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# Exploring University Students' Learning Goals

*by* Kristiyani Titik

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## Exploring University Students' Learning Goals

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### Abstract

Among the causes of failure to complete higher education is the incompatibility of students' goals with the objectives of their study programs. So far it has been assumed that students have the same goals as their education providers. There are very few exploratory studies regarding student goals that support the assumption above. This study aims to identify students' learning goals, where the results can be used to optimize the achievement of educational goals. Using the constructive realism approach, the results of this study show that students' learning goals include to achieve academic competencies, social and spiritual involvement, personal development, future success, and technical sufficiency. Among these five goals, the achievement of academic competencies, personal development, and future success are in line with previous findings and opinions from experts. In addition, two other goals appear to be characteristics in the local context, namely social and spiritual involvement, and technical sufficiency. This implies that students also learn because of social drive, an educational institution that facilitates their orientation, a compatibility between student's technical and financial situation, and an institution that supports their beliefs/faith. For students, academic goals are considered as the most critical goal: if it is achieved, students perceive their future to be bright through obtainment or creation of jobs. Following the context of the community, all these goals will be realized when they are aligned with social goals and driven by a desire to develop themselves.

**Keywords:** learning goals, academic competence, social and spiritual engagement, personal development, future, success

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Success in an educational context is driven by learning goals, cognitive representation of beliefs, intention, attitude, and doubt, that drive achievement behavior (Dowson & McInerney, 2004; Woolfolk, 2005). In higher education, students achieve their optimal learning process when their goals are in line with their study programs' objectives. The objectives of study programs are predominantly clear. However, studies on students' goals have been underexplored. Thus, the suitability of the two goals cannot yet be predicted. Based on the background mentioned above, this current study aims to explore university students' learning goals.

Among various classifications of learning goals, mastery and performance goals are the most essential and favorite term. Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz (2010) support this statement by articulating that mastery and performance are the primary constructs of goals; each demonstrates beliefs about competence. Students who have mastery-oriented goals focus on learning, completing tasks, developing new skills, increasing competence, trying to

overcome challenges, and mastering school materials. Meanwhile, students with performance-oriented goals focus on exhibiting their competence to others. Success and competence in students with mastery-oriented goals are based on their self-development standards, whereas success and competence for students with performance-oriented goals students are based on comparisons with other people's criteria (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2010; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001).

Previous studies about learning goals tend to test its role in achievement (Daniels, Stupnisky, Pekrun, Haynes, Perry, & Newall, 2009; Durik, Lovejoy, & Johnson, 2009; Fong, Davis, Kim, Y., Kim, Y. W., Marriott, & Kim, S., 2017; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Tyson, & Patall, 2008; Vrugt & Oort, 2008). Many studies also compared mastery and performance goals. Huang (2011) found mastery goals to be more useful in comparison to performance goals. Vrugt & Oort (2008) found a positive correlation between mastery goal and metacognition skill, as well as a negative correlation between performance goal and metacognition skill. Other studies found effects of mastery goal on self-regulation and achievement (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006). These previous studies indicate that compared to performance goals,

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mastery goals have a more positive effect on achievement. A different result was found by Barron & Harackiewicz (2001) who claimed that both goals were adaptive for achievement.

Some researchers claimed that learning goals have an individualistic nature (Conley & Frech, 2014; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007), but other researchers believed that learning goals are affected by culture and experiences in specific contexts (Fong, Acee, & Weinstein, 2016; Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2010). The performance-orientation goal is typical of students in the culture of strong social connectivity, which focuses on social acceptance. In the autonomous society, people achieve personal goals with no regard for social approval (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). In a more egalitarian context, students are free to pursue their own goals. This atmosphere is more conducive for mastery goals, allowing students to show motivation for high achievement because of the desire to master challenging tasks and to learn (Dekker & Fischer, 2008). These studies support the arguments of Tanaka and Yamauchi (2004) who stated that the goals of achievement are rooted in culture, so the cultural context needs to be considered in studies about learning goals.

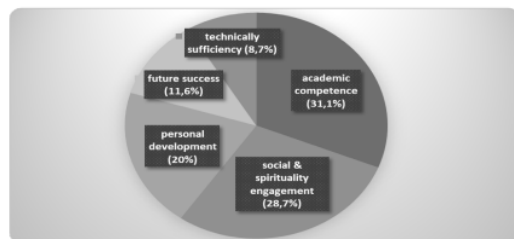
Since the cultural context has an vital role in learning goals, the exploration of student learning goals in Indonesia becomes essential. By knowing more contextual and concrete conditions, it is expected that learning activities in higher education will be more effective. Through this background, this study aims to explore students' learning goals by answering three problems, as formulated below:

- What are university students' learning goals?
- Which goals are considered the most important ones?
- Why are these goals considered important?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are 1684 responses from 514 respondents. Out of 1684 responses, five categories of learning goal emerged: academic competence, social and spiritual involvement, personal development, future success, and technical sufficiency. Figure 1 depicts the percentage of each category.

