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Facilitating and hindering factors associated with academic performance in students of business administration: Exploration of strategies for improvement

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Abstract:

CONTEXT: Examinations and results are usually psychologically stressful events for students. It is known that various factors may influence examination grades. It was intended to explore the perceived facilitating and hindering factors associated with examination outcomes in adult students.

METHODS: In a cross-sectional study, we assessed factors associated with examination outcomes using open-ended questionnaires, comparing postgraduate business administration students in a university with high (Grade A, score 5 and above) and low (Grade B and lower, score up to 4.99) grades. The themes of the responses were analyzed qualitatively and categorized.

RESULTS: There were 24 (47.1%) students with higher grades and 27 (52.9%) with lower grades. Comparatively greater proportion of high performers reported personal skills and the teaching process being helpful, whereas a greater proportion of low performers picked up academic facilities, personality, and environmental factors as positively contributing factors. Factors negatively contributing to educational success as perceived by high performers were teaching method, management issues, and the facilities; whereas low performers suggested personal issues and personality factors.

CONCLUSION: Students identified many factors contributing to their academic outcomes. A considerable proportion of students reported personality-related factors. The findings suggested strategies that may improve their performance and academic experience.

Keywords:

Academic achievement, adult, business management, contributing factors, education, examination, outcome, performance

Introduction

Examinations and their outcomes are considered psychologically stressful events.[1] Especially if the examination outcome is related to securing a professional career, or particular vocation, or defines the future direction of the students,[2] it could be particularly demanding. The multifarious concerns related to examination outcomes among students are well known.[3] It is a particular concern in India, where negative mental health consequences of examination stress, such as self-harm and suicide, are frequently reported.[4-7]

There exists a diverse literature on the factors influencing examination performance, and these could be beyond what is taught in the classrooms or what is examined. It is imperative to look into the factors affecting the academic achievements of

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adult students. While there are many studies related to mental health status among students in colleges and universities in general,[8,9] and the stress related to the outcome of entrance examinations,[2,10] there is inadequate understanding of the factors associated with the outcome of examination in university-level courses. As a prototype, it was intended to study the factors associated with business management studies, a course that can be taken up by students from different academic backgrounds such as humanities, commerce, and science, and which is relevant in most work-streams.

There are a few studies reporting different factors that have been identified to influence examination outcomes in students of business administration. One of the basic factors was class attendance; higher attendance was associated with higher scores in examinations.[11] In a study of 2nd-year Diploma in Entrepreneurship students at the University of Technology, South Africa, attendance in classes, hard work, and assignment completion were linked to success; whereas lack of attendance, poor self-discipline, inadequate effort, lack of attention to lectures, and lack of ability to have thorough understanding were some of the factors linked to failures.[12] In a study of undergraduate medical students in Saudi Arabia, factors linked with high academic achievement were: lecture attendance, early revision, prioritization of learning needs, mind mapping, learning in small groups and skills laboatory, learning with patients, learning from mistakes, time management, and family support. In addition, motivation and desired examination results were key drivers.[13] It may be highlighted that specific supportive measures for students who are struggling can improve their outcomes in the examinations.[14] Hence, the students who may be struggling in their academics must be identified and supported through a process.

Studying the factors that can influence adult learning and improve outcomes is an essential step for any college or university-level educational setup. Specifically, an exploration of factors that are modifiable and can help students improve their performance should be undertaken. In this study, we intended to find out the self-perceived facilitating and hindering factors for success in the examination from the students of business management. It was expected that actions may be taken on modifiable factors gleaned from this exploration to improve academic and professional outcomes.

Methods

Data for this study were available from a project that was conducted as a cross-sectional, questionnaire-based survey. The sample included all the available 2nd year students of the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) at a university in Odisha, India.

The evaluation questionnaire included open-ended items about factors students consider as most important in contributing positively and negatively to their academic success in the MBA course; and actions they would like to take or changes they would like to make to improve their academic performance. Students were asked to provide up to five responses that they considered most appropriate for each of these areas. We asked for objective information about their achievements in nonacademic or extracurricular fields.

We also enquired specifically about their performance grade or percentage in the last semester. The students were categorized as high (Grade A, score 5 and above) and low (Grade B and lower, score up to 4.99) performers based on their grades.

Institutional permission was obtained for conducting this project. The project followed ethical guidelines such as informed consent, anonymity, voluntariness, and an option to withdraw at any point. There was a facility to discuss any aspect of the project or any concern following the participation in the survey, with a faculty member or the research team.

All the responses to open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed. These were coded based on the themes and later regrouped for their comprehensiveness. This was done by two authors independently, and if there was any discordance in categorization, the response was deliberated and a consensus method was applied to categorize these. Data were quality-checked by two researchers, going through source documents, coding, and entries in the Excel document independently, and mismatch was discussed to arrive at an agreement. Missing data were excluded from the analysis. As the students had options to give multiple responses, some of them had more than one theme from similar areas. These were counted separately to represent the actual proportion of the themes reported. This process provided the accurate frequency of their responses. This led to proportions being more than 100% for some of the themes. Data were analyzed on SPSS version 25 (IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA).

