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EXPLORING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
ACADEMIC READING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN  
MALAYSIA

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**Abstract:**

Reading academic textbooks offers numerous benefits to university students, such as enhancing their knowledge, fostering critical thinking, and promoting classroom engagement. Despite these advantages, there is a dearth of research investigating students' perceptions of textbook use, particularly in a Malaysian context. To address this gap, the current study aims to explore student perceptions at a Malaysian university. Employing a qualitative research methodology, the study gathered data through reflection papers written by students on the subject matter, which were subsequently analyzed using a thematic approach. Two main themes emerged: the 'Importance of Reading' and the 'Constraints of Reading.' The former theme encompassed elements such as knowledge enhancement, critical thinking, and career development, as well as aiding performance in exams and assignments. Conversely, the latter theme revealed constraints like a lack of encouragement from educators, the perception that books are non-essential, and barriers related to time, finances,

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language proficiency, and limited capabilities. Additionally, some students expressed concerns that relying too heavily on textbooks could restrict their intellectual freedom. These issues are elaborated further in the discussion section of the paper.

**Keywords:**

Academic Reading, University Student, Qualitative Study

## Introduction

University students are frequently given a list of books and articles that they are encouraged to read. This type of material is referred to as assigned reading (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). And no one can deny the significance of student compliance with academic requirements. reading. Which improves their understanding of course materials and the amount of information they can retain from the lecturer (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Sappington et al., 2002). It also helps them become more involved in class discussions (Leeming, 2002) Reading serves more than just academic success; it also provides them with skills and abilities that will help them succeed in the workforce (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011).

However, the research presents a complex picture of students' reading habits. One body of work indicates a significant decline in the amount of reading done by students (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000), with some studies suggesting that students engage with their academic texts for fewer than three hours per week (Clump et al., 2004; Sikorski et al., 2002). In contrast, other research points to much higher estimates, indicating that students spend an average of 9.7 hours (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 1994) to 10.9 hours (Mokhtari et al., 2009) per week on reading. St Clair-Thompson et al., (2018) caution that these figures may vary depending on whether the time is primarily spent on preparing assignments, completing guided or assigned reading, or carrying out independent reading. They also note that it is unclear if reading time changes to academic expectations or course requirements. Additionally, a study by the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) raises concerns about literacy levels, finding that most students who have earned a bachelor's degree are not proficient in reading.

## Literature Review

The observed decline in reading is not confined to any specific field; it is a cross-disciplinary issue. Studies have highlighted this trend in a range of academic areas, including business (Artis, 2008), philosophy (Brost & Bradley, 2006), sociology (J. R. Howard, 2004), education (Carney et al., 2008), and science (Jensen & Moore, 2008).

Various theories have been proposed to elucidate the underlying reasons for students' inconsistent engagement with academic reading. One such explanation, put forth by Nolen (1996), attributes the issue to a fundamental mismatch between the objectives of the lecturer and those of the student. Specifically, if a student's primary aim is merely to pass exams and they find that they can accomplish this without engaging with the assigned reading, it should come as no surprise that they opt to forgo this academic task.

Another salient factor contributing to this phenomenon is the lack of motivation to engage with academic texts, which often demand a significant and deliberate effort to comprehend. As Rothkopf (1988) notes, academic reading may not be the most stimulating activity, especially

when compared to alternative leisure pursuits like video gaming or social media interactions. The substantial time investment required for thorough reading further amplifies the perception among some students that the activity is not worth the effort.

Additional layers of complexity are introduced by external commitments and distractions, as pointed out by studies from Hoeft (2012) and McMinn et al. (2009). These researchers argue that the issue might also be related to students being preoccupied with other responsibilities and activities, making it challenging for them to allocate sufficient time for academic reading.

Further complicating matters is the issue of comprehension. Several studies have identified specific challenges that students face when attempting to read academic literature. For instance, Alghail & Mahfoodh (2016) and Anwar & Sailuddin (2022) emphasize that navigating complex vocabulary is a substantial hurdle for many students. Another study by Hirano (2015) raises the concern that an absence of sufficient background knowledge can make it particularly difficult for students to manage their assigned readings effectively.

