



Academic excellence as selection criteria among Malaysian employers

Selection criteria

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine whether or not performance of employees is determined by merit of their academic excellence, which is measured by cumulative grade point average (CGPA). This paper thus attempts to measure the variables that could possibly influence employees' performance, such as job satisfaction, motivation and involvement in co-curriculum activities.

Design/methodology/approach – An adapted version of the questionnaire used by Sarmiento *et al.* was utilised to assess the perceived performance of employees. Ability construct was measured in terms of employee academic qualification and skills. A 13-item scale based on Porter was used to measure motivation. A 14-item scale based on Hackman and Oldham's Job Diagnostic Survey was used to measure job satisfaction. In total, 340 respondents from 87 companies participated in this study.

Findings – The findings revealed that there is a weak relationship between employees' performance with CGPA. The findings also revealed that there is a weak relationship between employees' performance and their job satisfaction, motivation and ability.

Research limitations/implications – It would be meaningful for future research if actual performance appraisal report could be obtained.

Practical implications – Company policy makers need to provide a wider employment opportunity to everyone and not merely to candidates based on merit of their academic excellence. Many graduates may be missing out on employment opportunities while they may be the right candidates.

Originality/value – This paper illustrates that academic excellence, which is the main selection criterion used by most employers, is not a determinant of employees' performance.

Keywords Malaysia, Graduates, Employees behaviour, Academic excellence, CGPA, Selection, Performance, Motivation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

With an increasing number of universities established in Malaysia, a huge number of students are expected to graduate from these universities. As a consequence, there will be substantial number of job seekers in the labour market. Last year, over 150,000 students graduated from public Malaysian universities. As the number of graduates rises, it would be a daunting task for the companies' recruiter to select the best candidates among the graduate applicants (Lin and Kleiner, 2004). In most cases, companies often adhere to students' academic excellence such as cumulative grade point average (CGPA) to shortlist the candidates so that they will have lesser candidates to interview. Several well-established companies in Malaysia limit their recruitment only to students who achieve 3.00 CGPA and above. Graduates who obtained lower CGPA are not eligible to apply.

CGPA is a system widely used by the universities in Malaysia to assess students' academic achievement. The CGPA is obtained by dividing the cumulative grade points



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(determined by multiplying the grade values of subjects taken with the number of hours in the semester) with the cumulative attempted hours (i.e. credit hours in which the students obtained a grade) (Alfan and Othman, 2005).

At the point of interview, it is rather difficult to predict the performance of the candidates. The difficulty arises because when a candidate is screened, only some of the factors contributing to job performance may be checked or verified. Those factors are work related and categorised under the heading of abilities such as knowledge, skills, experience, and formal education. Some candidates may not possess academic excellence but they possess other important attributes and skills essential for work. If employers limit the recruitment based on candidates' academic excellence as selection criterion, the assessment ignores the complete set of candidates' abilities, and other potential candidates who might possess other essential attributes and skills to qualify as good employees. On the other hand, the real concern of potential candidates is fairness and equality of opportunity to be selected.

This study aims to achieve several objectives. First, it aims to link a relationship between employees' performance with their academic excellence. Second, it examines the performance of employees as assessed by their supervisor. Third, it aims to measure other variables that could possibly influence employees' performance, such as job satisfaction, motivation, and involvement in university's co-curriculum activities.

The present study is important not only because such study is practically non-existent in present literature, but also the findings are important as more and more companies adhere to applicants' CGPA as their first screening criterion for recruitment. The evidence regarding the effect of education on performance is inconclusive and contradictory (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, studies that have examined these relationships focused on the level of education; or such degree of higher education, instead of CGPA of the applicants, as the primary selection criterion. The findings of this study will fill the gap in knowledge with regard to academic excellence as a determinant to evaluate employee performance. The findings of this study will provide useful insights to human resource managers and recruiters for effective hiring. Furthermore, it will also have significant impact on company policy makers on the importance to provide wider opportunities for everyone to apply, without merely selecting candidates based on their academic excellence.