Figure 1. Categories of university students' goals



### 2.1 Academic Competence Goals

Academic goal is the category with the largest percentage of responses (31.1%). It is the goal that is directly related to academic problems, which includes the goal of gaining knowledge, gaining experience, increasing competence, learning, exploring potential, applying knowledge, changing mindset, obtaining achievements and degrees, graduating, and pursuing further study. The following are examples of an interview quotation showing goals of academic competence:

"... achievements, also add experience, develop mindset"

"... I can, at least during college I can, can teach well ..."

"... the public speaking is getting better ..."

These goals contain the hope that students can improve their knowledge, skills, and experience in their study programs. This is in line with the mastery-approach goal, that emphasizes a person's progress in learning, understanding, and mastering new tasks (Elliot, Shell, Henry, & Maier, 2005).

### 2.2 Personal Development Goals

Personal development goals are responses that show the goals of personal development in the non-academic area. In this study, personal development goals include improvement of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, improvement of soft skills, character education, activeness in non-academic activities, activities in hobbies, balancing academic and non-academic activities, self-actualization, fulfilling curiosity, seeking self-pleasure, trying challenges, fulfilling demands, and getting social recognition. The following are some examples of interview quotations related to this goal:

"..Want to take part in organizational activities ..."

"... Value of life. Value. Because in life now maybe what you are looking for is not just a smart person. But people who have integrity too ..."

This category is not found among the goal categories suggested by Ames (1992). However, Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan (1997) also found personal-orientation goals, although the meaning was different from the findings in this study. Personal-orientation according to Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan (1997) is more intended for people who personally have an interest in developing themselves as individuals in the context of education, where learning materials in formal schools aims to make people more adaptive and attractive. Operationally, the personal-orientation in the research conducted by Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan (1997) was shown by the desire perform well on tests, to assess one's abilities, and focus on values and feedback. In this study, personal goals also include performing challenges, fulfilling demands, and getting social recognition. However, objectives related to value and feedback did not appear in this study.

This study found that for respondents, it was important to achieve personal development, which was interpreted by competencies in character, obtained through non-academic



activities on campus. This study used students who study in educational institution, in which certain characteristics become a vision that can be achieved through personal development. Personal development skills are given in a structured design through student activities and were implied in academic activities such as lectures. A mission of institution where the respondents study is to put them inseparately with their community. This mission seems to be internalized by students can allow students to develop awareness of these learning goals.

### 2.3 Future Success Goals

The goal of achieving future success includes the goal of getting a job, preparing for the future, achieving goals, and being able to compete in the working force, as exemplified in the following interview quotes:

"... I will prepare myself for competition later in the world of work ..."

"to find work, as a means to look for work in the future ..."

On the national scale in Indonesia, the goals of future success found in this study are in line with the aim of the higher education, namely, to become cultured intellectuals and/or scientists, able to enter and/or create jobs, and able to develop themselves into professionals (Act no. 12 of 2012, article 18 section 2). Findings in a study conducted by Beaty, Gibbs, & Morgan (1997) also stated that most students have a vocational orientation. They enter college with the hopes of gaining skills and being able to meet the qualifications required by the industrial world. In the community where this research was conducted, hopes for higher education were also focused on obtaining employment after graduation.

### 2.4 Social and Spirituality Engagement Goals

Social and spiritual engagement goals is the category with the second largest number of responses (28.1%). This goal is a commonly found among respondents of this study. This goal includes relationships, finding friends, getting a romantic partner, understanding diversity, being useful to others, playing a role in the society, family reasons, satisfying parents, and making parents happy/proud.

"... I must have built the first relationship if any opportunity ..."

"... to find as many friends as possible ... gain friends"

"... I just followed my parents' instructions ..."

No previous studies found learning goals like social and spiritual goals. Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan (1997) found social goals in their study, but the meaning was different from the content of the social goals in this study. Social goals that were mentioned in a research by Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan (1997) is defined as a person's focus on the social side of university life, namely how students spend their time on campus to do activities which have no relation to academic learning.

Examples of social goals according to Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan (1997) are sports activities and student organizations. In contrast to these findings, the social goals in this study contain matters that are more related to relationships with others, such as gaining relationships, finding friends, getting a romantic partner, and understanding diversity, and developing an altruistic attitude like being useful to others, serving elderly people and making their parents happy. The spiritual involvement goals include the goal of learning in an environment of the same religion and the aim to further explore certain other faiths. This makes a common appearance in this study and represents the reality of educational practices, where religious identity is explicitly expressed. In addition, this research was conducted in the context of religious diversity, where people tend to feel more comfortable in an environment with the same religion.

