

Planning a Study Pathway: Reflection and Goal Setting in Higher Education

Ross Eric Miller

Abstract

Study Pathways was implemented as a means of helping students succeed academically while also helping them plan and prepare for their futures. However, the current implementation has failed to gain traction among a large percentage of the student body. This paper serves as an attempt to address this issue. After describing the current iteration of Study Pathways, there is a discussion on the meaning of academic success, goal types and goal setting. The paper concludes with 11 specific suggestions for a version of Study Pathways 2.0 grounded more firmly in theory backed by research.

While the standards of higher education institutes have always been in a constant state of evolving practices, the transformation from an industrial-based society to a knowledge-based society was so sudden that a clear cultural demarcation point is identifiable between the generations. Where previous generations were educated to better support a society built on industry, this generation will make its advances through the understanding, application, implementation and innovation of information, in effect, creating a Society 5.0 (Hitachi-UTokyo Laboratory, 2020). This means that student needs now are different than before. One difference is that for students to truly benefit from their time at university, they must be cognitively engaged in their own learning and more pro-active in taking the issues, topics, concepts and skills they learn in class and apply them to their own out-of-class interests.

In order to better serve the students of today, the spring of 2022 saw the inaugural semester of the Faculty of International Studies (FIS) at Otemon Gakuin University. As could be expected, this new faculty introduced a new curriculum and new programs designed to provide students with opportunities to develop their language skills, their knowledge of local/global issues, their abilities with ICT and digital communication tools, their understanding of foreign cultures, and the opportunities to focus in areas such as international business, international development and assistance, and English professionalism. Soft skills such as communication, collaboration, and critical

thinking are also developed through both explicit and implicit course work. To help students succeed academically within the program and beyond, each year, students are assigned a faculty member to serve as an Academic Advisor, and several times a year, students are required to complete entries in a document known as Study Pathways. Created by the FIS (2023), Study Pathways is described as a tool to provide students with opportunities to better understand themselves and begin preparing for their future dreams. It is intended to serve several functions, among which include helping students with:

- knowing themselves.
- understanding their own interests.
- being generally successful in university.
- communicating with their academic advisors.
- creating a platform to continually assess, improve, and work towards their own individual goals.

Students are expected to update their individual Study Pathways three times a semester: at the start, in the middle, and upon each semester's completion. While it is premature to evaluate the overall effectiveness of this tool in the long term, with submission rates ranging at about 50% of students in both the first-year and second-year classes, it is worth evaluating what could be improved.

The goal of this paper is to define what is meant by “academic success” and to better understand how goal setting can lead to academic success and then, through that understanding, design a *study pathway* that will better help students forge their own road forwards.

Study Pathways 2022/2023

Study Pathways is intended to help students achieve academic success. As described to students, Study Pathways is a tool for self-determination, self-understanding, and communication with the academic advisor. It is also described as a “telescope” that will help students focus on their desired futures and achieve self-actualization (Faculty of International Studies Otemon Gakuin University, 2023). It proposes that this tool will serve as a pathway for students to successfully move from their current “now” to their desired futures. The intention of Study Pathways is that it will help students better understand their current situation. By clearly describing their future goals, they will have a better understanding of exactly what they want for their future selves and will be better prepared to make the decisions and perform the actions that are necessary to achieve their own definitions of that success. Study Pathways also contains an additional task of defining their own view of “international studies.”

Currently, Study Pathways is an Excel file with different tabs for different semesters. Initially, students must fill out some basic demographic information and list scores on language proficiency tests and any kinds of qualifications they are trying to acquire or have already acquired. The rest of the form is as follows:

- A series of checkboxes with 21 high school subjects where they are told to select the ones they liked.
- A space to write a self-description.
- A series of checkboxes with 22 fields of study where they are told to select the ones they like.
- A space to write about what interests them and/or what they want to study.
- A space to write about the competencies, skills and qualifications they hope to acquire.
- A series of checkboxes with 22 job-related industries where they are told to select the ones they like.
- A space to describe their future perspective, career, and dream.
- A space to write action goals/study plans to achieve that dream (limited to 120 words).
- A space to write roughly 120 words about their impressions or actions related to one of the three chapters they read from a textbook related to global and societal issues.
- A space to write a message to their academic advisor.

For June and September (middle and end of spring semester), they are asked to evaluate their achievement of their action goals (limited to 80 words). The same evaluations are listed for December and March (middle and end of fall semester). Also, they write about a different chapter from their textbook.

Once filled into the Excel sheet, all the essay entries must be copied/pasted into an assignment page on the university's learning management system (LMS).