2. Theoretical framework

Effective employee selection is a critical component of a successful organisation. How employees perform their jobs is a major factor in determining how successful an organisation will be. Through effective selection, the organisation can maximise the probability that its new employees will have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the jobs they were hired to do. Thus, employee selection is one of the two major ways (along with orientation and training) to make sure that new employees have the abilities required to do their jobs.

McKinney *et al.* (2003) examined the relationship between college grade point average (GPA) and recruiters' initial screening decisions. They found that major GPA is more strongly associated with screening decisions than is overall GPA, but the magnitudes of the relationships varied across decision sets. In review of existing literature, not many recent studies were found to have examined this relationship. McKinney *et al.* (2003) further added that recruiters indicate GPA as an attribute used to initially screen college applicants for positions. GPA is indicative of students'

performance in their academic programme and has been shown to be a valid predictor of job performance.

Job performance is essentially determined by the ability of an individual to do a particular job and the effort the individual is willing to put forth in performing the job. As argued by Gomez-Mejia *et al.* (2007), performance is a function of ability and motivation (performance = ability \times motivation). Since the earliest research on personnel selection, cognitive ability has been one of the major methods used in attempt to discriminate between candidates and to predict subsequent job performance (Robertson and Smith, 2001). Intelligence is the single most effective predictor known of individual performance at school and on the job; accounting for approximately 25 per cent of the variance in job performance (Hunter and Hunter, 1984). Cognitive ability provides criterion-related validity that generalises across more or less all occupational areas (Robertson and Smith, 2001). In addition, judge ratings of intelligence have been shown to predict intelligence test scores (Borkenau *et al.*, 2004).

There are countless tests of mathematical ability, verbal ability, and mechanical ability. It is said that a high-ability level can yield poor job performance if it is combined with low motivation. Likewise, a high level of motivation cannot offset the lack of ability. Unfortunately, most of the measures used in hiring decisions focus on ability rather than motivation. It is often difficult to measure motivation during interviews as it is not as stable as ability. Motivation seems to be much more dependent on context as compared to ability. In addition, Georges (1996) asserted that nobody, including the candidate can guarantee that she or he will display motivation on the job, especially since motivation cannot be easily generated at will. The goal of hiring is to hire the right person for the right job the first time (Roselius and Kleiner, 2000). Many studies have demonstrated the weaknesses in hiring. The common deficiencies include stereotyping of candidates, primacy effects, similarity effects, and negative information weighting bias (Barclay, 1999).

Besides motivation, job satisfaction is found to have caused performance. For instance, in the study of Sarmiento *et al.* (2007), it is found that job satisfaction is positively and significantly associated with job performance. Several other research support the idea that job satisfaction is significantly related to job performance (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2006; Chen and Silverthorne, 2005). On the other hand, Christen *et al.* (2006) argued against the idea of satisfied employees being more productive, as held through the 1970s. However, it was difficult to obtain support for the view that job satisfaction has a significant effect on job performance. As a result, the reverse (that an employee's job performance affects his or her job satisfaction) became the focus of research area.

At the same time, the evidence regarding the effect of education on performance is inconclusive. Education is perceived to enable employees to use productive and more advanced technologies, enhance their ability to work in teams and also make them more adaptable to new tasks or changes in old tasks (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2007). However, most studies tend to focus on the level of education, and not on education excellence. For instance, Hunton *et al.* (2005) found that job performance of accountants with master's degree is higher than that of those without master's degree. Nafukho and Hinton (2003), however, found that graduate education does not improve managerial performance at work. On the other hand, a study conducted by Lavigna (1992) found that GPA was significantly related to appraisal scores in a sample of professionals of the public sector. An exhaustive literature review revealed that this is the only study in support of CGPA with relation to performance.

