

FACTORS INFLUENCING TASK MANAGEMENT SKILLS AMONG SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS AT MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

¹Nazihah Kamarudin, ^{2*}Fauziah Ibrahim, ³Nur Saadah Mohamad Aun

ABSTRACT--Task management is an important skill needed by social work students in preparation for becoming professional social workers. Therefore, this article aims to measure the level of task management skills and factors influencing the aspect of task management among social work students at Malaysian public universities. This study applies quantitative research design by cross-sectional survey. A total of 215 final year social work students from six public universities in Malaysia were selected as respondents of the study. The study data was analysed using descriptive and inference statistics. Based on the results, social work students at public universities have moderate to high levels of task management skills. This study also found that the variables of leadership ability, problem solving ability and ethical behaviour are major predicting factors that can influence task management skills among final year social work students at public universities. The findings of this study have positive implications to the university management especially to the benefits of social work programs at public universities. The existing curriculum can be improved to enhance the social work students' skills in managing their tasks and in preparation for becoming professional social workers.

Keywords--task management, social work students, leadership, ethical behaviour, problem solving

I. INTRODUCTION

Social work profession is a profession that is responsible for delivering effective services to meet the needs and to enhance the social functioning of individuals and communities. According to Sajjad, Qasim & Bidayatul (2018), employees are contemplated as an indispensable pillar of the organization. The Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (2010) described social work as a profession that promotes social change, helps in solving social problems, and restores the social functioning of an individual. Saparin (2014) defined social work profession as a profession that focuses on the aspect of human service in enhancing the well-being and quality of life of the

¹Center for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor.

^{2*}Center for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor, ifauziah@ukm.edu.my

³Center for Research in Psychology and Human Well-Being, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, The National University of Malaysia, Bangi Selangor.

community. Meanwhile, Mohammad Shamil (2018) stated that social workers are mediators, educators, advocates and brokers in connecting employers and clients.

The Department of Social Welfare Malaysia statistics from 2009 to 2013 indicated that there are increasing cases related to community issues that have to be dealt with by social workers. Based on the statistics, social issues contributing to the upsurge are related to children, elderly, beneficiaries, and disabled people. For example, there are increasing child cases that need to be handled by social workers, from 8,425 cases in 2009 to 12,783 cases in 2013. Based on the issues, it is important for social work students at public universities to have high task management skills as those final year social work students will be entering the working environment as social workers. Besides, they will confront different social stratifications that have different life issues to be dealt with. The diversity of client backgrounds requires final year social work students to have the proper skills in managing their tasks, so that they can use their skills and knowledge to handle the increasing number of cases in the profession. Therefore, task management skills are very essential for final year social work students in order to prepare themselves as professional social workers in the future.

Final year social work students need to be nurtured in order to produce competent and highly skilled workers in the social work profession. Effective task management skills especially in delivering efficient services to the community is very crucial. Thus, task management is an essential aspect that needs to be incorporated in practicing their skills professionally to the clients. Lewis, Packard and Lewis (2012) defined management as a set of systems and processes that help employees in achieving individual and group goals. In addition, management is defined as the growth of formal and informal mechanisms, processes, systems and networks used by an organisation to achieve the organisation's goals (Ferreira & Otley, 2009).

It is important for social work students to truly understand task management, so that when they become social workers in the future, they can perform their tasks according to priorities. Such understanding is also important for them to carry out their works by focusing on cases that require more attention, such as cases involving client safety (Ahmet, Lennart & Evelyn, 2018). Furthermore, other examples of high priority cases are violence cases and child protection cases (Ahmet, Lennart & Evelyn, 2018). The understanding of social work students towards task management is also important in order for them to face difficulties and challenges in performing management related works in social work field. According to a study conducted by Norulhuda et al. (2017), one of the five major issues of social-client relationship challenges is the difficulty of building trust with clients, due to clients not being clear with the social worker's roles and tasks. As a social worker with good job management, social work students need to have some skills such as technical, human, conceptual, and interpersonal skills (Diana-Cristina, 2016). A social worker who performs the managerial tasks in an organisation is constantly faced with pressures and challenges in ensuring that clients receive sufficient services and organisation runs smoothly and efficiently (Diana-Cristina, 2016). According to Khadijah (2018), integrity in performing challenging tasks by social workers is needed to produce professional social workers as well as to enhance the society well-being. Integrity is also an important concept in forming a harmonious society (Nur Hafizah Yusoff, 2019).

