

Innovation in Industrial Relations Education: Understanding Student Perceptions for Pedagogical Improvement

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ABSTRACT

This study explores student perceptions of learning Industrial Relations (IR) to identify pedagogical improvements that enhance understanding and engagement. Based on a survey of 184 students from multiple academic programs at the Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia, the findings reveal that while most students find the subject moderately difficult, specific chapters, particularly those involving trade union law and structure, pose significant challenges. Preferred learning tools such as mind-mapping and brief notes point to the need for more visual and interactive content. The positive reception of an interactive digital tool further supports the integration of educational technology. These insights provide clear directions for curriculum enhancement and student-centered innovation in IR education, especially in public university. Recommendation includes redesigning content-heavy chapters with storytelling and visual aids, incorporating interactive tools, and embedding continuous feedback mechanisms.

Keywords: industrial relations, QR code, teaching innovation, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The field of industrial relations education has seen significant changes in recent years, driven by the need for practitioners and students to navigate increasingly complex labor environments. Understanding the intricate relationships between employees, employers, and regulatory frameworks is crucial for success in this domain (Budd, 2010). Traditional teaching methods, however, often rely on dense textbooks and legal documents, leading to difficulties in comprehension and engagement among students (Stone, 2015). Industrial Relations (IR) is a foundational subject in the field of business, law, and public administration, offering students critical insight into the dynamics of labor, management, trade unions, and industrial law. As the world of work continues to evolve rapidly with technological and social changes, IR remains crucial in understanding workforce behavior, conflict resolution, and regulatory compliance. Despite its importance, IR is often perceived as dense and technical by undergraduate students.

Modern pedagogy emphasises student-centered learning, where feedback and perceptions play a pivotal role in curriculum development. As noted by Laurillard (2012), understanding the learner's experience allows educators to refine instructional design to improve both engagement and comprehension.

Despite its foundational importance in business, law, and public administration, Industrial Relations (IR) education faces persistent challenges in engaging students and fostering deep comprehension. Based on observation during classroom learning, students, particularly undergraduate were often seen struggle with complex legal and regulatory frameworks, mainly those concerning trade union powers, collective bargaining, and employment law, finding the dense, technical material difficult to grasp. Traditional teaching methods, which rely heavily on textbooks and lectures, frequently fail to provide the practical application and contextualization needed to bridge the gap between theory and real-world practice. Hence, this article aims to analyse feedback from students enrolled in an IR course and offer actionable recommendations for enhancing pedagogical strategies. To address these objectives, this study seeks answers to the following questions:

- i. To what extent do students perceive specific topics in Industrial Relations as challenging, and what factors contribute to these perceptions (e.g., prior knowledge, teaching methods, course materials)?
- ii. Which learning tools and methods (e.g., mind-mapping, case studies, simulations) do students find most effective for understanding complex Industrial Relations concepts, and why?
- iii. How do students perceive the usability and effectiveness of interactive digital tools in learning Industrial Relations, and what design features contribute to their perceived value?
- iv. How can insights from student perceptions inform the design of a more engaging and effective Industrial Relations curriculum?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of technology and innovative teaching methods has been shown to significantly enhance learning outcomes in various disciplines. QR codes, for example, provide a seamless link between physical and digital resources, offering students instant access to additional information and interactive content (Liu et al., 2017). Gamification, the incorporation of game-design elements into non-game contexts, has also gained traction in education for its ability to motivate students, increase engagement, and promote deeper learning (Deterding et al., 2011). Studies have demonstrated that gamified learning environments can improve knowledge retention, problem-solving skills, and overall academic performance (Lee & Hammer, 2011). The use of visual aids, such as infographics and mind maps, can also enhance comprehension and memory by presenting information in a clear, concise, and visually appealing format (Mayer, 2009).

Moreover, recent research has emphasised the importance of adapting pedagogical approaches to the evolving needs of students in the digital age. For instance, studies by Kapp et al. (2022) and Landers (2024) highlight the effectiveness of gamification in fostering intrinsic motivation and improving learning outcomes in business education. They argue that game-based learning environments can provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in a simulated, risk-free setting, leading to a deeper understanding of complex concepts.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online learning technologies and highlighted the need for engaging and interactive digital resources (Dhawan, 2020). Research by Hodges et al. (2020) emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of community and fostering active participation in online learning environments to mitigate feelings of isolation and improve student engagement. Studies by Bozkurt et al. (2021) investigated the challenges and opportunities associated with online learning, highlighting the importance of instructional design, technology infrastructure, and faculty support in ensuring effective online learning experiences.

