

Poor Academic Achievement of University Students: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract— Poor academic achievement is a frustration for students and a concern for the teachers and university management. Usually, this aspect is seen as the responsibility of the students, and hence less attention is paid to this issue until it becomes serious. We have conducted a study to investigate the reasons for poor academic performance from students' perspectives and encouraged students themselves to identify solutions to the perceived problems. A day long participatory workshop was conducted for each of the three groups of students selected from the Department of Software Engineering, Department of English and the Department of Law for this purpose. A questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the workshop to both collect basic background data as well as sensitize students to the purpose of the workshop. Students' perceived problems were collected and classified using anonymous idea cards with the students working in pairs. Students' engagement with social media for entertainment competes with study time, lack of English language skills and inexperienced teachers were the major perceived problems that impede the academic performance. Students working in collaborative groups also offered solutions to these problems as detailed in the paper.

Keywords— Academic Achievement, Motivation, Social Media, participatory data collection

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1 INTRODUCTION

ACADEMIC achievement or performance is the outcome of teaching-learning methodologies – the extent to which a student achieves his/her goal is commonly measured by examinations or continuous assessment (Ward, Stoker, & Murray-Ward, 1996).

Other assessment options may be assignments, presentations, production of visual outcomes, debates, critiques, etc. The assessment alternatives are set by the universities or academic institutions especially in higher education. In the existing semester system which is a practice of many countries, the undergraduate students, in a four-year program, are awarded a Grade Point Average (GPA) at the end of each semester on the basis of the grades awarded in the courses taken by the students during the semester. After completion of the four-year program, students' are awarded a degree depending on the Combined GPA. A lot of research has been conducted into poor academic performance and the factors associated with it in the developed country context. Unfortunately, it is very hard to find studies conducted in developing countries. The present study was conducted in a private university in Bangladesh. In the spring semester of 2014, about one-third students obtained poor academic grades. This issue was discussed in several forums of the university with concern. As university

teachers, we realized the urgency for investigating the reasons behind the poor academic achievement of our students which was alarming for the academic and admin community of the university. The study was conducted in the summer semester of 2014 to find out barriers and identify possible solution. To situate the work presented, the following section is a review of literature on factors related to the academic achievement of students.

2 RELATED WORKS

Most of the literature presented in this section is based on findings of empirical studies conducted in developed countries for a long duration.

In the present world of communication technology, students have a serious affinity for content on the Internet and social networking. A good number of researches show that students spend lot of hours on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, personal blogs, etc., for entertainment. Paul, Baker, & Cochran (2012) commented that online social networks have permeated all generations of Internet users. These social networking sites are transforming a prominent communications tool, particularly, in the student community. As a result, academic institutions and faculty are increasingly using

social networking sites, such as Facebook and LinkedIn to connect with the current and potential students and often to deliver instructional contents. This has led to raise many questions about the impact of online social networking on academic performance and the possibility of using it as an effective teaching tool. The researchers found that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between time spent by the students on the social networking and their academic performance. Similarly, the study conducted by Rouis, Limayem & Salehi-Sangari (2011) indicated an extensive use of Facebook by the students with extraverted personalities leading to poor academic performance. However, students who are more self-regulated, have shown to have effectively controlled their engagement on these platforms. This finding is an indication of an awareness of students about negative impact of using social networking. So, students must understand the proper use of social media. Teachers have responsibilities to motivate students to use social media mainly for their learning and interaction with their peers. Another study also found a negative and statistically significant impact of Internet hours on grade performance (Englander, Terregrossa, & Wang, 2011), suggesting that the distractive dimensions of Internet use outweigh the productive dimensions. Despite some academic benefits, it is seen that most media is regarded as a source of amusement but it serves as a distraction and impediment on academic achievement (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2012).