### 2.5 Technically Sufficiency Goals

<sup>3</sup> In order to achieve the goals, respondents of this study have stated various requirements of a place designated for learning, including distinctiveness of the university, the place, and atmosphere of learning, the distance between their home to the place of study, and financial abilities. These goals appear to be characteristics that depend on local context or situation, such as the place of study, techniques, financial abilities, and faith. This means students are also able to learn because the place of learning is suitable for their orientation and both, technically and financially, matches their situation. The following is a quote from an interview quote that states those goals:

*... because since high school entered the Jesuit school ... and now in this this university which is also managed by the Jesuits, the values obtained from this university were different compare to the other ...*

Social and spiritual engagement and <sup>6</sup> technical sufficiency goals are two commonly found goals in this study, which are not found in the results of previous studies. The discovery of these two objectives shows how the socio-cultural context influences students' learning goals. Social and spiritual engagement, as well as technical sufficiency goals content, seem to be very incompatible with the aim of higher education as the institution that emphasizes the development of science. However, in the laws applied in Indonesia, one of the goals of higher education is to mold students to become a human being of faith, piety, and culture (Act No. 12 of 2012). It seems that in the context of Indonesian culture, faith and piety are also the responsibility of higher education institutions. Hence, it is easy to understand the context of the findings that call for the need of deeperr faith and being in a community of believers.

The implementation of this research was conducted in a city that has been used as a reference for education in Indonesia. This place of learning is relatively accessible with affordable education cost. and many scholarships offer for students. Since this college is a private college funded by a particular religious group, many students are hoping for the growth of their faith in this institution. Some respondents also stated that they followed the advice of parents or other people

in choosing this place of learning. This occurred because of the reputation of this university in certain social groups. It is apparent that such considerations are very typical in Indonesian society.

Research on the learning process and the impulses that give rise to these behaviors cannot be separated from an understanding of the current context. The context in question can include environmental characteristics related to achievement, such as class, school, work, and cultural factors, such as nationality, ethnicity; as well as various other social contexts related to the home environment of students, such as family and peers (Urdan, 1999 in Wosnitza & Beltman, 2012). Goal theory highlights how context plays an essential role in developing goals, explicitly emphasizing that students will base their learning goals on teaching practices and how teachers respond to students' achievements or shortcomings (Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2010). Research conducted on millennial students in New Zealand found that students' perspective on higher education was formed through the political, economic and, social context at the time. This finding is similar to the findings of a study conducted in American culture (Buissink-Smith, Spronken-Smith, & Grigg, 2008). In line with these findings, the respondents' learning goals in this study were also shaped by existing economic and social conditions.

## 2.6 Future Success as the Most Important Goal

Among the categories of learning goals found in this study, researchers found how each goal was inter-related to each other and to what level. Findings showed that future success was the ultimate goal to be achieved. The most important thing to achieve this goal is academic goals, where the goal is achieved through the support of personal development and social factors. For respondents of this study, academic goals are considered as the essence of learning activities on campus: if this goal is achieved, it will increase the probability of future success. Figure 2 illustrates the dynamics of learning goals that are considered important by students.

Figure 2. Dynamics of the most important learning goals

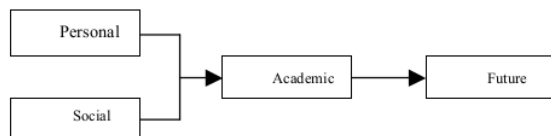


Figure 2 shows that all the learning goals that are considered the most important findings in this study lead to the ultimate goal of preparing for the future or work career. Academic goals are provisions prepared by students during lecture sessions are seen as the requirements or qualifications needed in the working world. The increase of academic competence is influenced by students' personal development and social competencies.

## 3. CONCLUSION

University students' learning goals can be categorized into five categories, namely improving academic competence, social and spiritual involvement, personality development, future success, and technical adequacy. Findings concerning the aim of improving academic competence, personal development, and future success are in line with the results of previous studies. Furthermore, the purposes of achieving social and spiritual involvement and technical adequacy are the novel findings of this study. The goal that is considered the most important one is achieving future success. Achieving this goal is determined by the goal of obtaining academic competence, which is perceived as a requirement to enter the working force. This academic competence is supported by personal development and social involvement. This understanding of students' goals has implications for what lecturers can do in the learning process. For example, social and spiritual involvement, the most commonly found goal in this study, can be used to design tasks in groups so that learning outcomes can be optimized.

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