Lastly, Satriani (2018) introduces the notion that some students may lack fundamental reading skills to begin with, making the task of engaging with academic materials even more daunting.

The issues also might be related to student perception regarding academic reading as something as something painful and dull (Harl & Jolliffe, 2008). Others believe that many students do not understand the role of academic reading. Based on what (Brost & Bradley, 2006) noted, almost half of the assigned readings have not been used by the faculty in any apparent way during or within the class. However, (Derryberry & Wininger, 2008) suggest three types of motivation that may explain why some students engage in reading while others do not. These motivations were the need for cognition (individual inclination toward the enjoyment of deep thinking), goal orientation (whether the individual is mastery-oriented or performance-oriented), and the self-determination theory (which includes autonomy, competence, and relatedness).

Different approaches were proposed to develop students' engagement with academic reading one of them is providing weekly quizzes regarding the assigned reading (Johnson & Kiviniemi, 2009). Another approach is reading questions which require students to generate questions before reading the passage (if they are familiar with the topic) or after reading it (if they are not familiar with it) (Van Blerkom et al., 2006).

Previous studies explore students' perceptions of academic textbooks. Found that many students recognize the role of books in building knowledge (Marek & Christopher, 2011). However, the same article notes a large segment of student who was aversive to the idea of building knowledge through books. Another study presents a paradoxical perception of students and faculty members. While both strongly agree that undergraduate studies should aim to make students proficient at reading, one-half of students and lecturers noted that lecturers would receive a negative evaluation if they assigned a lot of reading (P. J. Howard et al., 2018), issues have been discussed in another study as well (Lei et al., 2010). However, in Howard's study, students were five times more likely to agree that they could learn what they needed without completing their assigned reading. Howard's findings were like another study where students also recognize the role of reading and its importance, however, they still do not read (Berry et al., 2011). Another study (Stokes & Martin, 2008) shows tutors perceive the

reading list as guidance for the students, generating the transition from novice to expert. While students perceive it as an instrument to fulfil their course requirements.

In light of the intricate attitudes and challenges concerning academic reading among university students, the primary objective of the current study is to provide a comprehensive exploration of students' perceptions toward assigned textbooks and reading lists. Employing qualitative research methodologies, we seek to delve into two key dimensions: first, to better understand students' attitudes concerning the role, importance, and utility of textbooks in both their academic and broader personal and professional development; and second, to identify and dissect the specific barriers that impede students from effectively engaging with their assigned reading materials.

This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on academic reading in multiple ways. It not only synthesizes various strands of existing research, ranging from motivational factors to skill-based challenges and external commitments, but also introduces new variables like digital distractions and language barriers that have yet to be fully explored. Additionally, by incorporating qualitative insights, this study aims to offer a nuanced, contextual understanding that can serve to enrich educational strategies, guide institutional policies, and provide a solid foundation for future studies on academic reading practices in higher education.

### Methodology

In the present study, we employed a qualitative research methodology to gain deeper insights into the complexities of the issue at hand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were gathered through a questionnaire administered to students as a course requirement in a specific subject. The questionnaire comprised the following key questions:

1. What is Table 4?
2. Have you read any textbooks recommended by your lecturers in Table 4? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. Do you believe that reading university textbooks should be mandatory for all students?

For data analysis, we adopted a thematic approach, specifically the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis unfolded in several stages:

1. Familiarization: Initially, we thoroughly reviewed the data multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding.
2. Initial Coding: Subsequently, we developed a set of preliminary codes that captured key elements in the data.
3. Iterative Review: The data were revisited, with new codes being introduced and existing ones being either refined, merged, or removed, as necessary.
4. Theme Development: From the refined codes, we identified and constructed overarching themes and sub-themes that encapsulated the core insights.
5. Reporting: Finally, we synthesized and presented our findings.

