



Global Conference on Business and Economics Research (GCBER) 2017
14-15 August 2017, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Studying Audit in UiTM: Challenges and Preferred Learning Styles from Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Previous accounting education literature documents mixed evidence regarding student's perception and opinion on accounting. The perceptions will influence learning and performance. Auditing, as a sub-set of the accounting discipline can be presented as an organized system, by which the auditor's tasks can be broken down into a series of steps such as planning, tests of controls, substantive tests and statutory matters, in this way the teaching method of lecturing with routine problem solving was found inadequate. The possibility for challenges and difficulties arise, for both students and lecturers, when the educational methodology is inconsistent with the inherent nature of the subject. Therefore the teaching methods must be improved to promote creative thinking and self-development. This study offers three objectives. Firstly, to ascertain the student's perceptions on learning audit course, secondly it aims to identify the preferred teaching methods and lastly, to identify the challenges they faced in learning audit course. Interestingly, our findings suggest positive perception on auditing course. This study also discovered a few challenges in studying audit course, and highlight real case example as a preferred teaching method. This study contributes to the accounting curriculum for designing the best teaching methods for audit course.

Keywords: Accounting education, accounting perception, audit subject, audit challenges

1. INTRODUCTION

Issue of accounting education has been discussed since 1980s. The prominence of students' perceptions has been highlighted by prior research. Accounting play a significant role in forming an accounting stereotypes for students (Saudagaran, 1996; Friedlan, 1995). These perceptions are induced directly by accounting teachers (Byrne and Willis 2005). Past research presents mixed evidence on the perception of accounting. Previous research discovered that introductory accounting students come to the study of accounting with negative perceptions of accounting (Cohen and Hanno, 1993; Saudagaran, 1996; Mladenovic, 2000). These negative stereotypes can cause an adverse and mislead judgments (Bierhoff, 1989) and affect the career decisions (Holland, 1973; Byrne and Willis, 2005).

Even though accounting is regarded as boring and routine (Bougen, 1994), depicted as dull number crunchers and bean counters, Geiger and Olgiby (2000) find that first year financial accounting students held positive perceptions of accounting, and have also been associated with honesty, integrity and competence (Dimnik and Felton, 2006). Therefore, the literature supports the existence of both positive and negative view on accounting.

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Auditing, part of the accounting discipline can be viewed as an organized system, by which the auditor's tasks comprised of planning, tests of controls, substantive tests and statutory matters, in this way the teaching method of lecturing with routine problem solving was found inadequate. The possibility for challenges and difficulties arise when the educational methodology is inconsistent with the inherent nature of the subject. Thus, the teaching methods must be improved to promote creative thinking and self-development.

Audit and Assurance services is one of the core courses, compulsory to all final year accounting students under Bachelor of Accountancy (Honours) in Universiti Teknologi MARA. Some of the topics introduced for this course are MIA by-laws and Company Act 1965 (now revised 2016), liability of auditors, quality control for audit, fraud and error, corporate governance and external auditor, audit risk, materiality, sampling, computerised information system, completing the audit, audit report, group audit, using the work of others, internal auditing, audit related services, other services and current issues in audit to include shariah audit, audit oversight board, expectation gap and audit quality.

A normal teaching method is applied, where lecturers meet students twice in a week. For the first meeting of two (2) hours, lecturer normally provide slide for lecture part, while another one hour is allocated for discussion with students for past exam questions. In line with other courses, the audit course (AUD 689- Audit assurance and services) was evaluated according to 40% on ongoing assessment and another 60% from the final exam. The ongoing assessment comprised of test (15%), quiz (5%), project audit role play (15%), and case study (5%). The audit role play will focus on the audit procedure in normal audit practices.

In relation to the above scenario, this study offers three objectives. First objective is to ascertain students' opinion on audit course. Secondly, it aims to identify the preferred teaching method and third to identify the challenges in learning the audit course. This study is motivated by the need to understand the students' opinion specifically on audit course. This problem is highlighted due to high failure rate (more than 25%) in the past. A lot of efforts have been done such as workshop examination techniques that improved the situation. However, the qualities of the students' result remain unsatisfactory, as most of them only barely passed the course. Furthermore, this study specifically concentrate on audit course where most of the prior research focus on students' perception on accounting as a whole (Ferreira and Santoso, 2008; Byrne and Wilis, 2005; Geiger and Olgiby, 2000). Interestingly, our findings suggest positive perception on auditing course. This study also discovered some challenges in studying audit course, and highlight real case example as a preferred teaching method.