Results

There were 33 (64.7%) male and 18 (35.3%) female students. The sample consisted of students mostly from upper middle socioeconomic status (78.4%) and Hindu background (96.1%). More than half of them (58.8%) were single, and a considerable proportion (39.2%) were in a relationship. There were 24 (47.1%) high-performing students and 27 (52.9%) low-performing students.

Comparison of high- and low-performing students

The responses to the open-ended questions were thematically grouped into various categories. It was interesting to observe the range of these responses; the response categories in various areas are given in Table 1.

Responses on factors positively contributing to academic success were grouped into personal skills (time management, presentation skills, communication, social skills) and personality factors (disciplined, attitude, ethical, outgoing, etc.). Academic facilities, teaching methods (interactive, interesting, support from teachers, additional guest lectures, etc.), and environmental factors (drug-free campus, work culture, spiritual atmosphere, etc.,) were also reported as having a positive influence. A comparatively greater proportion of high performers reported personal skills and the teaching process being helpful; whereas, a greater proportion of low performers picked up academic facilities, personality, and environmental factors as positively contributing factors.

Factors that negatively influenced the academic outcome were categorized into teaching method-related issues, personal issues, personality factors, course management, issues with academic facilities, and others. The stress of the assignment, pressure from teachers, no mentorship, lack of variety in teaching methods, focus on theory rather than practical aspects, and communication gap between management and students, predominated in the issues related to the teaching process. Lack of specific skills, such as communication, time management, and various distractions, were the personal factors reported as hindrances. Interestingly, various personality issues were also mentioned, for example, impatience, ego clashes, overconfidence, procrastination, and comparison worries. About the course management, tightly packed course schedules, unnecessary rules and regulations, lack of dynamism, and interaction with students were some of the responses. Inadequate resources in the library, placement opportunities, and industry exposure were cited as well. Factors negatively contributing to academic success as perceived by high performers were teaching method, management issues, and the facilities; whereas low performers suggested personal issues and personality factors.

In response to questions about the actions they would like to take as remedial measures, the points related to personal skill development and self-improvement activities predominated. Along with these, there were expectations from the academic authorities to improve facilities and communications. Most of these

Table 1: Themes in various categories based on the responses of students to open-ended questions

	Low performers (%)	High performers (%)	Total (%)
Factors most important in positively contributing to academic success			
Personal skills	128.5	170.7	148.8
Academic facilities	141.9	122.3	132.5
Teaching process/method	96.5	121.8	108.4
Personality factors	61.7	32.6	47.8
Environmental factors	51.5	35.5	44.0
Other	19.5	17.2	18.6
Factors contributing negatively to academic success			
Teaching method	109.4	187.2	147.1
Management issues	123.8	147.5	135.9
Personal issues	113.2	53.6	84.4
Personality factors	110.8	29.2	71.2
Academic facilities	37.5	54.6	45.8
Other	5.3	27.9	15.9
Actions or changes needed to improve academic success			
Expectation from teaching method/process	197.0	201.9	199.9
Personal skill development	192.4	199.2	193.7
Self-improvement	67.3	44.2	57.6
Expectations from management	43.3	54.7	48.9
Nonacademic/extracurricular achievements			
Leadership	134.8	165.8	152.2
Creativity	121.3	98.3	112.2
Academic activities/participation	101.2	70.5	81.7
Sports	83.5	80.2	80.4
Others	29.4	35.7	32.3
Volunteering	19.9	26.9	23.9
Additional it skills	10.4	22.9	17.5

Some percentages are more than 100%, as students have given more than one response in that theme. Missing values were not analyzed

were comparable between the two groups of students; however, a higher proportion of low performers reported "self-improvement."

It was interesting to observe the achievements of students in nonacademic and extracurricular areas. Most had leadership experiences and additional skills, mostly in information and technology (IT) and computer skills. A considerable proportion had achievements in sports. Some reported creative abilities that may be useful for entrepreneurship and to nurture a career in management. While leadership was reported in a greater proportion of high performers, more low performers reported creativity and participation in various activities.

Discussion

Success in university courses goes beyond the classroom, and multiple factors influence this. Although academic grades are an immediate outcome reflecting achievement at the university level, these have long-term implications and probably some predictive value for a proportion of students. Hence, improving the grades is important not only for the students but also for faculties and departments, which reflect their academic prowess. This study explored the factors that are associated with high and low achievement in postgraduate management students. There were many facilitating and hindering factors identified, along with the reflections from the students about what might be helpful.