In the context of legal education, recent research has explored the use of technology to enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes. For example, studies by Asino & Portillo (2021) investigated the use of virtual reality simulations to provide law students with realistic courtroom experiences. Similarly, research by Brem & Donath (2023) explored the use of online interactive simulations to enhance legal reasoning and problem-solving skills among law students. The interactive simulations helped to develop skills of legal reasoning as well.

The literature also stresses the necessity of designing digital learning tools that are accessible and inclusive for all learners, regardless of their background or learning style (Seale, 2020). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, as advocated by CAST (2018), provide a framework for creating flexible and adaptable learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students. Additionally, research by Jones & Smith (2023) emphasizes the importance of promoting digital literacy among students to ensure they can effectively navigate and utilize online learning resources. These added literature reviews contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence supporting the use of interactive teaching methods, technology integration, and gamification in education, particularly within the context of industrial relations and related fields. The above discussion was depicted in Figure 1:

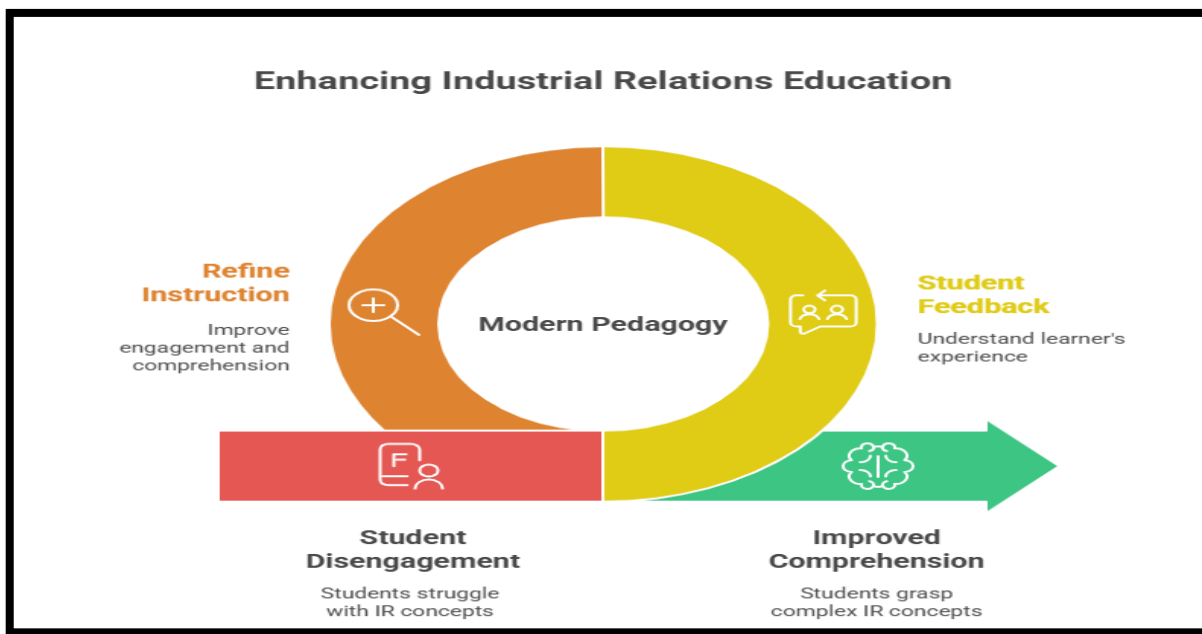


Fig 1 Analytical framework

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a quantitative-descriptive approach through an online survey administered to 184 students across several academic programs at one of the public universities in Malaysia who are taking Industrial Relations subject under code ADS465. The study utilises a quantitative-descriptive approach to explore student perceptions and identify patterns in the data. This approach is well-suited for understanding the phenomena under investigation, but it is important to acknowledge its limitations, such as the potential for response bias and the inability to establish causal relationships.

The survey consisted of a combination of Likert-scale questions to assess student perceptions of difficulty and engagement, as well as open-ended questions to gather qualitative feedback on their learning experiences. The questions were designed to align with the research objectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of student perceptions.