Despite time on social networking, several factors are found to be responsible for low academic performance. According to Hansen (2005) the factors affecting the achievement that can hamper success, such as, (1) being enrolled in less rigorous and challenging academic courses; (2) having under-prepared, less experienced teachers; and (3) facing low teacher expectations and possible discrimination. The researchers provided several suggestions for improving their education opportunities which include (1) Teacher Quality and Professional Development; (2) Teacher Expectations; (3) Extended Learning Time; (4) Parent and Community Support; (5) Social Support; (6) A Rigorous Curriculum; (7) Knowledge about and Access to Higher Education; and (8) Learning Resources. Increase in enrollment, university admission policies, counseling, study skills, study facilities, and financial policies and practices are things that affect adult students (Beagle, & Melnyk, 1971). In case of adult and professional students, work responsibilities, study skills, and unclear goals are the

most frequently cited general factors affecting studies (Olson, 1990).

Many studies including (Keller, 1978) show that students themselves perceived greatest responsibility for their low grades on their own lack of motivation, proper study habits, and attention to assigned work. In Keller's study many students felt that institutional or environmental factors, such as, university and divisional requirements, faulty teaching and examination procedures, residence hall atmosphere, background in English, and the quality of academic advice also contributed to their problems. Students also found that problems in time management impeded their studies but pre-set schedules enhanced them. In addition, social support, self-regulation skills (Rytönen, Parpala, Lindblom-Ylänne, Virtanen, & Postareff, 2012) curriculum, learning environment and classroom interactions (Grayson, 1985) are perceived to be important for academic achievement. Becerra (2012) examined the factors affecting the perceptions of barriers in academic achievement of university students and found that higher levels of income, education, and linguistic acculturation were associated with the perceived barriers in education. However, Romanik (2010) reported low income children obtained poor grades which is contradictory to the findings of Becerra (2012).

3 METHODS

The objectives of the study were to identify the reasons of poor academic performance of the students in a developing country and in particular students enrolled at a private university. The purpose was to get the students to do collaborative group work to solve their own perceived problems. The participants for this study were selected from different departments who obtained poor grades in spring semester of year 2014.

The emphasis was on getting the students to document perceived problems on individual idea cards. They did this after discussing their problems with their partners and honing down their problems into key phrases. After this exercise, cards were collected by student volunteers, read out and displayed on the whiteboard. After visually displaying all the cards, the students collectively group or classify the cards under suitable headings. The class is then divided into the same number of groups as represented by the classified cards. The groups then work collaboratively to collectively come up with solutions which they present to the rest of the class. Each group has not only to present but to defend their ideas presented. To carry out these objectives, we

conducted three workshops on three different dates for the students of Software Engineering (37), Law (20) and English (21). The same workshop techniques were used for a total of 78 students. The techniques of conducting the workshops are elaborately described below:

1. As the students arrived for the workshop, they were given a questionnaire to fill up. The questionnaire collected basic data on their background, their motivation for attending tertiary level education and whether it was important to achieve a good CGPA when leaving the university.
2. Students were asked whether they were aware of the purpose for which they were attending the workshop. They were then given a briefing on the purpose of the workshop and asked what they wished to achieve by attending the workshop.
3. Students were then paired. The last three members were made into a small group. Every pair was asked to discuss reasons behind their poor performance. As they were discussing, 3" x 5" cards and markers were handed out. Once they had firmed up their ideas, they were to write down the idea using keywords - one idea per card. They were asked not to put their IDs or names on the cards. They could therefore express their ideas without being identified. This created a comfort zone and allowed the students to be free and frank. The students were given freedom on the number of cards they wished to write.
4. Two volunteers were requested from the class. The volunteers were asked to collect the completed cards. Once everyone had finished, the class was asked to welcome the volunteers. One volunteer showed and read out each card. The other volunteer took the read out card and using draftsman tape fixed the card to the white board.
5. The class was then asked to study all the cards and group similar ideas into individual columns. Once the cards were in different columns, the class was asked to give suitable Title cards. After putting the title cards, additional volunteers were asked to summarise each category/column.
6. The number of columns range from 4 to 7. After thanking the volunteers the class is randomly divided into the same number of groups as there are columns. Each group is then given the task of solve the problems of one category. The groups disperse into different corners of the classroom to

brainstorm collaboratively and design a presentation on a yellow poster paper of size 2' x 3'. As the groups work, the facilitator individually listens in to the ideas of each group and check whether they have understood the assignment.

7. As each group finishes, they display their posters using draftsman tape. Finally, each of the groups made their group presentations. The other groups were allowed to ask questions which the presenting group defended, added ideas or modified the ideas put forward. The students were free to use either Bangla (the mother tongue) or English or a mixture of both - whatever made them feel comfortable.

