



A STUDY ON STUDENT MOTIVATION AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract: The present paper explores how student motivation changes over time at university level based on the students' perspectives. A purposive sample of nine students was interviewed from the Economics Discipline of Khulna University. The paper reveals that the loss of motivation can occur at any stage of a student's university life: some may start university with low motivation, yet others may be caught in it at the middle stage or even at the very end. While a small number of students sustain good motivation level throughout their student life, most students experience some swings between high motivation and low motivation and majority of them tend to end the university life with a frustrated mindset. It is also found that some factors play a positive role and can drive a number of students more to academic tasks. In addition to providing insights and explanations about what factors work behind to shape the motivation level of students at the university, the present paper reveals how the provision of certain interventions is related to them and thus relevant to the existing setting.

Keywords: Student motivation, university life, qualitative study, goal orientation, academic tasks, interventions

Introduction

In his "*Education and the Social Order*", Bertrand Russell (2010: 15) maintains that one of the "sole purposes of education is to provide opportunities for growth and to remove hampering influences." The university education plays an important role in student's life in this respect. Not only that, the university life is also different from the previous educational life in the context of gaining experience as it provides better self-autonomy to students in choosing their own life decisions. The significant concern of how the students carry themselves in these years shapes their future career. Since it is the students who generally determine their own affairs in the university life, a particular student's self-motivation to study becomes critical at this stage. In the context of educational research, motivation is that force which makes students take part in academic tasks, both easy and formidable. True, if students cannot derive enough motivation from the environment, they may detach themselves from academic contacts and assigned activities.

Educational psychology and applied psychology have studied student motivation for decades and numerous methods are available for the practitioner's use. Researchers often apply the quantitative techniques to study student motivation. For example, Müller and Palekčić (2005) tackled how student motivation changes over time in a three-year follow-up study using statistical techniques like structural equation modeling. Qualitative research techniques, however, are not uncommon. For instance, Martin *et al.* (2003) applied the qualitative approach to study the self-handicapping behaviour, defensive pessimism, and goal orientation of 1st year university students from three universities in metropolitan Sydney, Australia.

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The purpose of this study is to understand motivation change in students, brought about from their own perspectives, over the years in their university life, and thus a purposive sample of nine students from the Economics Discipline of Khulna University has been adapted and used. The idea is all events and actions do not have the same level of effect on student motivation; some of them might strike the students intensely and could lead to other motivation problems. Therefore, a qualitative research approach can be more suitable to gain a better understanding of the quality of student motivation during the university life. This paper describes how students come to university with an amount of varied motivation and how their motivation level evolves over the years. It identifies those important points in a student's life in which his or her motivation level changes dramatically, explains the causes by relating them to theoretical discussions and describes the relevancy and importance of certain interventions within the existing setting that can effectively contain any potential problems associated with student motivation.

Methods and material

In the present study, the research objective has been achieved through logical objective and systematic methods and analysis. Since this paper aims to explore how student motivation changes over time at university level, it is necessary to study only those students who already experienced university life for more than four years. Therefore, data were collected from the students of Economics Discipline at Khulna University who had already completed the undergraduate level from there and were studying at the post-graduate level. There were eighty-one such students at Economics Discipline at the time of the study (Sumon Mohanta, student, personal communication, April 19, 2011); thus, the population of this study consisted of eighty-one students.

In fact, choosing of an adequate sample banks on a good number of factors that do not entail an exigency to be handled in this context. Therefore, a purposive sample of nine students was selected in the present study, which is better suited for an in-depth study. Because, here two factors were primarily considered in student selection – the students' willingness, which is essentially required, to participate in the study spontaneously and their inclination to share their experience with us honestly. The respondents were also chosen to represent such students who hail from the heterogonous socio-economic background, in terms of grades, satisfaction level towards one's performance at the university life and the overall level of respect towards the University. Of the students, six were males and the other three were females. The age of the respondents ranged approximately between 24 years 6 months and 27 years. To protect their privacy, the female students were given the following first three pseudonyms while the male students were given the last six: Samira, Sheila, Sabina, Saied, Jabir, Raja, Sumit, Akash, and Mahmud.

