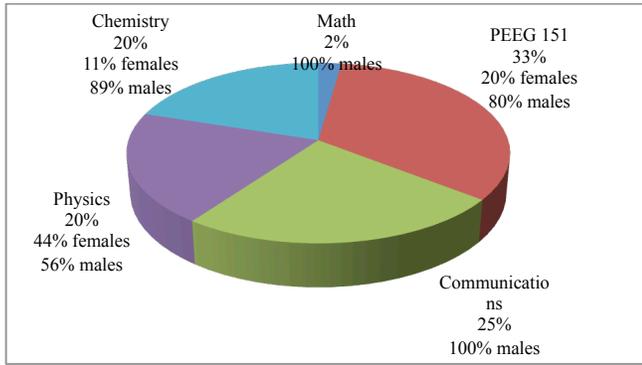


Fig. 5: Courses that students face language difficulties with (M= 29, F= 10)

Figure 6 demonstrates that the language issue is a major problem which affects students' GPA, as 69% of male respondents said "yes it does".

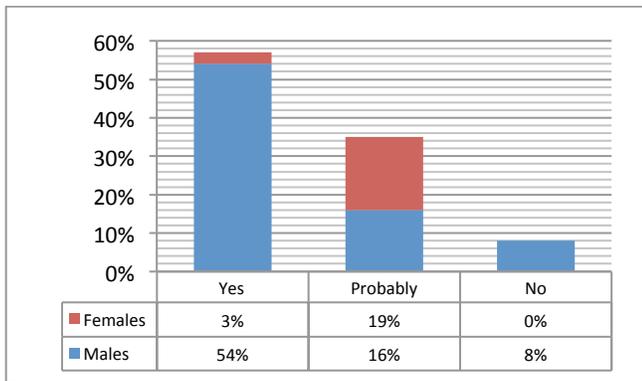


Fig. 6: Do you think that the English language level affects the student's GPA? (M= 29, F= 8)

Part-time jobs are obstacles themselves as 67% of the respondents who have part-time job face difficulties balancing between academic load and job requirements as displayed in Figure 7. Also 29% of surveyed students think that part-time jobs offered at the PI waste the student's time (see Figure 7). Although it is only 29%, it is still a high percentage.

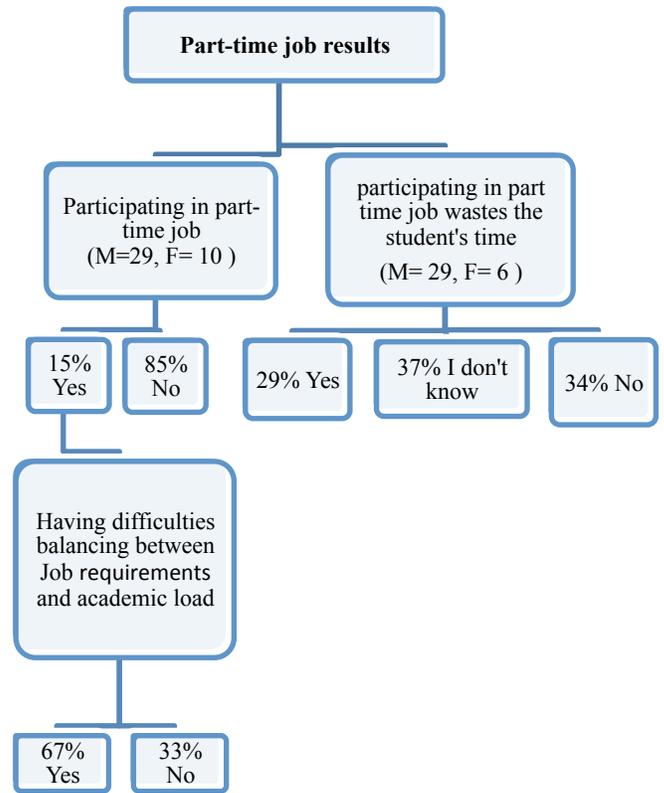


Fig. 7:Part-time jobs results

Emotional issues are quite common in college. As illustrated in Figure 8, the most influential issue on the GPA within the PI is found to be emotional conflicts with a percentage of (49%). From Table 1 below, it can be seen that students who live in dorms have different opinions about changes occurring in their life and the impact of these changes on their psyche. It also shows that 42% of the respondents gave missing family 4 on the scale of impact, leading it to be the main cause of depression.