Effective hiring starts with determining not only the education, but also skills and attributes that are necessary to be successful on the job (Roselius and Kleiner, 2000). The core categories of skills which are important to employability are basic competency skills (i.e. learning to learn, reading, writing, computing), communication skills (i.e. speaking, listening), adaptability skills (i.e. problem solving, creativity), personal-development skills (i.e. self-esteem, motivation and goal-setting, personal and career development), group effectiveness skills (i.e. interpersonal, negotiation, teamwork), and influencing skills (i.e. understanding organisational culture, leadership). In a study conducted by Takachiho (2000), employers expect university students to possess personal qualities such as cooperative personality, good communication skills, leadership skills, initiatives, and an entrepreneurial mind. This is supported by Shafie and Nayan (2010) who found that employers today are concerned about finding good workers who not only have basic academic skills such as in reading, writing, science, mathematics, oral communication, and listening, but also higher order thinking skills like learning, reasoning, thinking creatively, decision making, and problem solving. Besides, they are also looking for employees with personal qualities that among all include responsibility, self-confidence, self-control, social skills, honesty, integrity, adaptability and flexibility, team spirit, punctuality and efficiency, self-directedness, good work attitude, well-groomed, cooperativeness, self-motivation, and self-management.

Based on the review of literature, the following hypotheses are developed in this study:

- H1. There exists a relationship between employees' performance and CGPA.
- H2. Employees' performance depends on their ability, motivation, job satisfaction, co-curriculum involvement, and academic excellence.

3. Methodology

3.1 Measurement

This study used several instruments for data collection purposes. The variables studied were employees' job performance, ability, motivation, job satisfaction, employability skills, and academic excellence. These instruments have been extensively used in human resource management studies and have demonstrated robust reliability and validity indices.

- (1) *Job performance*: an adapted version of questionnaire used by Sarmiento *et al.* (2007) was utilised to assess the perceived performance of employees. The subjects were evaluated by their immediate supervisor on a six-point scale. Eight items were included in the assessments. These measured variables include "quality of work", "quantity of work", "dependability", and "knowledge", amongst others.
- (2) *Ability*: ability construct was measured in terms of employee academic qualification and skills. Academic qualification and skills would normally reveal the candidates' mathematical ability, verbal ability, and mechanical ability.
- (3) *Motivation*: to measure motivation, this study used a 13-item scale based on What Motivates You? by Porter (1964). This scale is derived based on the motivation theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and it seeks the employees'

feeling about the job they currently hold. Although there are other recent measurements on motivation, Porter's measurement was used as it is appropriate with the nature of the respondents. Porter's primary concern was to investigate differences in perceived deficiencies in need fulfilment at different managerial levels. It focuses on outcome of the jobs such as reward rather than hierarchical of needs.

- (4) *Job satisfaction*: A 14-item scale based on Hackman and Oldham's (1975) Job Diagnostic Survey was used to measure job satisfaction. The scale measures five facets of job, namely, job security, pay, social, supervisory, and growth satisfaction. Job Diagnostic Survey seems reasonable because it elicits attitudes to work from internal work motivation whereby the presence of specific job attributes motivates workers which in turn lead to high motivation, high performance, high satisfaction, and low turnover (Hackman and Oldham, 1975).

3.2 Sample and data collection

In total, 340 respondents from 87 companies participated in this study. The respondents work in various companies and positions. Forty per cent of the respondents have less than two years working experience, while 21.8 per cent have more than five years working experience. Almost 35.0 per cent of the respondents possess a bachelor's degree, 63.0 per cent has a diploma, and 2.0 per cent has a master's degree. About 57.0 per cent of the respondents graduated with a 3.00 CGPA and below, and 43.0 per cent of the respondents graduated with above 3.00 CGPA. About 70.0 per cent of the respondents have average degree of involvement in co-curriculum activities during their study in the university. The detailed results of the respondents' backgrounds are shown in Table I.