It is worth noting that ChatGPT was utilized as an analytical aid in this process (Hassani & Silva, 2023).

## Findings

**Table 1: The Themes and Sub-Themes of The Findings**

Theme	Sub-theme
Importance of textbook	Academic Enhancement Skill and personal development Professional Growth
Constraint	No encouragement Books are not essential Financial and time limit actions limited capabilities

After analyzing students' responses, we identified two main themes which are the importance of the textbook and constraint.

### Theme 1: Importance of Textbook

Some students assume that reading the recommended textbook will help them expand their knowledge. One student, for example, believes that textbooks provide a deeper level of understanding. It is regarded as a reliable source for obtaining a full overview of a certain topic.

*“Furthermore, it helps gain a deeper understanding of the suggested book. Textbooks are a valuable source of information and provide a more comprehensive overview of a specific topic than other study materials” (Student 4).*

Furthermore, students believe that textbooks help them understand concepts and theories, which will ultimately improve their exam performance. One student points out that reading these textbooks is important because some exam questions will be based on them. Other students emphasize the importance of textbooks in assisting them with their assignments.

*“They contain information about key theories, concepts, and examples that might be tested in the exams, which is why students should read the recommended textbooks to be better prepared for examinations” (Student 4).*

*“By reading the recommended textbooks, also makes it easier for us to refer to and cite for coursework assigned by the lecturer. Additionally, reading the recommended textbooks can help us obtain solid content for the work assigned” (Student 8).*

The importance of recommended textbooks is underscored by their relevance to course content. Students believe that their lecturers curate these reading lists to closely align with the curriculum topics, allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the lecture material.

*“This is because the books recommended by the lecturers closely relate to the learning topics, we will study” (Student 4).*

*“Most of the information and knowledge taught by lecturers are similar to what's available in textbooks, and sometimes the information is clearer and easier to understand” (Student 1).*

Moreover, students point out that textbooks serve to streamline the instructor's teaching process. They facilitate better class participation and consequently enrich both teaching and learning experiences.

*“With the availability of textbooks, students' movement to meet their lecturers is reduced because the required information is already available in the textbooks” (Student 1).*

*“Using teaching materials is deemed essential in the teaching process. For lecturers, using teaching materials can help accelerate the teaching and learning process for students, in addition to helping them teach in a more organized manner” (Student 12).*

On another note, textbooks also contribute to the cultivation of critical thinking and creativity among students. These books enable students to be more open-minded and holistically developed, touching upon cognitive, spiritual, and emotional facets.

*“Another importance of reading in universities is to help enhance students' critical and creative thinking. From a developmental perspective, reading can aid cognitive growth and strengthen memory. For adults, reading can help open their minds and prevent them from being narrow-minded” (Student 1).*

*“Therefore, textbooks apply the National Education Philosophy that leads to the development of a balanced and harmonious person in terms of intellect, spirit, emotion, and physique” (Student 3).*

*“Moreover, university textbooks contain up-to-date information. Current issues help students analyse matters impacting themselves, society, and the nation. Students are sensitive to current global issues” (Student 6).*

In addition to cognitive and personal development, textbooks assist in language acquisition and proficiency. Students note that these texts help improve vocabulary and contribute to a more nuanced command of the language.

*“Making it obligatory for students to read university textbooks can also help them in proper language usage and mastery. This is because when reading, we learn new words or phrases from the book” (Student 8).*

*“In my opinion, I believe that reading university textbooks should be mandatory for all students. This is because the practice of reading among students can enhance their mastery and understanding of the language” (Student 1).*

*“Additionally, reading the textbooks from 'Table 4' can expand one's vocabulary. This is because selecting reading materials can enhance language proficiency due to the vocabulary acquired. Indirectly, reading the textbooks from 'Table 4' can build self-confidence and courage to speak” (Student 10).*

Lastly, textbooks are deemed instrumental in preparing students for their future careers. They not only equip students with the requisite skills but also provide practical exercises and case studies for real-world application.