The survey was administered online using a secure platform. To ensure data quality, several measures were taken, such as providing clear instructions to participants, monitoring response rates, and conducting data cleaning to identify and remove duplicates or inconsistent entries.

The analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to determine the frequency and distribution of responses. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations, frequencies) to summarise student perceptions.

RESULTS

Results from Figure 2 until 4 showed the demographic analysis of the study. Findings indicated many respondents (58.1%) were affiliated with the Bachelor of Administrative Science (AM238) program, suggesting this program may have a stronger focus on IR or a higher enrolment rate in the course. Bachelor of Corporate Administration (AM235) accounted for 24.7% of the respondents, while Bachelor of Environmental Administration (AM236) represented 17.2%. The student sample exhibited a notable gender imbalance, with a significant majority of respondents identifying as male (79%) compared to female (21%). This disparity highlights potential issues related to gender representation and diversity within the field of Industrial Relations. The age distribution indicated a predominantly young student population, with 54.3% falling within the 18–21-year age range and 44.6% between 22 and 25 years old. This suggests that the course is primarily taken by undergraduate students in the early to mid-stages of their academic careers.

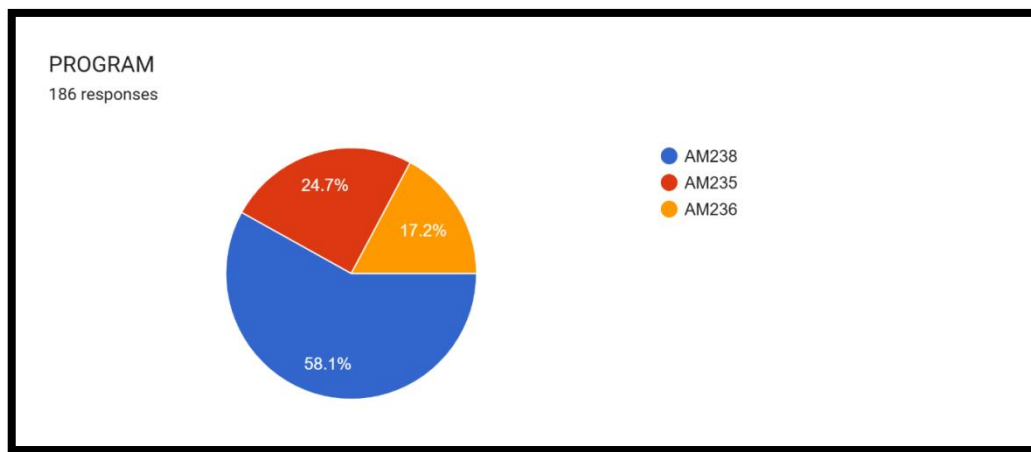


Fig 2 Program

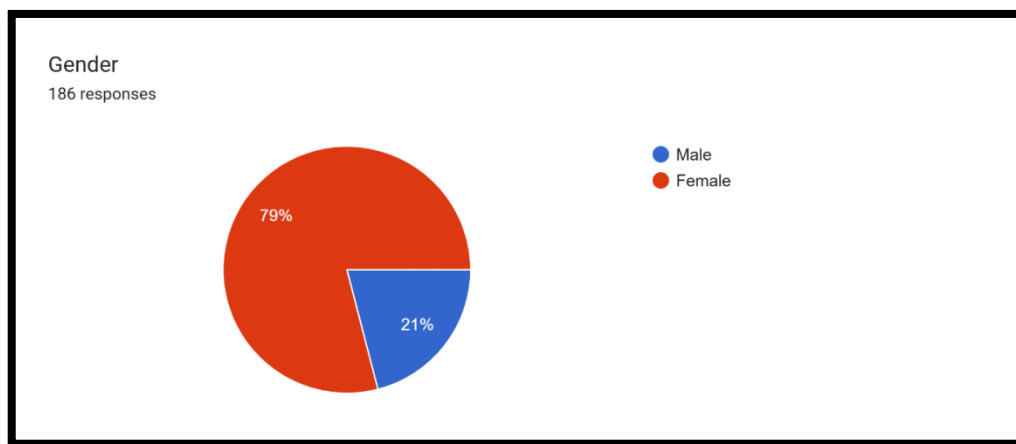


Fig 3 Gender

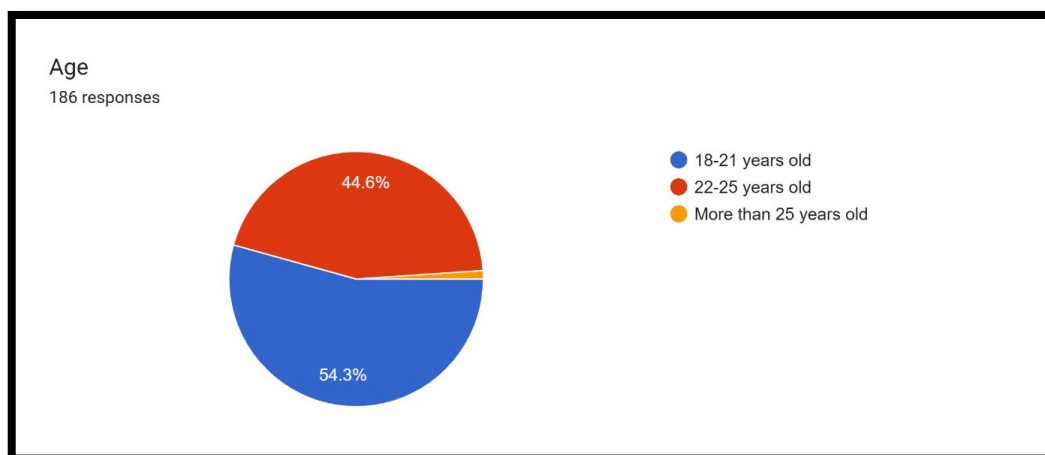


Fig 4 Age