Each of the three workshops was conducted in the same manner. The problems and solutions received from three workshops were analyzed. Qualitative analysis of data was done. This included coding and categorizing of the reasons.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Different groups of students (SWE, Law, and English) reported different reasons but they fall in the same category of problems. The 37 students (8 female and 29 male) of the Department of Software Engineering (SWE) reported different reasons responsible for poor academic performance. The reasons given by the students were coded and categorized. These are listed in the tables that follow.

TABLE 1

CATEGORY OF PROBLEMS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS OFFERED BY SWE STUDENTS

Category of problem	Reasons
Unclear course goals	Confused about the career of a Software Engineer; No interest in study
Lack of motivation	Late presence in early morning classes, reluctant to study daily
Improper use of social media	Busy with browsing Facebook, watching movie,
Lack of confidence	Fear of study , Less concentration in class, Lack of self- confidence
Time management	Duration of semester is too short to understand several courses properly
Lack of English skill	Fear to speak in English, Lack of writing skill in English
Inexperienced teacher	Students have to memorize everything, Lack of guidelines, Only power point presentation makes boring

The students gave their opinions at the end of the session. The students' preferred practical orientation and activity based lessons and more tasks in the laboratory, innovative teaching method, especially, in English and Math so that they can practice and learn. They also proposed hand out from the teachers in some courses. The opinions given by the students indicate that there is lack of an appropriate learning environment in the class, findings which agree with Grayson (1985) and absence of interaction between students (Becerra, 2012). These aspects are important, especially, for improving their English language Skills (Keller, 1978; Becerra, 2012).

The 20 students (3 female and 17 male) of the Department of Law reported their reasons for poor academic performance. These are given in Table 2.

TABLE 2

CATEGORY OF PROBLEMS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS OFFERED BY THE STUDENTS OF LAW

Category of problem	Reasons
Unclear course goals	Don't understand the topics, confused about the subject matter
Lack of motivation	Irregular in class, irregular in studying daily at home or hostel; as a result forget the topic taught, No concentration on study, They are not interested in study but always think about the ways of developing their business,
Improper use of social media	Spending time for using social media, such as, facebook
Lack of confidence	Students reading but at the time of exam, they have a fear of writing, Students feel themselves as helpless
Lack of English skill	Fear to speak in English; Don't know how to start writing in English after reading a paragraph, Everything is understandable but problems in understanding English , Can't express clearly when writing the topic
Inexperienced teacher	Lectures of some of the early semesters in university are difficult for students to understand
State of low income	Facing financial problem as family cannot support the study, Facing personal and family problems
Study skills	Students not having problems in understanding during class, but when they started studying, they faced lots of problems.

Comparing the responses with those of Table 1, we see that the 'time management' category is absent in table 2 but two new categories 'state of low income' which agree with the findings of Romanic (2010) and study skills (Beagle & Melnyk, 1971; Keller, 1978; Olson, 1990). The undergraduate students of the university come from different rural areas. So, they may have problems with the study habits and to adjust with the university and

residence/hall atmosphere (Keller, 1978). The students suggested for more activities and interactions in the classroom which are important aspects for improvement of academic performance (Grayson, 1985).

The 21 students from English Department participated in the workshop. The reasons given by these students are given in Table 3.

TABLE 3: CATEGORY OF PROBLEMS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS OFFERED BY THE STUDENT OF ENGLISH

Category of problem	Reasons
Lack of motivation	Students are not concentrating on the class due to a poor speaker, lack of seriousness, Students are not attentive in class, irregular in classes,
Improper use of social media	Spend time for using social media and internet
Lack of confidence	Fearing to ask any questions to the teacher, fearing to speak out,
Lack of English skill	Poor grammar skills, poor in speaking English, weak in writing skills, lack of confidence in using the English language, spelling problem, delivery of the class lecture is in English,
Inexperienced teacher	Classroom is not active, can't understand the class lecture properly, teachers are not influential and friendly,
Time management	Students spend maximum time with their friends gossiping, Students mostly utilize their time in sleeping, eating, taking shower and talking,
Study skills	Can't prepare themselves instantly inside the class, Students having a less memorizing power and forget everything while writing, Students are not studying regularly at residence,

It is found that 'unclear course goal' and 'state of low income' categories are absent in the reasons given by the students of English department. Similar to other two

groups, these students demanded for more activities in the class.

