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STUDENTS' PASSION FOR GRADES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The shrinking labour market and employers' obsession for talent have increased the challenges for students in universities to achieve higher academic grades for improved employability. Researchers have suggested different factors that contribute towards students' enthusiasm for grades during the educational career. The focus on this phenomenon in higher education has so far been restricted to developed countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate empirically the predictors of students' passion for university grades in institutions of higher education in Pakistan in a milieu of dwindling job opportunities under prevailing economic environment.
The study is based on primary data, collected through a structured questionnaire from 242 students studying in higher-education institutions. Factor analysis, correlation and regression analyses were used to determine the effects of pressure for employability, academic self-concept, parental interest, psychological pressure, academic recognition, and financial concerns on students' passion for academic grades.
The study revealed that pressure for employability; academic self-concept, academic recognition, parental concern, and psychological pressure were the main predictors of students' passion for academic grades. Financial concerns did not indicate a statistically significant effect on criterion variable. The study provides useful insight to policy makers in higher education institutions to formulate appropriate academic interventions to foster students' endeavours to excel in learning pursuits.

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of education is the promotion of students' learning. Higher education aims at promoting critical thinking, understanding and tolerance to accommodate diverse perspectives (Schultz, 2008; Wood, 2009). The societal concept of education aims at extending knowledge in to the society (Kuhn, 2007). Higher Education Commission of Pakistan Quality Assurance Manual (Batool & Qureshi, 2005) focuses on changing paradigm and aligns the higher education with a view to "harness future leaders, facilitate an enabling learning environment, and enriches the academic and intellectual landscape. Thus it fuels the engine of economic and social development at the national, regional and international levels (p.1)." The HECPQ initiative envisages holistic development of student for value addition to the society. The primary focus being on cognitive, moral and social development of the students for significant contribution to the society. Based on structured interviews of deans, head of departments, and senior faculty members of difference universities, it has become apparent that the students' focus is shifting away from learning to achieve higher grades for career development. This is primarily due to internal and external factors. The students view higher grades an accomplishment for career development (Chamberlain, 2009). Researchers opined that students accord priority to grades and are less intrinsically motivated (Forrest & Peterson, 2006; Story et al., 2008). Students' quest for higher grades is an unethical, cultural, and educational dilemma in higher education that offer challenges for policy makers (Harris, 2006; Berger, 2007).
There is a growing tendency among students to strive for higher grades than with learning. Policy makers in higher education institutions should identify the factors that contribution toward students' passion for higher grades.

The purpose of the study is to examine the factors affecting students' passions for higher academic grades in higher education institutions in Pakistan with a view to plan and execute interventions strategies to lessen the affects of these aspects to achieve desirable learning outcomes.

The primary purpose of education is to promote learning among students and enhance the understanding and foster tolerance enabling students to make significant contribution towards society. According to Wood (2009), higher learning focuses on academic learning as well as social and moral development of students within educational experience. The students' priority on achieving higher academic grades seriously hampers the achievement of moral and social values. The overall result of such academic experience is not holistic. Students' passion for grades is embedded in achievement motivation theory (Schunk, 2007) and its sub theories of expectancy value theory, cultural influences, self-worth theory and familial influences (Jones, 2008; Schunk, 2007). Achievement theory focuses on student need to do well and excel (Bembenutty, 2010). Within this context, the students' place high value on grades as an outcome and exert extra efforts to achieve it (Romanowski, 2004). Researchers relate achievement motivation to two theories in the field of education of education; functionalism and higher order thinking. The first deals with values and norms for functioning in the society namely independence, achievement and universalism (Pai & Adler, 2005). In educational institutions, grades are the determinant of performance and progress (Westacott, 2008). In higher order thinking, the focus is on the need to develop high order cognitive skills for academic success to make significant contribution in the society (English, 2008; Wood, 2009).
Researchers have found students' changing priority with main focus on higher academic grades than the learning outcomes (Peters, 2008; Thomas, 2011). Students perceive that higher academic grades offer lucrative opportunities for future employability and career advancement (Chamberlain, 2009). Milonopolulos (2007) argued that students are focusing more on attaining higher grades that development of social and cognitive skills. Gilroy (2008) found that students resort to professors' harassment to achieve high grades. Romanowski (2009) found that students' performance is targeted toward grades on any expense. Story et al., (2008) determined that many students prefer extrinsic rewards for their motivation to perform and are less intrinsically driven.