A smaller proportion (19.4%) perceived the subject as "Difficult," while a relatively small percentage found it "Difficult" or "Very Difficult." This overall perception of ease may indicate effective teaching methodologies or a well-designed curriculum. The findings found that four main insights were produced from the study. First, there is a mixed perceptions of difficulty when asking about their feelings about this subject. Over two-thirds (68.3%) of students find the subject "neither easy nor difficult," suggesting a lack of strong emotional engagement or clarity as shown in Figure 5.

Although a large majority (68.3%) found the course neither easy nor difficult, the minority who rated it as "Difficult" or "Very Difficult" represent a segment of the student population whose needs are not being fully met. Even a small percentage, in this case potentially representing around 5-10% of the class, could indicate systemic issues for those students. This could stem from diverse learning styles, inadequate prior preparation, language barriers, or other factors that hinder their ability to grasp the concepts. Addressing their concerns requires a more differentiated approach to instruction.

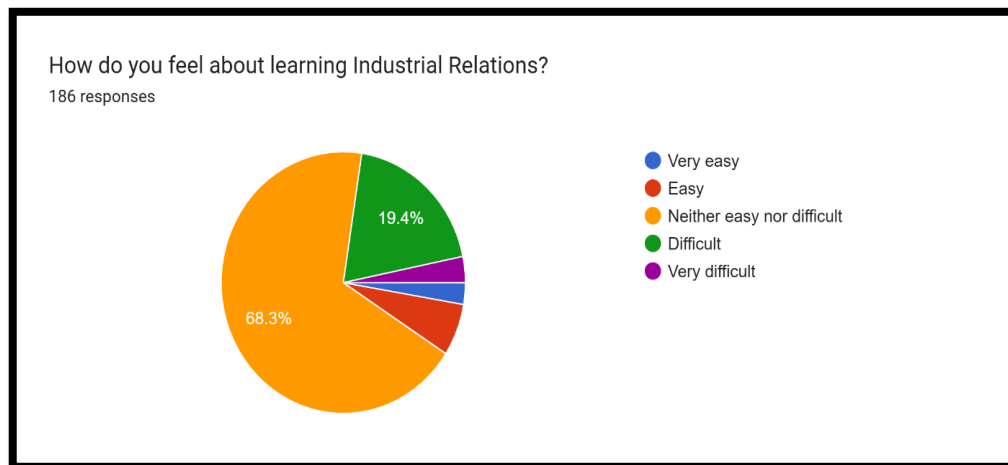


Fig 5 Feeling about learning Industrial Relations

Nearly 1 in 4 students struggle with the content, indicating that some materials or delivery methods may not be fully effective. This aligns with previous literature asserting that legal or procedural subjects tend to pose difficulties for students, particularly when delivered through traditional, lecture-based formats (Alt, 2023; Biggs & Tang, 2011). Therefore, there's a clear opportunity to enhance engagement through differentiated instruction, offering both foundational supports and enrichment activities.