From table 1, table 2 and table 3, it is evident that out of nine categories of problems, five categories are common in all the three groups. These are use of social media, lack of English language skills, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, and inexperienced teachers. Other categories are unclear course goals, time management, study skills and state of low income. The problems related to the university administration, poor teaching quality, curriculum design are not elements of students' problems. However, these problems affect students' learning. In relation to use of social media, it is very hard to find a student at the university level who does not use social media. The data collected from students indicates that all participants use social networking sites, especially, facebook for a duration of one to four hours daily. It is also perceived from discussion in the class that students spend time at night on the facebook instead of doing personal study. Due to academic pressure, they may find the social media as entertainment and prominent communication tools (Paul, Baker, & Cochran 2012) for discussing and completing assignments but extensive use of it serves as a distraction and impediment on academic achievement (Rouis, Limayem & Salehi-Sangari, 2011; Englander, Terregrossa, & Wang, 2011; Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2012; Paul, Baker, & Cochran 2012). So, counseling and guidance (Beagle, Melnyk, 1971) is necessary to protect the students from improper and destructive use of social media. This may help develop students' self regulated skills (Rytkonen, Parpala, Lindblom-Ylanne, Virtanen, & Postareff, 2012) and lead to use this media for out of class academic help and solving problems which is a solution given by the students themselves. In doing so, students may be able to do time management (Keller, 1978) properly and develop their good study habits.

Lack of English language skills (Becerra, 2012) is a common problem for the students who are not native English speakers. The medium of textbooks used is English. Although the medium of instruction of our higher education is English, the students cannot conform to the situation because of poor English language skills that they acquired during their previous education. So, creating an appropriate learning environment (Grayson, 1985) inside and outside the class in the university is crucial where students can practice English through interaction, group discussion, communication, and academic writing competitions. The students gave their opinion for creating such an environment for improvement of their English Language skills. It will

increase their level of confidence for expressing ideas that they have.

Teachers should be the driving force of a university and facilitators for achievement of course goals. However, under-prepared and inexperienced teacher (Hansen, 2005) cannot fulfill expectation of the students and considered as a reason for poor academic performance. It is mandatory for the teachers to make students understand their course goals (Oslo, 1990) which is found as a barrier to their better academic performance. Understanding course goals and career path are

important for the students for their motivation (Keller, 1978) towards study. The data shows that the students expected caring, inspiring, and friendly teachers who can facilitate (Savery, 2006) their learning more efficiently and help obtain higher academic grades in the exam.

On the basis of the above discussions, the data from the students and our experience of dealing with the students' the problems and solutions related to the poor academic performance of university students are presented in figure 1.