Academic Success

As students make the transition from high school to an institute of higher education (HEI), it can be safely assumed that students will work towards achieving academic success while at the same time, the institution will have a program in place intended to help students achieve that success. Predictors of academic success are often seen in factors such as “prior academic achievement, student demographics, e-learning activity, psychological attributes, and environments” (Alyahyan & Dustegor, 2020, p.5). With this list, the first two predictors have been locked into place prior to entry into the HEI, while e-learning activity is simply a quantifiable measure of clicks, entries, and page views of

digital materials, with the assumption being that the higher the number, the more likely students would be able to achieve academic success. Psychological attributes include descriptors such as students' interest in the materials, study habits, levels of stress, motivation, self-regulation, and perceptions of overall self-efficacy (Alyahyan & Dustegor, 2020; Morisano et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2015). Environment can refer to the assets inherent in the HEI itself (classes, support systems, facilities, etc.) as well as the learning environment that students create for themselves through eliminating distractions, developing study strategies, and finding study partners that will all help to facilitate learning (Lin et al., 2023). While these attributes can lead to academic success, it is still unclear what it means to succeed academically.

Academic success is a concept that is intuitively easy to grasp, yet the term is not always used to refer to the same items. Kuh et al. (2006) broadly define this type of success as “academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance” (p. 5). In an expansive study regarding the construct of academic success and its measurement, York et al. (2015) pointed out that as academic success tends to be viewed as an outcome, one of the seven items in the above definition does not quite match as student engagement is a contributing factor to the remaining outcomes, and not an outcome in and of itself. In other words, is academic success a measurable outcome such as a test score or GPA, a skill that can be demonstrated, the result of a survey on student satisfaction, or is it a process where students are actively engaged in their own learning and development to achieve some future goal?

In York et al.'s (2015) conceptual model of academic success, they mirror Kuh et al.'s (2006)



Figure 1 York, Gibson, & Rankin Revised Conceptual Model of Academic Success (p.5)

description, except for “engagement”, which was not seen as an outcome of succeeding academically (see Figure 1). For these researchers, engagement was defined as “students’ psychological investment or willingness to invest time in educational behaviors” (p. 5) or as just a general indication of how students interacted with their academic endeavors. While they acknowledge that levels of engagement could be an outcome of experience, they argue that such a variable is generally a specific item of interest rather than a component of academic success.

Goal Types

As the one focus of Study Pathways is student goals, it is important to have an understanding of three major types of goals: behavioral, performance, and learning (Latham & Seijts, 2016). A behavioral goal is not an outcome in and of itself, rather it is observable “behaviors demonstrated within a given period of time” (Latham & Seijts, 2016, p.226) and can only be evaluated when compared with a previous state of time. Performance goals, on the other hand, are specifically about an outcome and are not necessarily tied to the behaviors that were responsible for it. In this sense, behavioral goals are more a matter of degree, while performance goals are more binary: successfully achieved or not. Learning goals are more about acquiring the necessary skills that can lead to setting higher performance goals.

Unlike a performance goal, a learning goal draws attention away from a specific task outcome in that the emphasis is on discovering, mastering, or implementing effective strategies, processes, or procedures necessary to perform a task. (Latham & Seijts, 2016, p.227)

In regard to university students, some examples of behavioral goals might be things like study 2 hours a week, attend every class on time, read one book a month, etc. Performance goals would be more like achieving a 90 or above on a specific test, passing some qualification exam, or attaining a specific GPA. Learning goals are the means to an end and require knowing and learning the foundational skills necessary to achieve a performance goal. Even students with the same performance goal might have different learning goals based on their different backgrounds. For example, if the performance goal is to create an effective web page, a student who had never made one before would need to understand HTML, color theory, and SEO (recognizing several learning goals), where the student with experience in web design could complete the performance goal with little effort, not requiring any intermediary learning goals.

Goal-Setting Theory

Goal setting is related to motivation in that the individual has a desire to accomplish, attain, or achieve (Alessandri et al., 2020). A stated goal is different than a dream in that there is an implication that a goal requires effort and attention where a dream is just a hoped-for state. Contrast “after university, I will go to flight school and study to be a pilot” with “I wish I were a pilot.” The former plans on the necessary learning goal (entering/attending flight school) to achieve the performance goal (becoming a pilot), while the latter lacks any indication of intending to plan how to or expend the effort to becoming a pilot.

Goal-setting theory (GST) is based on the idea “that conscious goals affect action” (Locke & Latham, 2002, p.705). Locke and Latham (2002) identify four ways in which goals influence action:

- They direct attention on achieving the goal.
- Clear goals energize the goal-setter.
- Difficult goals lead to more time and effort spent achieving them.
- The type of goal dictates the type of action taken, be it making use of known skills, adapting known skills, strategizing goal completion, taking on pre-requisite learning goals.

GST states several components that when present, lead to more successful goal achievement.