Based on previous studies, studies related to task management that specialise in final year social work students are hardly conducted by researchers around the world. Nevertheless, this aspect is important to measure the degree of task management skills among final year social work students. Moreover, it will assist them in delivering professional services in the social work field which is currently gaining more attention and highly needed by the country. Based on the research gap, this study is conducted to measure the level of task management skills and to identify factors influencing task management among final year social work students at Malaysian public universities. The results of the study are expected to provide valuable input to the universities' top management in designing and developing graduate employability programs. Besides, it will help in producing graduates who are capable, competent and highly skilled in the social work professions and services.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies quantitative research design by cross-sectional survey. The study data was analysed using descriptive and inference statistics. Data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The research instruments used in this study are as follows:

1. Ethical Behaviour Scale: measured using a standardised test instrument from the Value Audit Management System (SPAN) in 2007. This instrument has 11 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.756.
2. Interpersonal Communication Scale: measured using a scale developed by Armstrong (1981), contains 52 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.89.
3. Creative Thinking Scale: measured using an instrument developed by Eko et al. (2016). This instrument has 20 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.911.
4. Problem Solving Scale: measured using an instrument adapted from the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) by Cooper et al. (1988). This instrument has 19 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.94.
5. Task Management Scale: measured using a test instrument developed by Nazihah (2018). This instrument has 8 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.895.
6. Leadership Capability Scale: measured using the Self Leadership Questionnaire developed by Anderson and Prussia (1997). This instrument has 20 question items and has a good reliability value of 0.7.

All of the test instruments in this study applied a four-point Likert scale with options ranging from (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) agree, and (4) strongly agree. In this study, the minimum score is 1, and the maximum score is 4. The range between score 1 and score 4 is 3. This range was subsequently divided into three and produced one outcome. Based on this range, the level of task management among final year social work students at public universities have been categorised into three levels as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1:The levels of interpretations of task management skills among final year social work students at public universities

Level score	Level of interpretations
1.00 - 2.00	Low level
2.01 – 3.00	Moderate level
3.01 – 4.00	High level

Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive analysis uses values such as mode, median, mean, and percentage to indicate the results of a collected data (Chua, 2014). Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, percentage, and standard deviation were used in this study to achieve the first research objective, which is to identify task management level among final year social work students at Malaysian public universities.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis is used to identify changes in two or more factors (independent variables) which contribute to changes in dependent variables (Andy, Daniel & Erica, 2011). In this study, multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the main factors contributing to task management among final year social work students at Malaysian public universities.

Population and Sample of the Study

In this study, study population refers to final year social work students at six public universities in Malaysia. According to the intake statistics of social work students enrolling at Malaysian public universities in 2018, the total number of social work students enrolled in six public universities namely Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin is 404 students.

The sample size of the study was determined based on the sampling design table developed by Krejic and Morgan (1970) with the level of significance at $p < .05$. According to the sample size determination table provided by Krejic and Morgan (1970), if the study population is 404 and the required significance level was .05, then the required number of respondents are 196. Tuckman (1988) mentioned that it is appropriate to add up 10 percent to the number of respondents from Krejic and Morgan's (1970) sample size (196 respondents) in case there are any dropouts when the respondents filled out the survey questionnaires. Therefore, by taking the suggestion into account and 10 percent of the sample size was added up, the sample size used in this study was 215 students.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Level of Task Management among Final Year Social Work Students at Public Universities

Task management is an important aspect for all social work students as it can help to improve the competency while dealing with individuals and communities professionally. According to Steers (1985), management is a process of planning, organising, directing, and handling activities with the employees using the available resources in order to achieve the set goals. In this study, task management refers to the ability of final year social work students to identify tasks such as carrying out social work practices to the community, the ability to assign and prioritise tasks accordingly, the ability to plan interventions, and the ability to review the planned tasks. The study on task management skills is significant as it can assist social work students to better understand their task management when performing works and to help them set tasks accordingly (Ahmet, Lennart & Evelyn, 2018).

Table 2 shows the results of the study related to the level of task management among final year social work students at public universities. The findings showed that majority of final year social work students at Malaysian public universities have moderate level of task management (138 respondents, 64.2%). Meanwhile, 77 students showed high levels of problem solving skills (35.8%). The results showed that none of the final year social work students showed low levels of task management skills. The results of this study indicate that the efforts of stakeholders are needed to enhance the level of task management skills among the final year social work students at public universities.