Level of impact* changes	1	2	3	4
New roommate (N= 12)	6 (50%)	2 (17%)	4 (33%)	0
New friends (N= 12)	0	8 (67%)	4 (33%)	0
Missing family (N= 12)	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	4 (33%)	5 (42%)

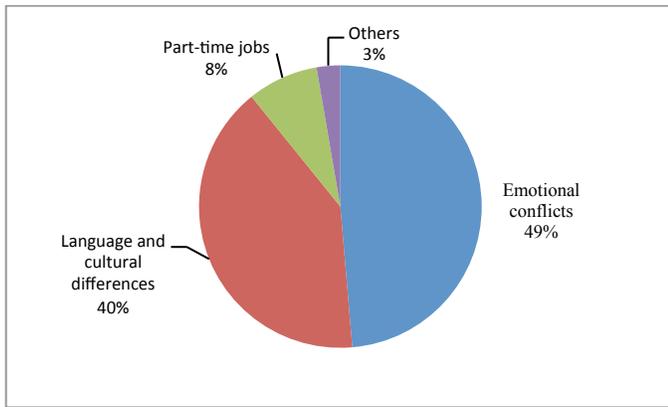


Fig. 8: The most influential issue that has a negative effect on the GPA (M= 29, F= 8)

On other hand, having new roommate does not seem to cause that much of problem, as 50% of the sample scaled it 1 and 0% scaled it 4. Moreover, 51% of the sample agree with the statement “students with above average credit hours tend to feel more depressed than student with average credit hours” as shown in Table 2.

Level of agreement	strongly agree	agree	do not know	disagree	strongly disagree
N= 37 M= 29 F= 8	9 24% M: 67% F: 33%	19 51% M: 90% F: 10%	8 22% M: 75% F: 25%	1 3% M: 0% F: 100%	0

Regarding the events that PI organizes, 44% of our respondents said it is still not enough to relieve the stress (see Figure 9).

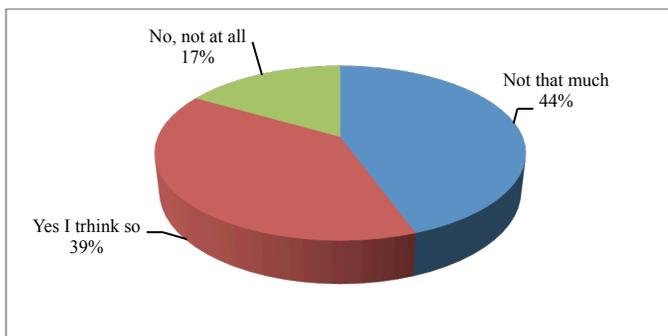


Fig. 9: Does the PI offer enough events to relieve the stress? (M= 29, F= 7)

As you can see in Figure 10, students use different ways to overcome their depression. For example 61% of the surveyed students talk with their friends to reduce the depression level, while 22% students prefer to visit a councilor inside or outside the PI.

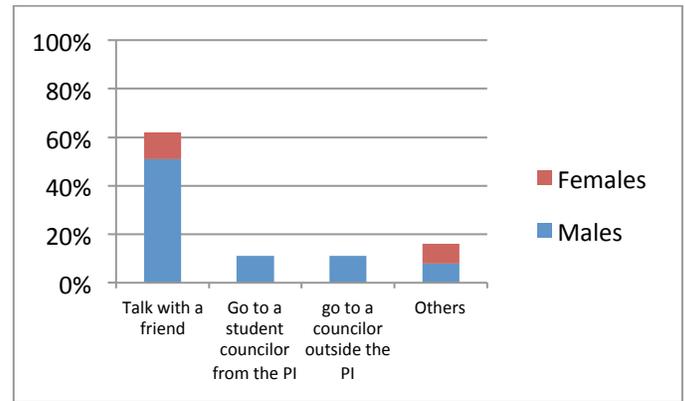


Fig. 10: Means of overcoming emotional depression (M= 29, F= 7).

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of the research indicated that academic issues do have a negative effect on students’ performance. Therefore, the results obtained proved the hypothesis and addressed the research question. 39 students were surveyed and received the information we needed regarding academic issues including; language and cultural differences, part-time jobs and emotional conflicts. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss the relevant results, draw conclusions from them and show how they addressed our research question.