1. Specific goals are better than non-specific goals in that the specificity provides a clear direction for achievement (Alessandri et al., 2020; Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006).
2. Challenging goals tend to result in higher performance. However, the level of challenge must be manageable. Complex goals can be broken down into more manageable components for more effective results (Alessandri et al., 2020; Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006).
3. Feedback is critical for helping goal-setters achieve their goals. Feedback helps individuals better understand their own progress and helps them with direction for the next stage (Alessandri et al., 2020; Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006).
4. There must be some level of commitment to achieving the goal. Achieving goals, especially challenging ones, take time, and sustained effort over a period of time requires commitment (Alessandri et al., 2020; Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). Commitment can wax or wane in relation to the goal-setters perceived self-efficacy in succeeding at attaining the goal (Kuh et al., 2006; Locke & Latham, 2002).

Discussion

Proper goal setting has been shown to lead to improved academic achievements (outcomes) and student engagement (process) (Alessandri et al., 2020; Locke & Latham, 2006). Factors that negatively impact academic achievements include a low motivation and a lack of specific goals while “individuals with clear goals appear more able to direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities” (Morisano et al., 2010, p.256). The problem is that some goals are more appropriate than others. In a study of 180 university students in Italy, Alessandri et al. (2020) found that self-set goals were only of value when the goals had the proper level of “difficulty and specificity” (p. 9).

The current iteration of the FIS Study Pathways is a good first attempt at trying to promote goal setting among the student population. However, the current format lacks specificity in the kinds of goals students should be setting. Anecdotally, students have complained that they don’t see the point of Study Pathways and one student wrote a well thought out response to one of the prompts but had to cut it because it exceeded the word length, and he was unable to submit it as originally written. The entire task became demotivating to the student as he was not able to submit his complete thoughts. If the purpose is to help students plot a path forward to some future state, then the question asking them to write about one chapter of a required textbook from a specific class seems out of place.

Version 2.0 of Study Pathways should have a clear purpose that is easily understood by the students and the tasks within it should be based on researched theory. Suggested changes are as follows:

- Students should be introduced to the idea of goal setting and the power proper goals can have.
- Students should be taught the difference between behavioral goals, performance goals, and learning goals.
- Students should be guided on making more specific goals before making any initial entries.
- Students should be guided on evaluating and detailing their current behaviors, performance, and learning.
- Students should make specific behavioral goals (study habits, reading, etc.) and performance goals (attendance, homework submission, GPA, etc.).
- Students should list a series of learning goals that must be overcome to achieve their future dream.

- Students should be guided in making appropriately challenging goals.
- For behavioral and performance goals, students should keep a weekly diary of accomplishments (and failures).
- Students should refer to these diaries when updating their Study Pathway.
- To the extent possible, faculty academic advisors should provide regular timely feedback on all the above.
- Finally, the format/medium of Study Pathways should be a tool more conducive to the process of goal-making and reflection than the current system.

It is hoped that with a more challenging and engaging Study Pathways, more students will find value in the task. Learning the value of proper goal setting in university will be a skill they can employ throughout their futures, perhaps one that could prove more valuable than any topic covered in a regular class.

References

- Alessandri, G., Borgogni, L., Latham, G. P., Cepale, G., Theodorou, A., & De Longis, E. (2020). Self-set goals improve academic performance through nonlinear effects on daily study performance. *Learning and Individual Differences, 77*, 101784.
- Alyahyan, E., & Dustegor, D. (2020). Predicting Academic Success in Higher Education: Literature Review and Best Practices Review Article. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 17*, 1-21. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/intjedth17&i=57>
- Faculty of International Studies Otemon Gakuin University. (2023). *Kokusai gakubu "manabi no michishirube (rashinban)" sutadi pathways ni tsuite [Faculty of International Studies: About Study Pathways 'Learning Guidebook (compass)']*.
- Hitachi-UTokyo Laboratory(H-UTokyo Lab.) (Ed.). (2020). *Society 5.0: A People-centric Super-smart Society*. Springer Singapore. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2989-4>
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J. L., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature* (Vol.8). National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Washington, DC.
- Latham, G. P., & Seijts, G. H. (2016). Distinguished Scholar Invited Essay: Similarities and Differences Among Performance, Behavioral, and Learning Goals. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 23*(3), 225-233. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051816641874>
- Lin, S., Mastrokourou, S., Longobardi, C., Bozzato, P., Gastaldi, F. G. M., & Berchiatti, M. (2023). Students' transition into higher education: The role of self-efficacy, regulation strategies, and academic achievements. *Higher Education Quarterly, 77*(1), 121-137. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12374>
- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist, 57*(9), 705.
- Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2006). New directions in goal-setting theory. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 15*(5), 265-268.

- Morisano, D., Hirsh, J. B., Peterson, J. B., Pihl, R. O., & Shore, B. M. (2010). Setting, elaborating, and reflecting on personal goals improves academic performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 95*(2), 255-264. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018478>
- Travers, C. J., Morisano, D., & Locke, E. A. (2015). Self-reflection, growth goals, and academic outcomes: A qualitative study. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 85*(2), 224-241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12059>
- York, T. T., Gibson, C., & Rankin, S. (2015). Defining and measuring academic success. *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation, 20*(1), 5.