WE SUPPORT YOU: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND SPORTS INVOLVEMENT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENT-ATHLETES

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Abstract: One of the misconceptions about the university student-athletes is that they may not be capable to strive in academic performance towards academic excellence. This has become a stigma to those who are actively involved in sports. Correspondingly, the challenge of balancing academic standards with athletic competitiveness is not new. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the student-athletes from UiTM Sarawak (N=168) on the factors of the surrounding environment (support system) affecting sports involvement, and the perceived health condition in relation to academic performance (GPA). The data were gathered using the survey method where the questionnaire was distributed through an online platform. The results indicated that there was no significant relationship between GPA and the perceived health condition, and the support system (p > .05). For gender comparison, there was a significant difference in the perceived health condition (p < .05), but not in the support system (p > .05). Conclusively, the student-athletes has a good health condition level, with females being perceived to be at a higher level, and have great support from the environment in their sports career; where the academic achievements are concerned, regardless of the gender, the student-athletes are in good hands. It is recommended that the supports that are given to these student-athletes be maintained and to promote sports participation to the non-athletes.

Keywords: Academic performance, Support system, Student-athletes, Sports involvement

Introduction
Being a student-athlete is not an easy role as the athlete needs to be committed to both studies and participate in a sport. The student-athletes need to balance between the roles of being full-time students and being athletes during their student life (Apaak & Sarpong, 2015). As these student-athletes are struggling to survive in university life, they are also associated with the stereotyped term of being a ‘jock’, which is a pejorative where these athletes are perceived to
be more interested in sports and do not take much interest in intellectual culture (Grimit, 2014). Notwithstanding the perception, there are factors that can either be a barrier or a motivation for student-athletes to succeed in their academic achievement. An example of a barrier is the stressful training schedule that has contributed to the academic experience of student-athletes and non-athletes alike. The different experiences have influenced the student-athletes’ social, emotion and academic education (Yusof, Chuan & Shah, 2013).

While academics are important to the university students’ future, participating in a sport is also important to the students as it helps them to improve their health and emotional stability. This has been proven by many studies (Hicks, 2018; Yusof, Chuan & Shah, 2013; Razak, Abd Jabar & Sharifah, 2012). Academic achievement has been a very important element in individuals. The higher the level or the success of each person in his or her academic performance, the higher the opportunity he or she has to have a better position in a job (Ab Razak et al., 2019). Not only that, a student with good grades will also be admired and respected by other people. But some harsh criticism stated that the student-athletes experience lower level of academic performance (Sitkowski, 2008).

According to research, theory suggests that a student will learn through his or her involvement in sports, in meaningful ways during his or her undergraduate experience. Students are balancing themselves, where both psychological and physical energy are invested in tasks that are related to their academic experience. Thus, it is positively related to their overall learning experience and personal development (Gayles, 2009). A study stated that participation in a sport improved the discipline of an athlete. So, this helps the student-athletes to remain eligible and perform well academically. Thus, it is believed that it is the responsibility of the coaches, the athletic departments and institutions to maintain success both in the performance in sport and in academia (Forster, 2012).

The studies of the factors that are related to academic performance of university students have become a massive topic in the educational circle. Both the external and internal factors of a student-athlete to perform on an academic perspective need to be studied, especially in Malaysia. Thus, the factors that influence the participation in sport (level of health condition and support system) and academic achievement among university athletes were examined throughout this study. The differences between gender and the level of health condition and support system of the student-athlete were examined and the relationship between these variables and academic performance were explored as well.

**Methodology**
A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data from the university student-athletes and was conducted within a time frame, i.e., in October 2020 – November 2020. A cross-sectional study is used for the researcher to measure the outcome and the exposures in the study’s participants at the same time (Lavrakas, 2008).

**Participants**
A sample of university student-athletes who represent UiTM Kampus Samarahan, Sarawak in various sports and at any level, have participated in this study. The participants have been selected using the convenience sampling techniques, and have registered at the Sports Unit in order to represent the university. The sample size of this study was $N = 168$ in which the
university student-athletes who were readily accessible during the data collection became the participants of this study. Ethical approval was also sought from the faculty’s Research Ethics Committee.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the university student-athletes from UiTM Sarawak. Most of them are from 21 to 23 years old- that is 64.9%, where 54.8% are females. In accordance to ethnicity, a majority were Bumiputera; Bumiputera Sarawak (30.4%), Bumiputera Sabah (26.2%) and Bumiputera Peninsular Malaysia (18.5%).

Table 2 shows the range of the participants’ GPA. Most of the participants’ GPA were 3.00 and above (72.7%) with a few who had scored less than 3.00 (27.4%).

**Measures**
This research uses an instrument by Farez (2017). In this instrument, there were 27 items of two domains- influence of support system (18 items) and perceived level of health condition (9 items). The first domain collected information on the influence of parents, coaches, teammates, and the university. Meanwhile, the second domain collected information on the current perceived health conditions of the student-athletes. These items were rated using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The demographic information of the respondents was obtained in the first section of the questionnaire which consist of age, semester, gender, ethnic group, sport background, and academic performance, which were measured in grade point average (GPA).