The paper is organized as follows. Section two provides the literature review of the study. This is followed by the research method section. Next, we present the result and discussion. The final section contains the conclusion of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Students' Perceptions on Audit Course

A review of literatures on students' perception on audit course found that student usually have negative stereotypical perceptions of accounting, which in turn, influence the learning approaches they adopt (Mladenovic, 2000). This problem is magnified in auditing education because of the lack of numeric involvement and students' difficulty in grasping the application of the subject area, which contributes to an already demanding learning context (Clikeman, 2012). Maltby (2001) also mentioned negative stereotypical perceptions of students about auditing education such as, the course is boring, disliked and difficult.

Some research found that auditing is a complex task and a difficult course to teach (Jones and Abraham, 2007). One of the major difficulties in the teaching and learning of auditing lies in developing an understanding of the relatedness of the various elements of the curriculum. Other factors that influence the difficulty of the auditing course were noted by Blayney, Kalyuga and Sweller (2010). They commented that the difficulties encountered by novice accountants are caused partially by the quantity of the material that must be learned. Additional important factors are the intrinsic complexity of material and the need to consciously process many interrelated elements of information simultaneously. This is because the novel material in accountancy courses often includes new concepts or formulas that are composed of a great number of elements. In order to understand these concepts and formulas, all of the relevant elements must be processed simultaneously in working memory by the student, thereby generating excessive levels of working memory load due to the narrow limits of change principle (Blayney *et al.*, 2010).

Accounting (and auditing) is double-faceted in that education and training has to accommodate both the academic and the professional. In addition, because it is in the public domain, it may need to serve another master, as its

success is judged not only by what it reports but also by how the public perceives it (Drake, 2011; Howieson, 2003).

There seems to be an expectation gap. Maltby (2001) noted that students expect auditing to be an abstract process of evaluating unambiguous quantitative evidence and not the jumbled reality of collating data from various sources and dealing with conflicts between them that it is. It is therefore evident that students struggle with audit as a course at tertiary level because of various common reasons related to the reason why students choose to study chartered accountancy in the first place. This includes perceptions of the course, the quantity of the theory of which all elements are interrelated and the inherent complexity of the course as well as the teaching of it. It is also true that most of these problems stem from students' expectation gap or a communication gap between the lecturer and the student, which vastly complicates the efficient transfer of knowledge from the experienced audit lecturer to the novice student.

2.2 Challenges in Teaching and Learning an Audit Course

This is consistent with the American Accounting Association finding in 1986, in the Bedford Report that the teaching method of lecturing with routine problem solving is inadequate, because it does not promote creative thinking and self-development.

Some of the previous literatures mentioned that teaching methods should take into account that most students, by the time they end up in audit class, will not have gained any experience in the audit field (Steenkamp and Rudman, 2007; Steenkamp and Von Wielligh, 2011). Also, there is no indication in the existing audit curriculum of provision of opportunities for students to experience the real world of the auditing profession (Dombrowski, 1993), even though educational psychologists of differing schools agree that experience is a vital component of successful learning (Marriott, 2004). Granted that academic studies are not intended to provide practical experience in the full scope of possible auditing areas, as this is the function of traineeship (Steenkamp and Von Wielligh, 2011), there is still the need to add some type of practical exposure to the academic programme, even if it is only simulated (Rudman and Terblanche, 2011).

2.3 Students' Preferred Method of Learning

When discussing effectiveness in teaching, there are no better persons to ask than the students themselves. They can be an important source of information on the quality of teaching and the learning environment if the right questions are asked in the right way.

Students who learn with their preferred learning styles are more likely to gain more knowledge and skills when taught and counseled through their natural or primary style rather than through a style that is secondary or undeveloped, particularly when they are presented with new materials or engage in new experiences (Matthews, 1996). Teaching methods that involve a variety of learning styles may lead to more student success. Students tend to favour surface learning to deep learning (Clikeman, 2012). According to Booth *et al.*, (2000), reasons for this could be due to increasing class sizes, increased student diversity, a culture of "massification".