The results suggest that those who took an average of 12-19 credit hours had a GPA ranging from 2.5 to 3.5. One of the most interesting findings was that students who took less than 12 and more than 19 credit hours had the same GPA which ranged between 3.5 and 4.0. A possible explanation for this might be that students with less than 12 credit hours have plenty of time to study and arrange their schedules. Whereas, students with above 19 credit hours feel more pressure which encourages them to study more and work harder to achieve their outcomes. The data suggests that when student’s credit hours are higher than 12, the GPA will keep increasing not the opposite.

As we expected, the most difficult course, in terms of language, according to the participants of our survey was Overview of the Petroleum Industry (PEEG 151). This course introduces various scientific English terms which may require more advanced English skills. In addition, most students surveyed speak Arabic as their native language, so it is expected that they have some trouble with some certain courses, because of their lack of English vocabulary and skills.

Another important outcome was that 67% of surveyed students who had part-time jobs faced difficulties balancing between their academic load and job requirements. A simple explanation for this situation can be, when a student gets a part-time job, he will not have enough time to study especially if he is taking more than 15 credit hours. For example, here at The Petroleum Institute, some students work at the library in the afternoon and they go back home

in the evening. Hence, they do not have time to study for the exam which will be held in the next day.

Our results provided us with some valuable information about emotional conflicts. It showed that 49% of our respondents had chosen emotional issues to be the main cause of a lower GPA. These emotional issues include: living with new roommate, missing family and having new friends. Surprisingly, missing family turned out to have the highest impact on students' psyche. This can be clarified by saying that most students tend to live in a more stable environment which is home, while living in dorms presents a new environment for them. Eventually these changes in students' life bring about a depressed psychology and raise the stress level of a student.

VII. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

We can summarize the issues we have identified in our research as follows:

- Students who took less than 12 and more than 19 credit hours had the highest GPA in our surveyed sample and as credit hours increase, the GPA of student increases - Which is not what we had expected.
- The most difficult course, in terms of language, according to our sample is PEEG 151
- 67% of our surveyed students who had a part-time job faced difficulties balancing between their academic loads and job requirements.
- Emotional conflicts are the most influential issues causing a lower GPA, as indicated in our results.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

The results gathered using the survey were quite intriguing. After all, they proved the hypothesis and helped discovering more on the students' performance and how it is affected by the academic issues they face. But, there are some areas of the PI which need to be improved. The important results and recommendations in order to deal with each issue are presented as follows. Firstly, one of the main findings of our research indicated that students find the course of "Overview of Petroleum Industry (PEEG 151)" to be the most difficult in terms of the language used. This problem can be tackled if a few changes are brought in the PI curriculum. This course should be shifted from freshman year to sophomore year. This will give students enough time to practice and improve their English language skills. Language is an important issue because most of the students taking this course faced this problem. This course requires advanced English vocabulary, writing and understanding skills. Moreover, the PI should offer an English course that will help to improve student's vocabulary, terminology and skills. Lastly, the contents of the course should be reduced as it is assumed to be an intensive course by the respondents.

Moreover, students who had a part-time job faced difficulties balancing between their academic loads and job requirements. In order to avoid this problem, the student should organize and manage his/her time more efficiently. The working hours should be flexible for the students so they can manage the job and studies in a better manner. In the end, the students should be given more choices and freedom to choose between several jobs so they can choose what suits them the most.

Our final result showed that emotional conflicts are the most influential issues that cause a lower GPA. The PI can take several steps to handle such problems. They can focus on providing more details about counselling services so that the student can be more aware of this opportunity. The student council should give students incentives to join clubs and organizations to allow better socializing among students as this will avoid these problems to occur in the first place. The recreational department can help the student council in this matter by organizing more events and trips that do not conflict with academic schedules. Concluding, the professors have to be more flexible with academic workload during the week and not pressurize the student with several tasks as this will burden the student mentally and physically.

IX. CONCLUSION

The report illustrates the entire research topic and the information which were gathered and analyzed from the results. It includes: literature review, purpose and scope, methodology, and the results followed by their discussion and recommendations. Using surveys, useful quantitative data were collected that is easier to interpret as charts and tables. This method was of a great use for the topic as it was easy to apply and analyze. It also gives general information about what is dealt with within the PI. On the other hand, there were some limitations that made restrictions on the results. For example, some of the survey questions were misinterpreted by students leading them to answer questions which do not need to be answered, besides some students did not pay attention to the instructions provided in each section of the survey. Thereby, this created some confusion while gathering the data. It is also important to pay attention to the recommendations since many students face similar if not the same issues.

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