**Data analysis**
The data collected was analysed using the computer software called Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0. The descriptive data for all variables of the study were presented in mean and standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages. Normality was tested using skewness and kurtosis (ranges between -2 to +2) (George & Mallery, 2010) and the distribution of score were normal. Significance of relationship between the level of health and support system and academic performance were assessed using the Pearson correlation test. Meanwhile, the Independent sample T-test was utilised to compare between gender in level of health conditions and support system among the university student-athletes. A p-value ≤ 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results**
Table 3 shows the means and standard deviation of the variables of the study by gender. There was a significant difference in perceived level of health condition, with females who had the higher score rather than males, among the university student-athletes; female (M = 4.74, SD = .364) and males (M = 4.63, SD = .367) (p < 0.05). On the other hand, social support did not have any significant difference between the gender (p > .05). The correlation between the level of health conditions and academic performance among the university student-athletes is shown in Table 4. There was no significant relationship between the level of health condition, support system and academic performance (GPA) (p > .05) of the university student-athletes.
Table 1: Demographic profile of UiTM students' athlete (N=168)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-23</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>54.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay Sarawak</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumiputera Sarawak</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumiputera Sabah</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bumiputera Malaysia</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Academic Performance - Grade Point Average (GPA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 2.5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.51-2.99</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00-3.49</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.50-3.99</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Mean scores of studied variables by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Social Support</th>
<th>LOHC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M ± SD</td>
<td>M ± SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>4.19 ± 0.504</td>
<td>4.69 ± 0.370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 76)</td>
<td>4.19 ± .481</td>
<td>4.63 ± .367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 92)</td>
<td>4.19 ± .524</td>
<td>4.74 ± .364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>.050*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant difference at .05 (p < .05). The variances were equaled (p > .05) for comparison of scores. LOHC: level of health condition.

Table 4: Correlations between level of health condition, support system and GPA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GPA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOHC</td>
<td>.147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. LOHC: Level of health condition; GPA: academic achievement
Discussion

While a well-documented involvement in sports will benefit physical and mental health (Markelj, 2010; Snedden et al., 2018), it has been found that the level of health condition and academic performance among the university student-athletes was not correlated. Even so, the level of health condition score was high (4.69 ± .369), which revealed that the students agreed that the participation in sports is a tool in improving health physically and mentally. The mean score is considered high because it is in the range of 4.21 till 5.00 (Pimentel, 2010). In addition, the academic achievement of the students was excellent, with a majority of them possessing a CPA greater than 3.00. Student-athletes who aim to play at the professional level are adamant that the association with playing sports could be negatively related to their academic performance, however, this did not occur among the very studious participants. The outdated idea was found in the study by Hewitt (2002), where more intense athletic movement leads to stronger athletic identity and weaker academics. The student-athletes who are involved in sport and spend more time in training may drop the academic performance as they are giving too much importance to participation. However, in this study, the students have good academic performance with a majority of them possessing a GPA greater than 3.00. Student-athletes who are involved in sport and spend more time in training may drop the academic performance as they are giving too much importance to participation. However, in this study, the students have good academic performance with a majority of them possessing a CPA greater than 3.00 GPA every semester. Thus, this explains a lot on the great academic achievement among the participants.

A study by Farez (2017) has supported that participation in sport is one way to increase the physical and mental health quality of the student-athletes. It is also reported in a research that students’ who participated in sports had lower depression scores (Snedden et al., 2018). Furthermore, Rees and Sabia (2010) showed that there was a significant relationship between health condition and academic performance, in which participation in sports were associated with the students’ academic performance. By participating in sports, they support that the physical health of the students are improved as well as their academic performance. On health perspectives, the involvement in sports not only develop the physical appearance and fitness, but it also encourages student-athletes to have better self-discipline, mental alertness, and it helps them to develop more confidence (Razak, Abd Jabar & Wahid, 2012). From the mental health aspect, university students who are involved in sport are reported to be more stable; these athletes agree that sport helps a student to reduce stress, thus, it helps him or her to score in academics. There is a study which stated that a student who was involved in sport had the tendency to consume a balanced nutrition compared to students who did not engage in sports (Snedden et al., 2018). Individuals who engage in sport will consume a balanced nutrition because they need to control their calorie deficit to maximise their performance in the sport (Leonarda et al., 2018). Therefore, these factors may possibly help the student-athlete to live a sustainable healthy lifestyle.

In the present study, the result showed that there was no significant difference in the support system between males and females among the student-athletes population. Both genders received an equal support system, however not in perceived level of health condition. Female perceived greater health than males. Females at all ages were reported to be less active than the males (Halliday et al., 2019; van Uffelen et al., 2017; Edward & Sackett, 2016). However, the females were reported being more proactive and engaged in seeking, gaining and discussing health-related issues (Renahy, Parizot & Chauvin, 2010; Wellstead, 2011). The female athletes
in this study were more concerned and believed that level of health was as important as participating in sports.