However, based on Figure 6, many students disclosed the challenging contents on specific topics, such as Trade Union and its Constitution/Management and Recognition as particularly challenging. These topics typically involve dense legal concepts, organizational structure, and institutional frameworks that can be abstract and difficult to visualize (McKeown & Dyer, 2022). The findings support the idea that students may benefit from more context-based learning and examples to better understand the real-world application of these topics. With no law background, they expressed that the topics become challenge for them to master. Hence, redesigning these topics using case studies, simulations, or storytelling can ground abstract ideas in relatable contexts. While Chapter Trade Union was identified as the most challenging, other chapters also presented difficulties for a notable minority of students. This highlights that challenges are not isolated to the introduction and suggests specific concepts or teaching methods in those chapters may need re-evaluation and adjustment. Focusing only on certain chapter would neglect the needs of these students struggling with other sections.

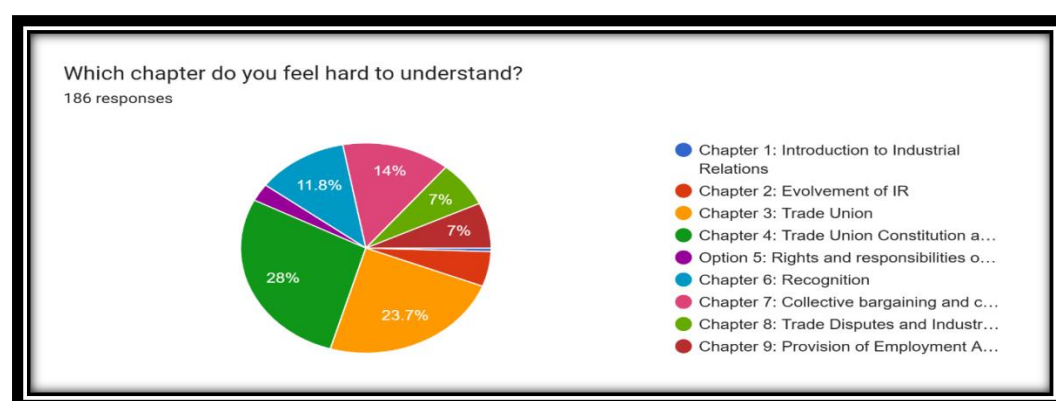


Fig 6 Chapters hard to understand

When asked about the most helpful strategies for understanding this subject, a clear preference emerged for "mind-mapping notes" (48.9%) as the most appealing solution for improved understanding of the subject matter. The use of "brief notes" was favoured by 28.5% of students as represented in Figure 7. The relative popularity of more concise methods suggests students benefit from condensed materials. The demand for mind-maps reflects the utility of visual aids in simplifying complex information. This is consistent with Mayer's (2009) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which posits that learners process information better when it is presented in both verbal and visual formats. Similarly, while "Mind-mapping Notes" were highly favoured, the minority who preferred "Brief Notes," "Online Games," or "QR Codes" signal a need for a variety of learning resources. Relying solely on brief notes would disadvantage students who thrive with more visual, interactive, or exploratory learning methods.