One of the criticism of the current method of teaching audit is that too much lecturing is done (Maltby, 2001). In this way, an appropriate level of competence is not always transferred to the student. Students do not get the chance to be actively involved in the learning process, but rather are passive recipients. Maltby (2001) advocates that students should rather be assisted towards understanding the role and process of auditing rather than just memorizing of techniques.

A popular method of learning utilized in many business schools to engage students in a more active learning environment is case studies. Case studies have been shown to be superior to lecture and memorization (Bradford and Peck, 1997).

Roleplay is another method that can be utilized to teach audit. Janvrin (2003) used roleplay in the examination of internal control and fraud detection concepts, while Durtschi (2003) used it in a problem-based learning case in forensic auditing. According to Cheuk (2009) the advantage of using the role play as a teaching approach (as opposed to a real-life audit in an organisation) is to avoid throwing students too much at the deep end. In a role play, the instructor can control the learning environment. Another advantage is that it involves minimal upfront reading on the background of the company, unlike a case study approach.

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach using open-ended survey was employed in this study to ascertain students' opinion on audit course as well as to identify the challenges faced by them. Their suggestions on the preferred teaching methods for the audit course were also collected. The surveys were distributed to Bachelor of Accountancy (Honours) students who took up the audit course in UiTM Kelantan for semester March-July 2017. Since the audit course is taught only in their final semester, the data collection process only involved part 8 students. In UiTM, the entire Bachelor of Accountancy (Honours) students had to undergo their practical training while they are in part 7. Therefore, all the participants in this study had gone through practical training for a period of six (6) months.

The open ended survey asked these students to:

1. Provide their opinion on audit course
2. State the challenge (s) faced by them in learning audit course
3. Provide suggestion on way (s) that they think audit course should be taught for effective learning /understanding.

The qualitative information collected during this study was coded and analysed by the researcher using Microsoft Excel.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forty eight (48) Bachelor of Accountancy (Honours) students who enrolled in audit course for semester Mar-July 2017 participated in the open-ended survey in which 32 participants (66.7%) are female and the remaining 16 participants (33.3%) are male. Majority of the participants are from group 8B (45.8%) and 43.7% from group 8C indicate that almost all of participants are being taught by the same lecturer.

Surprisingly, despite the negative stereotypical perceptions of auditing as notified in the previous literatures (Maltby, 2001; Mladenovic, 2000) majority (32 / 66.7%) of the participants in this study provided positive perceptions on the audit course. Even though in general the participants mutually agreed that audit course is difficult, twenty three (23 /47.9%) of the participants still identified the audit subject as 'interesting' while nine (9/18.8%) participants stated that audit subject is a 'good' subject to learn. Only eight (8/16.7%) participants truly agreed that the audit subject is either 'challenging' (2 /4.2%) or 'difficult' (4/8.3%). Meanwhile the remaining participants (8/16.7%) only provide general opinions instead of their own opinions the course. The practical training underwent by the participants (Drake, 2011; Howieson 2003) as well as having experienced audit lecturers (Maltby, 2001) could generate such interests.

However, despite of the practical training experiences, only thirteen (13/41%) from thirty two (32) participants who provided good perceptions on the audit course because of its usefulness and relation to the auditing profession. While others (19 /59%) still demonstrate some struggle in learning audit course even though they identified it to either be a 'good' or 'interesting' course. Therefore, the effectiveness of the practical training experiences towards learning audit course could be evaluated in the future research. Among the opinions shared by the participants are given below.

"It is very interesting and I can relate with what I have been working for the past 6 months [during] training work. Thus it can be applied and this subject will useful in the future development". (Student#43)

"Audit is an interesting course which involves ethical behaviour also supreme knowledge of accounting in doing auditing work". (Student#34)

"Interesting and good for knowledge to be auditor in future". (Student#7)

"It [is] interesting but too much to memorise. I love audit subject but it difficult to me to memorise all the things especially the small things". (Student#47)

"In my opinion it interesting but hard to memorise and hard to 'just use common sense' because more fact and MIA by Law". (Student#48)

4.1 Challenges

In consistence with the previous literature (Jones and Abraham 2007; Blayney et al., 2010) more than half of the participants (26/54%) identified difficulty in understanding the audit course as the main challenge faced by them. Another fourteen (14/29.2%) of the participants admitted that they were having difficulties in memorising the

course learnt. Additionally, since all lectures in UiTM including the audit lectures are conducted in English, sixteen (16/33.3%) of the participants mentioned that the problems of understanding and memorising audit subject is due to the English language and terminology utilised.