The data for this study was obtained from two sources: the supervisors, and the graduate subordinates. First, the enumerator would identify the list of supervisors in each company, and approach them. The supervisors were approached because they are the ones responsible to assess employees' performance. The supervisors were required to assess the performance of their graduate subordinates based on the scale constructed by the researcher. Some supervisors assessed only one of their graduate subordinates, while the others assessed more than one. However, each supervisor was required to assess randomly not more than five of his or her graduate subordinates. This is to ensure that the study involves balanced participation of supervisors. The enumerator would then approach the assessed subordinates and request them to respond to other parts of the questionnaire that consist of questions about their background, academic qualification, academic excellence (CGPA), involvement in extra co-curriculum activities during university, job satisfaction, and motivation. The assessed subordinates would not know about the assessment made by their supervisors as the data were collected separately.

4. Findings

The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science version 15.0. The measurements applied in this study were adopted by several research conducted across Asia within a similar context and they were found appropriate (Anderson and Witvliet, 2008; Nguyen *et al.*, 2005). A reliability test was done and the results are shown in Table II. All of the measurements are reliable with Cronbach α values ranging from 0.845 to 0.939. To examine the relationship of the studied variables: job

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Variable	Frequency	(%)
<i>Working experience</i>		
<2 years	136	40.0
<3 years	64	18.8
<4 years	40	11.8
<5 years	26	7.6
More than 5 year	74	21.8
Total	340	100.0
<i>Highest academic qualification</i>		
Diploma	214	62.9
Bachelor's degree	118	34.7
Master's degree	8	2.4
Total	340	100.0
<i>Academic excellence (CGPA)</i>		
<2.50	11	3.2
2.50-2.67	43	12.6
2.68-3.00	139	40.9
3.01-3.33	89	26.2
3.34-3.67	48	14.1
3.68-4.00	10	2.9
Total	340	100.0
<i>Co-curriculum involvement</i>		
0 – Not active at all	2	0.6
1	6	1.8
2	7	2.1
3 – Average	237	69.7
4	56	16.5
5	29	8.5
6 – Very active	3	0.9
Total	340	100.0

Table I.
Descriptive statistics on
respondents' background

Variable	Cronbach's α values
Performance	0.925
Job satisfaction	0.933
Motivation	0.939
Employability skills	0.845

Table II.
Reliability analysis for
studied variables

performance, ability, motivation, job satisfaction, employability skills, and academic excellence, a correlation analysis was performed. As shown in Table III, the relationship between performance and CGPA is very weak ($r = -0.015$), and its relationship with co-curriculum involvement is very weak (0.022) as well. However, there are some comparatively better relationships between performance and other independent variables. Although these relationships are relatively weak, they are statistically significant. For instance, performance has a weak relationship with job satisfaction ($r = 0.330$), and a weak relationship with motivation ($r = 0.306$), as well as a weak relationship with ability ($r = 0.203$).

Variable	<i>A</i>	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	Selection criteria
1. PERFORM	0.925	4.607	0.670	–						
2. JSATISFY	0.933	5.053	0.764	0.330**	–					
3. MOTIVATI	0.939	5.123	0.782	0.306**	0.704**	–				
4. ABILITY	0.845	3.711	0.681	0.203**	0.303**	0.358**	–			
5. CGPA	–	3.441	1.075	–0.015	–0.021	0.058	0.064	–		
6. CO-CURRI	–	3.288	0.5354	0.022	0.115*	0.085	0.230**	0.055	–	

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Notes: ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$; PERFORM, performance; JSATISFY, job satisfaction; MOTIVATI, motivation; ABILITY, ability; CGPA, academic excellence CGPA; CO-CURRI, co-curriculum involvement