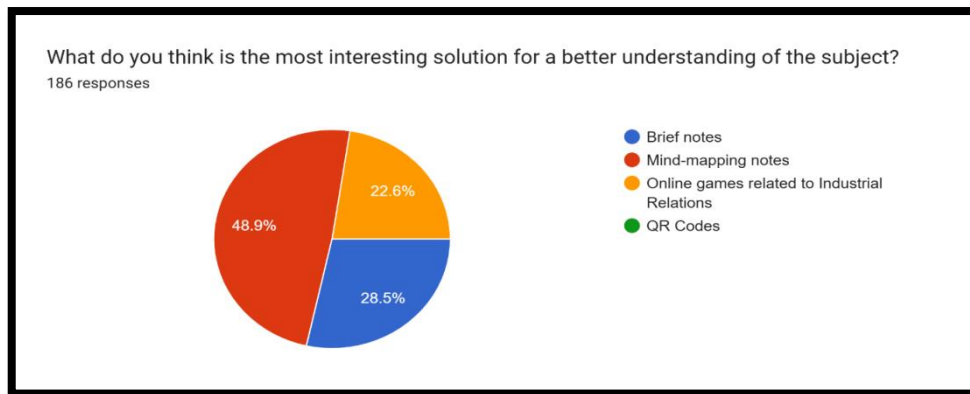


Fig 7 Solution for better understanding of the subject

The survey also revealed a strong preference for innovative teaching methods among the students. Many respondents expressed positive attitudes towards the use of mind-mapping notes, online games, and QR codes as tools to enhance their understanding of industrial relations concepts. Respondents described the tool as "very helpful" or "helpful" in improving their understanding of the course material. These findings align with previous research highlighting the benefits of active learning strategies and technology integration in higher education (Freeman et al., 2014). (Bond et al., 2022; Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

Students generally viewed the interactive tools employed in the course favourably as described in Figure 8. Almost half of the respondents (48.9%) found the tools to be "Very Helpful. This positive feedback underscores the potential of technology-enhanced learning approaches to engage students and facilitate their comprehension of complex concepts. However, about 25.8% considered them "neutral." The small percentage of students who found the interactive tools "Neutral," "Not Helpful," or "Very Unhelpful" (aggregating to over 25% of students) are critical. This signifies that the tools, while beneficial for many, are not universally effective. These students may require alternative modes of engagement, personalized support, or different types of technology integration. The reasons for ineffectiveness could be varied and require further investigation. It may indicate problems with design, technology access, or teaching methods.

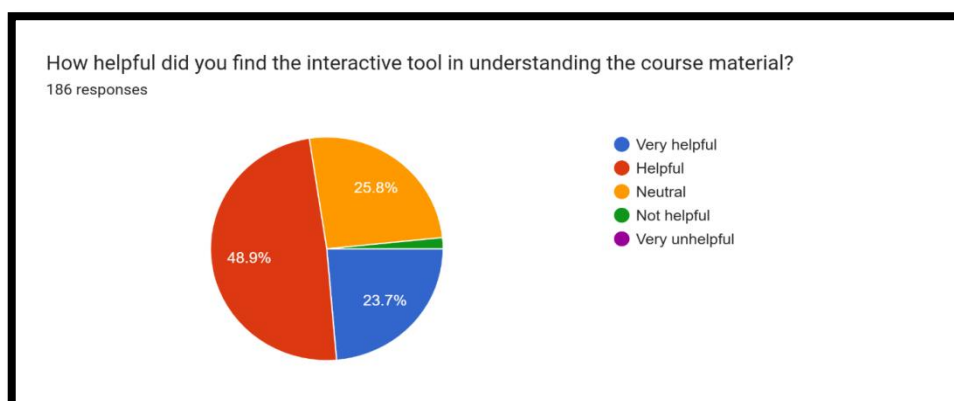


Fig 8 Perception about interactive tools used

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the need to rethink how Industrial Relations is taught. While many students appear neutral in their perception of difficulty, the significant portion who struggle indicates that traditional methods may not be sufficient. In particular, the complexity of union-related topics warrants special attention especially by the educators. To support student learning, educators should consider redesigning content-heavy chapters using storytelling, case studies, and simulations. For instance, explaining trade union structures through real-world case studies can help students visualize the hierarchical and functional aspects more clearly. Apart from that, as findings show that respondents preferred for mind maps and summarised notes, the curriculum should integrate visual tools such as flowcharts illustrating negotiation processes, diagrams of organizational structures of the union and infographics summarising labour legislation concerning employment, which heavily emphasised on visual learning. Also, in the era of digitalisation where technology integration is needed, the success of the interactive tool suggests a broader application is warranted. Educators should consider expanding the tool's functionalities to include instant feedback to students through pop quizzes, interactive case scenarios and gamified learning elements such as leaderboards or badges during the teaching and learning process. Finally, continuous feedback mechanisms should be embedded in the course structure by allowing students to reflect on and rate teaching methods can provide real-time insights for further improvement. It can be done at the end of the semester to reflect the overall teaching and learning of the educators and subject contents.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the demographic characteristics, perceptions, and learning preferences of students enrolled in an Industrial Relations course. The student is largely male and between 18 and 25 years old. There are a higher proportion of respondents coming from AM238. The data indicate that a large percentage of students find the IR content easy to grasp, which may warrant a closer look at the curriculum's complexity and the potential for incorporating more challenging assignments or real-world case studies. Students' identification of Chapter 4 (Trade Union Constitution and Management) as the most challenging suggests that the introductory material on trade union may require more scaffolding or contextualization to facilitate comprehension. A deeper analysis of the specific aspects of Chapter 3 (Trade Union) that students find difficult is warranted, as well as Chapter 6 (Recognition), and Chapter 7 (Collective Bargaining and Agreement).