“Not understand some sentence/and cases in the book or MIA-by law because high level of English”. (Student#2)

“High level of English in MIA-by-laws and a little bit hard to understand”. (Student#4)

“Too much theories and sometimes it hard to understand because it use[d] a complicated English terms”. (Student#28)

“The language of the audit term is difficult to understand and I need to read it and based on several of resources”. (Student#43)

This is in accordance with Harb and El-Shaarwi (2008) that identified students’ competency in English is the most important factor that would affect students’ performance. On the other hand, thirteen (13/27.1%) of the participants stated that there are having difficulties in relating the course learnt to the real life practices and case studies given during lectures as well as in the final examination. Again, the effectiveness of the practical training experiences need to be evaluated in further details to identify its contribution to students’ learning process.

4.2 Preferred Teaching Method

According to Steenkamp and Rudman (2007) and Steenkamp and Von Wielligh (2011) audit teaching methods should take into account that most students had no experience in the auditing field prior to them joining the auditing class. Conversely, unlike Dombrowski (1993) that state some auditing curriculum are lacking the opportunities for students to experience the real world, the Bachelor of Accountancy (Honours) offered by UiTM requires all the students in the programme to undergo practical training as part of the academic requirements. In agreement with Steenkamp and Rudman (2007) and Steenkamp and Von Wielligh (2011) five (5) participants notified that they can understand the course better when they can relate it to the experiences they had during their internship. Despite of the existence of participants’ practical training there are still twelve (12) participants that required the teaching lecturers to provide real case examples and scenarios to assist their understanding in learning audit course. Meanwhile eight (8) participants suggested site visit to audit firms as an alternative to classroom lectures.

“Teach using simple explanation to make more understanding. Give example of real audit work not only the theory”. (Student #7)

“The audit subject should be taught in a way that capture the students by relate[ing] the topic with the current situation and example of real example so that student can have the real picture of the situation”. (Student#38)

“My suggestion on how audit subject should be taught for effective learning/understanding are: (1) Should be exposed to the real audit work as an main examples. (2) One day seminar of auditing work by audit profession. (3) Site visit in audit firm to get understanding on real audit work being carried out”. (Student#34)

Consequently, nature of their practical training experiences which not necessarily concentrated on audit work but also included taxation, financial and accounting services contribute to such preferred teaching method. The participants might not have enough audit exposure during their internship. Therefore, further investigation on their internship employment could provide further justification of their preference.

Table 1. Preferred teaching method for audit subject as mentioned by the participants.

Preferred Teaching Method	Frequency
Real case examples	12
Graphics and Diagram	9
Site visit to audit firm	8
Group Discussions	7
Mind Map	6
Practical Training	5
Past years Questions	5
Language	4
Video	1
Story telling	1
Seminar	1
Role play	1
Colourful slides	1
Brief presentation	1

In support of the having language as one of the challenges faced by the participants in learning audit course four (4) participants suggested the use of simple language could assist their understanding process. Nine (9) participants recommended the used of graphics and diagram to assist teaching audit course. Most of the participants recommended the used of graphics, diagrams, mind map and video to capture students interest and to keep the classroom environment lively and not too boring.

5. CONCLUSION

The design and delivery of the best teaching method for audit course is a challenging task for the lecturers. The way the students perceived on the audit course will highlight the direction on the teaching methods preferred by them. This study identify the students' opinion on the audit course in UiTM, ascertain the challenges they faced in studying audit course and identify the preferred teaching method. Students perceived audit course with positive opinion and they highlight the challenges they experienced in learning audit such as high level of English in MIA by-Laws, the difficulty in audit term and full of theories. This study also documents that 'real case example' as the preferred teaching method requested by students. This study contributes to the accounting pedagogy, by highlighting the preferred teaching method to be used by lecturers. The importance of the study also calls for accounting curriculum to consider both methods in learning approach, deep and surface approach.

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