Table III.
Correlation analysis of the studied variables

Ability and motivation were hypothesised to have some influence on performance. The regression analysis results in Table IV reveal that ability and motivation only account for 9.8 per cent of the variance in performance. It is interesting to observe that there is a strong relationship between motivation and job satisfaction ($r = 0.704$) as displayed in Table III; but as shown in Table IV, these variables account for only 11.4 per cent of the variance in performance. Finally, further regression analysis was done to predict whether performance depends on ability, motivation, job satisfaction, co-curriculum involvement, and CGPA. Table IV illustrates that the independent variables account for 11.6 per cent of the variance in performance. As such, the model would need other variables to explain the variance.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The main objective of this study is to examine whether or not performance of employees is determined by merit of their academic excellence, which is measured by CGPA. At the same time, this study attempts to predict employees' performance based

Independent variable	β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
a			
Ability	0.107	1.945	0.053
Motivation	0.268	4.844	0.000*
b			
Job satisfaction	0.227	3.152	0.002*
Motivation	0.146	2.031	0.043
c			
Ability	0.105	1.869	0.063
Motivation	0.120	1.623	0.106
Job satisfaction	0.217	2.997	0.003*
Co-curriculum	–0.039	–0.734	0.463
CGPA	–0.026	–0.505	0.614

Notes: ^aDependent variable: performance; *statistical significant at $p < 0.05$; $R^2 = 0.104$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.098$; $F = 19.507$; significance = 0.000. ^bDependent variable: performance; *statistical significant at $p < 0.05$; $R^2 = 0.120$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.114$; $F = 22.899$; significance = 0.000. ^cDependent variable: performance; *statistical significant at $p < 0.05$; $R^2 = 0.129$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.116$; $F = 9.928$; significance = 0.000.

Table IV.
Regression analysis predicting performance of employee

on some predictors. The predictors tested are CGPA, employees' ability, motivation, job satisfaction, and involvement in university co-curriculum activities. The results show that performance and CGPA has a very weak relationship. Furthermore, the predictors are able to explain only 11.6 per cent of the variance.

Findings of the present study differ from that of McKinney *et al.* (2003) in which the relationship between college GPA and recruiters' initial screening decisions was examined. McKinney *et al.* (2003) found that major GPA is more strongly associated with screening decisions than overall GPA. In the present study, however, the overall CGPA was used. Based on the extensive literature review, Lavigna (1992) is the only study that supports GPA to be a valid predictor of job performance. Lavigna (1992) found that GPA was significantly related to appraisal scores in a sample of professionals in the public sector.

This study has an important implication for hiring companies. Companies customarily adhere to students' academic excellence such as CGPA to shortlist the candidates so that they will have lesser candidates to interview. Several well-established companies in Malaysia even limit their recruitment only to those students who achieve 3.00 CGPA and above. Those graduates who achieved lower than 3.00 CGPA are not eligible to apply for candidacy. This has contributed to high number of graduates who have to settle for work with less preferred employers as their opportunity to choose employers is limited because of their ineligible CGPA. The findings of this study revealed that the CGPA has a very weak negative relationship with work performance and it is statistically insignificant. Human resource managers and recruiters need to employ effective hiring procedures. They must not shortlist the candidates merely based on their CGPA. Company policy makers need to provide a wider employment opportunity to everyone by allowing everyone to apply and fairly go through a series of stringent selection procedures before rejecting them at the onset. As revealed in this study, CGPA is not a determinant of performance. Many graduates with potential will miss out on employment opportunities while they may be the right candidates. Although most recruiting personnel would agree that the performance of employees is not merely determined by CGPA as there are many other variables that may influence performance, at the same time the research findings on performance determinant is inconclusive, and they have to use CGPA because it is a company policy. The employers' argument for them to use CGPA is that students with higher CGPA are fast learners and easier to train. In hiring, recruiters should not just look for the best candidates, instead they should look for the right candidates and CGPA is not the predictor. CGPA indicates academic excellence, which focused on intellectual ability, thus CGPA may be appropriate to be used for position selection, especially if the position applied for requires significant cognitive ability as pointed by McKinney *et al.* (2003). Robertson and Smith (2001) asserted that intelligence is the single most effective predictor known of individual performance at school. On the job, intelligence accounts for about 25 per cent of the variance in job performance. It is disappointing for academically underperforming graduates who are capable to work for big organisations in Malaysia such as Bank Negara (Central Bank) and PETRONAS (Petroleum National) as these two employers of choice customarily adhere to 3.5 CGPA as criterion to shortlist the graduates.