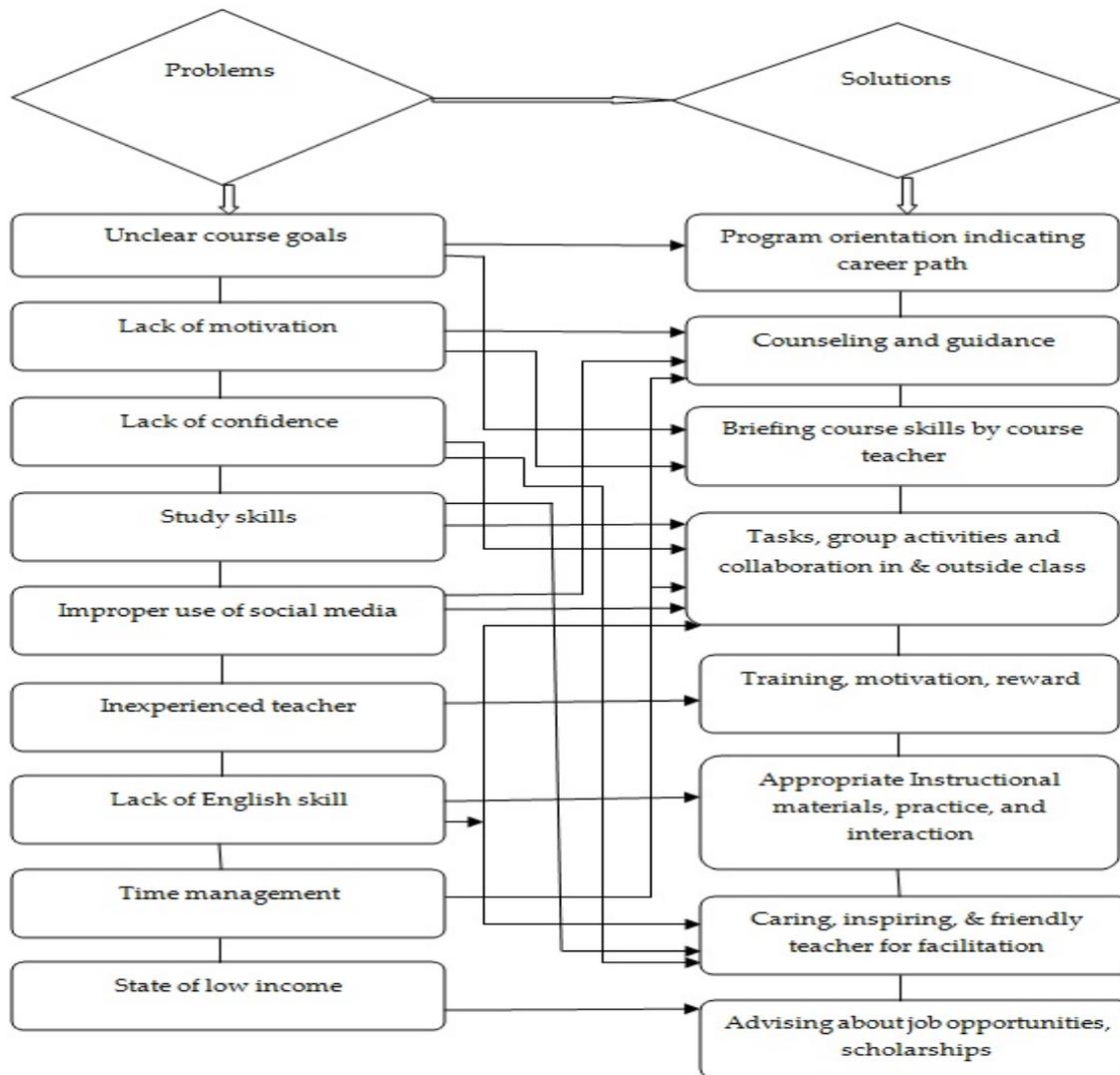


Figure 1. Problems and corresponding solutions of poor academic performance

It is obvious from figure 1 that students themselves can be their own resources and can solve several problems if they involve in activities and work collaboratively inside and outside the class on given tasks. However, the main responsibility is imposed on the

course teacher who plans and facilitates their learning (Islam & Vale, 2012). It is also important for the teachers to let students understand the course goals and the skills that they can acquire after completion of the course in order to motivate and increase level of confidence of the

students. Additionally, the teachers may plan and motivate the students to use the social media for doing their assignments, solving problems and group interactions instead of destructive use of it (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Gonzalez Canche, 2012). Creating an appropriate teaching and learning environment imposed on the university management, teachers, and relevant

4 CONCLUSION

The study discerns the reasons for poor academic performance of university students and solutions to the problems from students' perspectives. Use of social media by the students, lack of English language skills and inexperienced teachers are found the most prominent barriers to academic performance. It is evident that the faculty, administrative authority and the Head of the department have much to do for improvement of this situation. The learning goals must be made clear to the students with a focus to students' employment skills. Additionally, proper counseling and guidance should be done for motivation, development of the study skills along with a student-centered teaching and learning environment in the class. So, the main obligations for solving students' problems imposed on the university management, teachers and Heads of the Departments. The study has also revealed that the students use social media daily for a long time. So, a more detailed study is necessary to find the relationship between hours spend by the students on the social media and their academic performance.

All students of the university are offered two compulsory courses of English I and English II. Studying effectiveness of these two courses in terms of improving their English language is another important area for further research.

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