Sport helps to increase the blood flows to the brain, thus causes an increase in mental alertness, enhances learning and memory, self-esteem, self-confidence, social development and reduces the feeling of loneliness and depression (Bakir & Kangalgil, 2017; Montecalbo-Ignacio, Iii, & Buot, 2017). From the physical health aspect, it is reported by a study that females have a higher mean in total health problems than males (WHO, 2008; Stefan, 2015). This result can be related to the findings on females’ tendency to exercise more than males because of the perception that sport participation helps students to improve their health. Therefore, the present study indicated that the female athletes were more concerned with their level of health condition, thus believing that sports influenced them in achieving good health.

The present study has revealed that the support system of the student-athletes is not differentiated by gender. Even so, the mean score for both males and females were considered high. This indicates that the support system that is received among the university student-athletes from their surroundings are similar and high regardless of gender. A study by Eskiler and Küçükibiş (2019) has also reported that both males and females have received similar social support (friends) in motivation for participating in physical activities. The study emphasises on the supportive atmosphere that would allow people to participate in physical exercises. The results are high due to peer environments and sports cultures within organisations and places where physical activities and sports are encouraged and promote fun, as such acts encourage the determination to participate in physical activity. There is no harm if it is assumed that this was experienced too among the student-athletes in the present study. Sport involvement have many positive influence, thus it is a good point for parents, teacher, friends and university should support the student-athlete to pursue their passion in sport.

In the relationship between support system and the level of health condition and academic performance, no significant was found. The support system included the parents, university, coaches, teammates, lecturers and friends. In contrast, one study reported that the influence of the parent was the highest on academic achievement of the athletes (Yusof, Chuan & Shah, 2013). Even though the behaviour of parents, teammates, coaches and socialisation can influence the academic achievement of the student-athletes, the student-athletes in this study experience them differently. The academic performance was not influenced by their support system. The support system of the students has revealed a good score, which is sufficient to claim that they are in good hands. The mean score for the relationship between academic performance were (4.19 ± .503). Thus, this indicates that student-athletes have agreed that support system influence them in their sport involvement.

Sport participation has shown to be influenced by friends or their partners in making the decision to pursue sport and recreational activities (Kubayi, Jooste, Toriola, & Paul, 2014; Macdonald-Wallis, Jargo & Sterne, 2012) In addition, involvement in sport helps to form meaningful friendship that eases the burden of being a student-athlete in university (Sneddden et al., 2018). Peers’ academic performance has strong explanatory power for academic performance which means friends have helped these student-athletes to perform better in academic performance using various types of communication. Other studies show that students who participate in sport are more successful in academic achievement and feel that they are
more supported by the adults within their academic community. They also state that family support, teacher, community support and school safety have helped them to score a higher GPA (Van Boekel et al., 2016).

Positive support and encouragement for emotional aspects, and sociable parents are considered as crucial to the motivation and success of the student-athlete in combining sport and education, whereas negative parental attitudes can put student-athletes at the risk of psychosocial attitudes challenges, and to drop out from sport or academia. There was also a common misconception that lecturers only care about the performance of the students in the classroom, while athletic coaches only care about the performance of the students in the field (Farez, 2017). The outcome, however, that is shown in this study indicates that the student-athletes agree that lecturers and coaches care for both academic and sports success.

The university also plays role in the support system; a study report that scholarship offered by the university influences the student-athletes in their sport participation (Medic et al., 2007). Student-athletes depend on allowance and scholarships to survive during their student years. To attain improvements in the students' performance, be it athletics and academics, the efficiency of a sports facility and the university environment play a huge role (Daud et al., 2013). The present study found that the great support that was given to student-athletes was a good motivation for them to keep playing sports and to perform in academics.

As has been well-documented, sports involvement has a positive influence on memory as well as a concentration in education and improve learning efficacy, it is a good point for parents, teacher, friend and university to support the student-athlete to pursue their passion in sport (Van Boekel et al., 2016). Due to the university setting, peer pressure has also become a reason for these athletes to pursue their desire in athletic during their university years (Jõesaar, Hein, & Hagger, 2011). Therefore, the present study has shown that the student-athletes could receive the same support from their environment in their sports participation, thus, gender was not a manipulating factor.

**Conclusion**

There are various types of support system that influence student-athletes to be involved in sports. Parents, lecturers, coaches, and friends can be a reason for these student-athletes to stay in a sport related career. From the findings in the present study, the university, parents, and other surrounding environments should keep motivating and supporting local universities student-athletes to be involved in sports. It is recommended for university to organise more sports events and recreational activities for students to participate in. As has been revealed in the present study that the student-athletes’ level of health and condition are high, the non-student athletes should be advised to be involved in sports activities.

For future studies, experience in sports and the level of sports achievement should be incorporated in the assessment of the level of health condition and support system in order to further explore on their influence on academic performance. Other demographics information such as the number of years in sport involvement, scholarship and the type of sport should be explored further in relation to these variables.
Acknowledgement
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