*“Lastly, these textbooks can give us an advantage. Reading them makes it easier for us to gain an edge in the professional world. Universities aim to prepare students for their future careers, and with the textbooks recommended by lecturers, students can acquire the knowledge and skills they desire” (Student 15).*

*“This can help me better understand how different concepts are related to each other and build upon one another. Moreover, textbooks often include additional resources such as case studies, examples, and exercises that can help me apply the concepts I’m learning to real-world situations. This can help me better understand how the subject matter relates to practical situations and can enhance my problem-solving skills” (Student 14).*

## **Theme 2: Constraints**

Some students contend that textbooks aren't crucial for academic success due to the availability of alternative resources. One student mentioned that their lecturer primarily relies on electronic slide presentations that are uploaded to the University Malaysia Sabah Learning Management System, rendering the textbook unnecessary.

*“I have never read the textbooks listed by the lecturer in Table 4 as recommended. This is because my lecturer only uses slide presentations during lectures and uploads slides by topic arranged for each lecture to the Learning Management System” (Student 7).*

*“Most of my lecturers do not recommend textbooks, but they advise me to read books in the library related to the subject” (Student 2).*

Others argue that we are living in a modern age where information is readily accessible through various means, making the use of textbooks somewhat archaic.

*“Instead, students need to demonstrate a new way of thinking where seeking information and knowledge is not just from textbooks because this era is modern and sophisticated” (Student 2).*

*“In my opinion, making it mandatory for all university students to read textbooks is not appropriate. I hold this view because if students are required to read textbooks, it seems as if university students are still at the secondary school level. This approach indeed pampers students in terms of information-seeking when carrying out tasks or research” (Student 2).*

Several students suggest that lectures alone are sufficiently informative, and they question the efficacy of enforcing a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, given individual learning preferences.

*“In my opinion, lecturers do not recommend any textbooks because what is presented in lectures is sufficient for us to understand the syllabus and teachings conveyed” (Student 2)*

*“However, some students may prefer to learn in other ways, and forcing them to read textbooks may not be the most effective approach” (Student 14).*

*“Therefore, reading university textbooks depends on each student's circumstances and objectives. Other learning methods are also vital and should be considered based on students' preferences and learning goals” (Student 4).*

Time and financial limitations emerged as significant obstacles in students' views on the use of textbooks. These books are often extensive and can be costly, thereby exacerbating the academic and financial strains that students are already under. One student specifically pointed out that expecting students to read entire textbooks is unrealistic due to their voluminous nature. Another set of students highlighted an alternative to textbooks, emphasizing their reliance on

freely accessible lecture slides as a more budget-friendly approach to learning. This way, they can circumvent the financial burden that comes with purchasing expensive textbooks.

*“I also believe that while university textbooks should be mandatory for all students, they shouldn't be expected to read the entire book. Students should be wise and read only the essential parts related to the studied topics. This is because, generally, it's known that most university textbooks have many pages and take a long time to finish” (Student 8).*

*“No. This is because every student has their stance on reading textbooks at the University. Some students might not read the textbook due to their tight schedules, such as participating in various activities like faculty programs, co-curricular activities, and so on. This can add to their workload, potentially leading to stress” (Student 9).*

*“As a student studying at a public university, I believe that not all students can afford textbooks due to their high prices. Therefore, I usually read the slides provided by the lecturer or search for information on the internet” (Student 7).*

*“Additionally, making textbooks mandatory could create financial barriers for some students who may not be able to afford the cost of purchasing textbooks” (Student 14).*

Language barriers and individual comprehension skills were also cited as additional challenges. Not all students are comfortable with the language used in textbooks, and comprehension can vary widely among individuals.