Literature review indicated that academic recognition, psychological pressure, employability, financial constraints, and academic self concept are some important variables that affect students' passion for higher academic grades (Davis et al., 2006; Schmidt, 2007; Thomas, 2011).

Parent influence significantly affects students' motivation and behaviour toward superior academic performance and higher grades. Parents have high expectations from their children to do well and link reward and punishment to students' performance in educational endeavours Schunk (2007) identified the influence of social factors on students' academic behaviour with regard to achievement of higher grades. He stated that, "various factors in the social world affect the types of cognitive processes and motivational beliefs that student posses. These social influences include factors associated with the culture, the behaviour of important socialization influences in the individual's environment, and past performance outcome (p.348)." The grading is an important element in academic success of members of culture driven by performance (Romanowski, 2004). According to Romanowski (2004. p.149) "success, achievement, and individuality" is inherent in the norms and beliefs of the culture. Within the context of Pakistani culture, the influence of family is immense. Family places great hope and view students success as a guarantee for family future. The rising expectation of family investment contributes significantly towards students' performance for higher grades. In collective culture like Pakistan, students are greatly influence by high expectations and hope of the family and want to fulfil family dreams through achieving higher grades and better future enabling them to look after their families. Researchers argue that parental pressure is a strong motivator for enhancing student self-worth and their academic performance affecting students' passion for grades (Kormarraju & Karau, 2008; Stoeber & Rambow, 2007).

Psychological influences are important dimension affecting students' performance in universities. According to andragogy theory, the motivating factors for adults is the external reward that they get as a result of superior performance based on academic grades (Davis et al., 2006). Students' accord value to higher grades that is compatible to the societal perception of value on performance (Van Etten et al., 2008). Researchers found that competitive academic environment, challenging curriculum, demanding degree requirement, peer pressure, fear of unemployment after graduation, and a mix of physical, social and academic factors make students vulnerable to extreme psychological pressure that influence their efforts to get good grades (Hamaideh, 2011; Iglasias et al.,2008; Kranz, 2008; Laurence et al., 2009; Qaisy & Thawabieh, 2012).

 Financial constraints relates to the total cost associated with earning a university degree. In Pakistani context, the financial cost of education is borne by the parents, close family members, or by students themselves through doing part time jobs. With regard to those who are working, the financial cost of education is a huge burden since meeting this cost out of meagre resources poses difficulties in managing themselves. The perpetual increase in fee and related expenses, both in public and private institutions, further add to this financial burden. Students, as consumers, tend to perceive the value they receive in turn that should be compatible and more than their actual expenditure. The concept of consumerism perceived by students makes them believe that they should have good grades in return to the cost of attaining a degree (Craig & Fairchild, 2007). In addition, the entitlement of scholarships, or tuition fee waiver for good performance on attaining a certain grades foster their passion for a good grade (Knapp et al., 2009)

According to Wigfield and Karpathian (1991) "academic self-concept as person's knowledge and insight about himself in academic related circumstances." Seli et al., (2009) found that a higher level of students' perception about his ability significantly affect their desire to do well and achieve superior academic success. The internal happiness and the future career plans are important determinants to achieve good grades. Studies have indicated that academic self concept positively affects students' passion for higher grades and overall academic performance (Loo & Choy, 2013; Phan, 2012; Pruzer, 2011; Usher & Pajares, 2009).

Academic recognition refers to the extrinsic rewards that university offers to the students in the forms of scholarships, tuition fee waiver, dean's list, the best student of the programme, roll of honour etc. The recognition for academic performance energizes the students to excel. This recognition gives them a sense of purpose that directly affects their self esteem, open enormous career opportunities, and results in goal oriented behaviour **(**Usher & Pajares, 2009**).** Academic recognition also improves their social status among peers and family

members who view them as top performers. Researchers found that academic recognition positively affects students' commitment to high academic grades (Phan, 2012; Seli et al., 2009).