Facilitating and hindering factors for academic achievement

The survey suggested various factors that may help to reflect on the actions to be taken by all concerned, students, teachers, and the management to improve academic performance. In the responses to open-ended questions, there were a lot of personality-related issues that might help the students. Discipline, attitude, self-control, adherence to ethics, being focused, innovative, and extroverted were some of the characteristics reported. Skills in academic presentation and communication, knowledge of IT, and a practical approach to reviewing the course subjects were reported along with time management, social skills, and networking. The issues related to communication, the English language, and the need for developing language skills in the business curriculum have been highlighted.[15] It has been reported that individual and social factors have a huge influence on the performance of MBA students, suggesting interactive group workshops and group-work assignments to be helpful.[16] Academic activities, industry exposure, and placement opportunities were considered helpful in addition to the infrastructure and holistic environment on the campus. Most students found the faculty members supportive and the classes interesting.

Difference between high and low performers

Some of the differences between low and high performers were striking and suggested a few focus areas. For example, improvement of personal skills and attention to a few personality factors might be helpful. Interestingly, teaching method was reported both as a positive and negative contributor, which suggested that the method of teaching is an important contributor and depends on the style. Based on the observations of the survey, there are a few suggestions that may help students in higher educational institutions, especially those in business administration. These are presented for students, faculties, course planners, and providers.

Suggestions for students

Interestingly, students have provided a lot of insights about what they can do for themselves, improving their personal and social skills and performance. The suggestions they have provided can be practiced. It appears being mindful and organized about their studies is a key factor for students. Other suggestions were to improve personal communication skills, which will help in academic/business presentations and interactions. Having extracurricular and social activities along with leadership in various areas will improve their connectivity, skills, and efficiency, which are essential elements for success not only in academics but also in vocational spheres.

Suggestions for faculties

The results suggested that improved communication with students by the faculty members related to structure, process, assessment, etc., beyond the lectures may be helpful, probably by allaying their concerns, providing reassurance, and increasing confidence. Improving and maintaining an appropriate emotional climate in classrooms can facilitate learning and students' performance.[17] There are many examples of different methods of encouraging interactions. One such example is business simulation games, which have been found to be motivating and to develop generic skills.[18] A study in the UK business school reported that direct student–teacher contact time is a factor influencing student satisfaction.[19] It has also been suggested that improved student–teacher and student–student interactions, along with effective classroom management, are effective strategies to facilitate learning, besides the individual motivation of the students.[20] These strategies can be implemented in a structured way, for example, providing a scope of interactions and process of accessing teacher support as and when required and through mentoring.

There should be options for students to provide feedback about teaching sessions and methods, which should be systematically addressed. Support to students, especially those who are struggling or are underperformers,

through mentorship or other supportive measures may go a long way. It is important to explore hindering factors for scholastic achievements that can be modified, which may improve the performance levels of the students.

Suggestions for academic administrators

There were possible options for the course planners, providers, and academic administrators of higher education institutions to improve the academic performance of the students. It appears that, besides course-related support, improvement of academic facilities, and specific input to improve personal skills in different related areas such as communication, public speaking, and presentations, exposure to relevant industry and businesses outside is expected to be a positive strategy. The process for more student–management communication and feedback systems should be set and made more effective if already established. Institutional regulations and lack of resources have been reported as stressors for students,[21] which might impact their scholastic performance, and management can help in these regards.

Personality-related issues and their impact on examinations have been reported in management students.[22,23] As many students in this study reported personal issues and personality factors as hindrances, these need further exploration and support from the management. These can be provided with systematic evaluation and counseling. Some may need further psychological support. There is evidence for interventions preventing mental ill health, reducing the symptoms of depression and anxiety, promoting positive mental health for students,[24] and decreasing the impact of examination stress.[25]

In addition, identifying and supporting nonacademic and extracurricular skills of students for their overall improvement and positive experience is going to help improve student confidence and achievements that may progress beyond academics. The availability of such facilities on the campus is essential.

Strengths and limitations

Self-reports are often helpful for a comprehensive understanding of what affects students in a particular course. Open-ended questions provide observations to garner themes that may be specifically relevant to the group for which intervention modalities can be planned. While the study findings can be generalized to master-level management students in general, they may be relevant for other students with similar programs in universities; however, further studies in faculties with different focuses, such as humanities, community, laboratory, or healthcare-related courses, may be useful.

There are a few limitations. The study was conducted in a single center, and the sample size was relatively small. Classifying low or high performers based on a single examination result is debatable, as fluctuations are possible; so results in a range of examinations can be considered. Various other factors may influence examination grades, beyond what was self-perceived by the students. The assessment was based on the views only of students, it would be better to collect reflections from teachers and administration to realize the holistic picture. Future studies should consider these additional factors.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggested various factors that may influence the academic performance of MBA students. It was interesting to note that personality factors were reported as factors of academic performance, which requires further study. It was also highlighted that besides curricular achievements, noncurricular involvements, and successes should also be considered. There is scope for modification and improvement in many areas, which would help the students in supporting their academic achievements. Future studies may consider defining success objectively in a variety of ways, beyond the examination grades as the outcome, which may include long-term outcomes requiring follow-up studies, quality of life, work-life balance, ability to pursue personal extracurricular interests, etc. Associated factors in other subject areas of adult learning may be undertaken to explore any difference between various streams. It may be better to review student performance, following the implementation of recommended changes in the educational institutions.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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