Employability and its relationship with higher education has become an increasingly prominent issue over the past few years. A degree may once have been a passport into graduate employment: it was indicative of a level of knowledge and intellectual ability. However, as a result of organisational changes and the expansion

in the number of graduates, this is no longer the case. Although graduate jobs are expanding, so is the supply of graduates. In addition, many employers are also seeking for various types of experience. Hence a degree is no guarantee of a job, let alone a career, and it should only be seen as reaching first base in the recruitment process. In addition, recent developments within organisations and within organisational business environments have brought forth new challenges for personnel selection. Specifically, technological changes, globalisation, social trends, and changes in the organisation of work require that organisations reconsider the modus operandi of their employee selection procedures. As pointed by Lievens *et al.* (2002), the traditional selection model with its psychometric roots might no longer suffice. This traditional personnel selection paradigm is based on stable jobs and therefore places high emphasis on individual job performance, job analysis, determination of performance criteria, prediction of work outcomes, and development and evaluation tools. However, nowadays jobs are often not well defined. Additionally, employees are selected to work in teams on different projects; they may frequently change work roles, and may follow diverse organisational career paths.

In addition, other variables such as ability, motivation, and job satisfaction have weak relationship with performance. These independent variables have a very low predictability of the dependent variable. The findings of this study support the previous studies to a limited extent. For instance, Sarmiento *et al.* (2007) found that job satisfaction is positively and significantly associated with job performance. Several other research support the idea that job satisfaction is significantly related to job performance (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2006; Chen and Silverthorne, 2005).

In the present study, variables such as ability, motivation, and job satisfaction are found to have weak relationship with performance. It is said that a high-ability level can yield poor job performance if it is combined with low motivation. Likewise, a high level of motivation cannot offset the lack of ability. Several other research support the idea that job satisfaction is significantly related to job performance (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2006; Chen and Silverthorne, 2005). The findings of the present study shared Christen *et al.*'s (2006) argument. However, it is difficult to obtain support for the view that job satisfaction has a significant effect on job performance. In employees' selection, graduates' attributes need to be considered and assessed carefully. Skills and attributes are necessary of the prospects to be successful on the job as mentioned by Roselius and Kleiner (2000) and Takachiho (2000). Furthermore, Shafie and Nayan (2010) asserted that basic academic skills are not the only skills employers are looking for nowadays. According to Knight (2005) when hiring graduates, employers generally value good evidence of: ability to cope with uncertainty; ability to work under pressure; action-planning skills; communication skills; IT skills; proficiency in networking and team working; readiness to explore and create opportunities; self-confidence; self-management skills; and willingness to learn. Thus for graduates to be attractive to employers it is important that they are able to show evidence of having these skills during the selection.

It seems that the general consensus from higher education institutions is that the current and future employment market requires graduates to be equipped with a range of skills. Applicants must be able to demonstrate their core transferable skills in addition to their academic success. Students and graduates need to be willing to develop their personal and professional skills relevant for the field of work to improve their chances of employment success (Raybould and Sheedy, 2005).

This study is not done without a limitation. The supervisors might have conducted the assessment without serious thought as they were approached by the enumerators who

promptly asked them to assess their graduate subordinates. The assessment may be influenced by some errors. It would be meaningful for future research if actual performance appraisal report could be obtained. Besides, it would provide valuable contribution to knowledge for future research to examine the influence of students' CGPA towards other dimensions, such as on employees' ability to learn and to develop managerial ability at the workplace. There is still a need for empirical research to determine the factors that contribute to employees' performance and how they can be assessed at the point of hiring. Such future research will definitely fill the gap of knowledge in employees' selection and performance management field of study and practice.

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