Employability after graduation is major concerns in developing country like Pakistan where the unemployment rate is high and the job market is shrinking rapidly. This poses a dilemma for students and parents to find a suitable job for the students after completing the education. With limited jobs available in the market, due to prevailing economic environment, and the employers' preference the best entrants, student face tremendous pressure to do well and achieve an academic competitive advantage. Lately, the best employers have imposed minimum restriction to apply and students falling below the benchmark grade point average in the last degree and not shortlisted for the job. This milieu poses enormous challenges for students to achieve acceptable grades to become eligible for entry into the job market of preferred employers. Research found that students' performance in the university based on cumulative point average was a predictor of student employability **(**Gokoludas, 2010).

Methodology

Primary data was collected through structured questionnaire from a diverse sample of 242 students from different universities located in Rawalpindi – Islamabad, Pakistan. Convenience sampling technique was used in selecting the sample. The instrument was developed based on intensive literature review from previous studies (Gokuladas, 2010; Thomas, 2011; Loo et al., 2013). Pilot testing of the instrument was done. The reliability of the instrument during pilot testing was within acceptable range (Nunnally, 1978). Principal component factor analysis using Varimax rotation was performed. The results indicated a score of (0.876) for Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at ($p < 0.01$). Factors loading (<.50) were not retained. Factors having Eigen values (> 1.00) were retained. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis were used to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis
Passion for Grades	3.22	.621	.793	.723	.531
Parents, Interest	3.96	.662	.744	.385	.624
Psychological Pressure	3.84	.632	.614	.560	.319
Academic Recognition	3.95	.720	.824	.250	.371
Academic Self Concept	3.84	.582	.737	.219	.696
Financial Concerns	3.72	.885	.830	.788	.234
Employability	3.70	.488	.857	.053	.413

N = 242

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variables	PFG	PI	PP	AR	ASC	FC
Passion for Grades	-					
Parents' Interest	.439**	-				
Psychological Pressure	.586**	. 748**	-			
Academic Recognition	.476**	. 486**	.632**	-		
Academic Self Concept	.563**	.455**	.588**	.506**	-	
Financial Concerns	.440**	.431*	.487**	.480**	.488**	-
Employability	.446**	.544**	.645**	.494**	.717**	.533**

** Correlation is significant at $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)
*Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)
Passion for Grades (PFG); Parents' Interest (PI); Psychological Pressure (PP); academic Recognition (AR); Academic Self Concept (ASC); Employability (EMP)

Table 3. Regression Analysis

Variables	Proposed Effects	Path Coefficient	Observed t-level	Significance
Parents' Interest	+	.223	3.70	0.000**
Psychological Pressure	+	.150	2.1	0.050*
Academic Recognition	+	.339	5.71	0.000**
Academic Self Concept	+	.626	11.97	0.000**
Financial Concerns	+	.071	1.768	0.078
Employability	+	.965	15.43	0.000**

** Significance level; $p < 0.01$
* Significance level; $p < 0.05$
Dependent Variable: Passion for Grades
N=242; R Square, .632; Adjusted R Square, .623; F = 67.350 ($p < 0.01$)

Descriptive analysis in Table 1 indicated the respondents' general agreement with the variables of the study and its effects on criterion variables. The correlation analysis in Table 2 manifest that all variables are positively correlated with significance level of ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$) respectively. The results of regression analysis in Table 3 indicated that all predictor variables have positive and statistically significant relationship with criterion variables ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$). The model show positive and statistically significant relationship ($F = 67.350$ ($p < 0.01$). Predictor variables accounted for 63% variance in criterion variable. The results exhibit that employability, academic self concept, and academic recognition were the most significant predictors of dependent variables.

Discussion

The study provides insight to the phenomenon of students increasing passion for academic grades in institutions of higher education in Pakistan and contributes in the field of research in contemporary issues facing higher education. The results offered empirical support for the positive and statistically significant effects of parents' interest, psychological pressure, academic self concept, academic recognition, and employability on students' passion for academic grades. The study indicated that variable of financial concerns was not a significant predictor of the students passion for grades. The results of the study are in harmony with the outcome of previous studies (Gokuladas, 2010; Thomas, 2011; Loo et al., 2013).

The results pose challenges for university administrators and academic leaders to undertake appropriate interventions strategies to promote cognitive, social and moral skills among students to achieve holistic learning outcomes.

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