The strong preference for "Mind-mapping" highlights the importance of providing students with concise and readily accessible summaries of key concepts and theories. This finding aligns with broader trends in education that emphasize the value of microlearning and spaced repetition for knowledge retention. The positive assessment of interactive learning tools suggests that technology-enhanced learning approaches can be effective in engaging students and promoting deeper understanding of complex subject matter. However, it is important to note that a subset of students did not find the interactive tools particularly helpful, which may indicate a need for more diverse and customizable learning resources. Below is the diagram showing the proposed strategies in enhancing pedagogical among the learners as depicted in Figure 9:

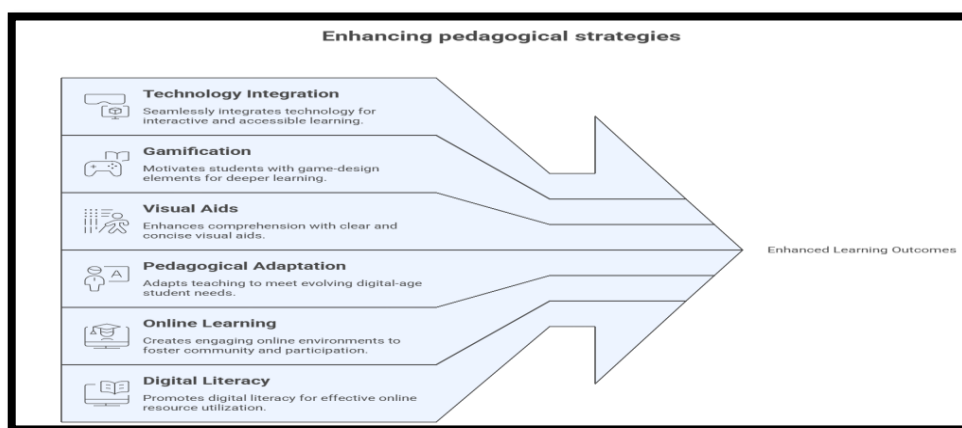


Fig 9 Proposed strategies in enhancing learning outcomes

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study provides compelling evidence that while many students can navigate the subject of Industrial Relations, a significant number encounter difficulty with specific chapters and concepts. Preferred solutions such as mind-mapping and interactive tools suggest that enhancing the course with visual and digital learning methods can bridge the gap in comprehension and engagement. Several strategies could be done. First, focus must be given on difficult chapters by revisiting Chapters 3 and 4 with redesigns, chunking of content, and hands-on simulations. Second, to boost Engagement with the students, educator may add role-play or negotiation simulations to embody industrial relations dynamics. Third, providing infographics, video explainers, and mind-maps for each chapter. Fourth, enhancing interactivity by expanding the use of interactive tools based on student ratings and incorporate learner feedback to fine-tune them. The integration of these innovations must be intentional and aligned with learning outcomes. By applying student feedback and evidence-based pedagogy, educators can transform Industrial Relations from a challenging subject into an accessible and engaging field of study. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its sample size and the specific context of UiTM Negeri Sembilan. Future research should explore the perception of the students in different educational settings and with larger, more diverse samples. Longitudinal studies could also assess the long-term impact of the tool on student learning and career outcomes. Furthermore, qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could provide richer insights into students' experiences with the subjects and their perceptions of its strengths and weaknesses. Also, the study employs only a quantitative-descriptive approach to explore and characterise student perceptions of learning Industrial Relations, aligning with its exploratory nature. Descriptive analysis effectively summarises student views and identifies key patterns in the survey data, including preferred learning tools and challenging topics. This method suits the categorical and Likert-scale responses, providing meaningful frequencies and percentages for a detailed overview. By accurately portraying the student experience, the descriptive analysis lays a solid foundation for targeted pedagogical improvements and curriculum enhancements. While lacking causal inferences, this approach establishes a necessary groundwork for future research utilising more advanced statistical techniques to provide comprehensive findings.

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