*“Furthermore, each student has different comprehension capabilities. For example, some students easily grasp a concept naturally, while others struggle to understand a concept even after repeated explanations. This difference leads some students to choose not to read the recommended university textbooks” (Student 5).*

*“One of the drawbacks I found while reading the recommended textbooks is the difficulty in understanding some words used in the textbook because the writing is in English. Some terms are especially hard, mainly when they are old English terms different from modern English” (Student 5).*

Lastly, some students expressed concerns that relying solely on textbooks could limit intellectual growth by discouraging the exploration of diverse ideas and perspectives.

*“Indirectly, it narrows the scope of students' information, which becomes limited only to the information available in textbooks. Students might assume that all the information in the textbooks is sufficient, even though the knowledge in a particular field is much broader. This situation prevents students from progressing and keeps them stuck in old ways” (Student 2).*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This current article explores student perceptions regarding the use of assigned textbooks in their courses, focusing on two key dimensions. The first dimension concerns student attitudes toward the significance of these textbooks, while the second examines the challenges that impede students from engaging with the assigned material.

Assigned textbooks serve as vital resources, enabling students to deepen their understanding of the subject matter, as they are meticulously curated by educators to cover relevant course content. Furthermore, textbooks offer more than just factual knowledge; they also facilitate the



development of critical and creative thinking skills. This observation is consistent with prior research on students' perceptions of academic textbooks (Marek & Christopher, 2011).

Beyond academic development, students recognize the role of textbooks in contributing to their personal and professional growth. Nevertheless, from a pragmatic standpoint, many students view textbooks primarily as tools for fulfilling course requirements, aiding them in exam preparation and assignment completion. This instrumental view aligns with findings by Stokes & Martin (2008), who also observed that students often regard textbooks as mere means to meet academic goals.

However, the study also unearthed various reasons why students might not engage with their textbooks. A primary issue is the absence of strong endorsement or encouragement from lecturers. Some students noted that educators neither directly nor indirectly recommend utilizing the textbook, perhaps assuming that it is not necessary. This observation resonates with Vedder's (2019) discussion, where he and other educators were found to reduce the volume of required reading over time. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of grade inflation, whereby contemporary students, even high achievers, are completing less reading and work than their predecessors while receiving similar or higher grades.

In addition, students cited time constraints and financial limitations as barriers to reading textbooks. Work overload is a known challenge in higher education (Paewai et al., 2007). Interestingly, the claim of limited time seems to clash with the notion of grade inflation. We hypothesize that the real issue may not be a lack of time, but rather how students opt to allocate it, such as towards social media and video gaming. Twenge (2017) supports this hypothesis, stating that students today spend less time on academic work and part-time jobs, redirecting some of this time to smartphones and social media. The claim of financial constraints also raises questions, given the availability of free or low-cost textbooks online.

Another layer of complexity comes from students' diverse preferences for learning material. Some students argue that not everyone prefers to read textbooks; hence it is unreasonable to have such an expectation. However, the idea that educational methods should be tailored to individual learning styles has been largely debunked, despite its enduring popularity (Dembo & Howard, 2007; Kirschner, 2017; Nancekivell et al., 2020; Newton, 2015).

Additionally, the study identifies language barriers as a significant obstacle for students from non-English speaking countries, complicating their interaction with the textbook due to unfamiliar vocabulary and grammatical structures (Miller, 2011; Nguyen, 2023; Tiwari, 2022). This challenge may also be associated with a general lack of reading proficiency among university students (Gorzycki et al., 2016; You-hong, 2011).

Lastly, some students reported difficulties in grasping the concepts presented in the textbooks, even after multiple readings. This could point to broader issues of academic preparedness, particularly as universities expand their enrolment, potentially diluting the overall quality of the student body, but not necessarily the proportion of less-prepared students (Sahami & Piech, 2016).

In summary, this study enriches our understanding of the role and challenges of assigned reading in higher education. While it adopts a qualitative approach, thereby limiting its

generalizability and potentially introducing biases, it offers valuable insights. One limitation to consider is the use of student assignments as data sources, which may or may not reflect their genuine opinions, but rather what search engines or AI like Google and ChatGPT suggest.

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