Table 2: Levels of task management skills

Task Management Level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Moderate	138	64.2
High	77	35.8

Note: Low (<2.00), Moderate (2.01-3.00), High (3.01-4.00)

The analysis of task management level was divided into two subscales, namely ability and skill. As shown in Table 3, for the ability subscale, the results show that majority of final year social work students are able to prioritise tasks (95.9% - item 1) and have the ability to prioritise what is needed to complete tasks (97.2% - item 3). A total of 94.4% of social work students were identified as being able to perform tasks as instructed (item 2), able to learn from the assigned tasks (95.8% - item 4), and 90.7% of the students demonstrated the ability to identify the best approach to use in performing tasks (item 5). For the skill subscale, majority of social work students demonstrated the basic skills required to perform tasks (95.8% - item 6), while 86.5% of the students were seen to be capable of managing and planning interventions (item 7), and have strategic ways of performing tasks (92.1% - item 8).

Table 3: Percentage of task management skills items

No.	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
		P(%)	P(%)	P(%)	P(%)
1.	Able to assign tasks according to priority	0.0	4.2	74.0	21.9
2.	Able to perform tasks as instructed	0.0	5.6	75.3	19.1
3.	Have the ability to prioritise what is needed to complete tasks	0.5	2.3	76.3	20.9
4.	Able to learn from the assigned tasks	0.0	4.2	72.1	23.7
5.	Have the ability to identify the best approach to use in performing tasks	0.0	9.3	71.2	19.5
6.	Have the basic skills required to perform tasks	0.0	4.2	76.7	19.1
7.	Able to manage and plan interventions	0.0	13.5	67.9	18.6
8.	Have strategic ways of performing tasks	0.0	7.9	74.0	18.1

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the level of task management among the final year social work students at public universities needs to be improved. This aspect is important because final year social work students will face various challenging tasks in handling numerous community issues when they become social workers. Therefore, it is important for them to have a good level of task management so that they can handle the tasks professionally and effectively for the benefits of the community.

Main Factors Influencing Task Management Skills among Final Year Social Work Students at Public Universities

Multiple regression analysis (stepwise) was used to identify changes in two or more factors (independent variables) that contribute to changes in dependent variables (Andy, Daniel & Erica, 2011). In this study, multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the main factors influencing task management skills among final year social work students at public universities as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Main factors influencing task management skills among final year social work students at Malaysian public universities

Variable	Beta	R	R ²	Δ R ²
Leadership Ability	.500	.801	.642	-
Problem Solving Ability	.301	.837	.701	0.59
Ethical Behaviour	.161	.847	.717	0.16

Based on Table 4, the results of multiple regression analysis showed ($n = 215$), which three predictor variables namely leadership ability, problem solving ability, and ethical behaviour are main predicting factors that influence task management skills among final year social work students at public universities. All three factors contributed 71.7% of the variance to the task management skills among the respondents at public universities. In this study, the variable of leadership ability [$F(1,213) = 382.510, p < .05$] contributed 64.2% of the variance ($R^2 = .642$) the task management skills among final year social work students. This shows that leadership ability is a key predictor that contributes to good task management skills among final year social work students at public universities. According to Nazihah et al. (2019), the lack of leadership ability among the students can result in social work students being unable to fulfill their role as leaders while conducting their tasks in the challenging job sector. The results of this study also found that the combination of the variables of leadership ability ($Beta = .500, p < .05$) and problem solving ability ($Beta = .301, P < .05$) increased by (70.1% - 64.2%) or 59% of the variance ($R^2 = .701$) to the factors influencing task management skills among final year social work students at public universities [$F(2,212) = 248.090, p < .05$]. In addition, the study also found that ethical behaviour variable is one of the factors influencing task management skills among final year social work students at public universities ($Beta = .161, p < .05$) with increasing variance of (71.7% - 70.1%) or 16% of the variance ($R^2 = .717$) to the factors affecting task management skills among social work students [$F(3,211) = 178.057, p < .05$]. Based on these results, it can be concluded that three out of five predicting variables were identified as influential and contribute to task management skills among final year social work students at public universities, namely leadership ability, problem solving ability, and ethical behaviour.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study found that majority of final year social work students at Malaysian public universities have moderate to high levels of task management skills. Thus, there is a strong need to increase the efforts in improving the level of task management skills among final year social work students. This is because they are already in their final year and in the transition of entering the workforce as professional social workers. Skills in performing comprehensive task management should be instilled in social work students so that they can efficiently serve the community in the future. This study found that variables such as leadership ability, problem solving ability, and ethical behaviour are main factors influencing task management skills among social work students at public universities. The findings of this study provide useful inputs to stakeholders, especially to the management of social work programs at Malaysian public universities in preparing useful programs to enhance the level of task management skills among the students. The aspect of leadership ability needs to be focused on as the study has found that leadership ability among social work students are main predictors and contributors in enhancing their task management skills. The results of the study may have strong implications towards designing and

implementing more programs to enhance the graduates' employability, to produce high competent graduates, and to provide effective community services to the society.

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