Procedures and ethics

During the last two weeks of April and the first week of May 2011, a number of unstructured interviews and follow-up interviews were conducted with the respondents over the telephone until they continued to repeat the same facts. The interviews varied from 58 to 85 minutes, and the average duration was approximately 75 minutes. Notes were taken both during and after the interview so that none of the important information and data were left behind. Unstructured interviewing helped the respondents to open their minds and freely expressed their opinions at their own accord while telephone interviews have the merit of being unthreatening for the respondents (Bernard, 2006: 211, 261). After the initial rapport building, the respondents were informed of the objectives of the study and they were encouraged to share their stories of experience. Although it can be argued that existence of biases is possible in narratives in the sense that the researcher guides the data collection procedure. Nevertheless, many believe that narrative

tales are the best technique to preserve “richness and authenticity” of the original data (Neuman, 2007: 336).

In the interviews, the participants told us how their willingness to study changed in the university life. Our data analysis began with open coding, which is the process of identifying interesting words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs and distinguishing them with labels. For example, the label of “LNMOT” was applied to indicate “little or no motivation” to the following remark of a student: “I was not happy at all when I got admission into the university.” Open coding continued until the analysis produced no new and interesting codes. Then five broad analytical categories were formed based on initial coding.

Several ethical issues were faced when conducting the research and, therefore, preventive measures were taken in every case. Primarily, the informed voluntary consent was taken from the participants. An option that researchers may choose is not to use any offending terms like “self-defeating” or “self-handicapping” (e.g., Martin *et al.*, 2003). However, this practice is ethically unacceptable as the participants’ opinion and judgment should always be valued if possible. Hence, the participants were informed of every aspect of this study beforehand. At every stage of the research, the utmost care was practiced to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. For this reason, pseudonyms are used throughout the paper instead of their real names and certain information is deliberately removed that could reveal their identities. Moreover, respect to the participants and to property rights has been considered an essential part of every effort. The research is pursued in such a way that it does not violate the participants’ interest and wellbeing. During the interviews, the proper care of not hurting any of the students’ emotions was sincerely taken. Efforts were made to avoid making any judgmental comments on their life. Instead, the following were focused on them: how they thought, felt and understood. For the same reason when the students’ personal problems were referred to, we tried to understand from the context that whether they could tell us more, and when we felt asking questions about personal matters could have harmful effects on them, we stopped inquiring further.

Results

Students’ goal orientation and motivation level when entering the university: This study identifies three types of students entering the university: students who are performance- oriented (i.e., those who feel better when they outperform others), students who are mastery- oriented (i.e., those who like to develop own skills and who seek mastery of the subject rather than performance), and those who fall outside both of the above-mentioned categories, i.e., those students who simply do not have any specific orientation. On the other hand, the respondents’ motivation level was found to fall into two broad categories: those who had high level of motivation to participate in academic tasks and those who had little, if any, desire to do so.

It was observed that students generally started university with the mindset that they would have to come out with flying colours. The respondents gave several reasons, which they formulated based on their previous life experience. Some believed that they would get a good job; others thought it was the indicator of individual ability while the rest complied with the same study plan they had followed in their previous academic life. For example, Samira had a good academic career before entering the university. When she entered the university, she was quite happy because she had to overcome many socio-cultural barriers to reach such a level. For example, her home was in a conservative locality and there female education was discouraged. Those socio-cultural factors had been a source of tension throughout her educational life and, at the same time, they had made her more determined. She reported her level of motivation at that time in the following way:

I entered the university with all my heart on study. From my family life, I experienced that it is very difficult to do business and maintain honesty at the same time. So, I always preferred

jobs. I also had the belief that the better I would perform as a student, the easier it would be for me to get a job. I evaluated my success by the marks I got in the examinations. I wanted to become one of the top few students, which I considered an indicator of my ability. I still believe that the duty of a student is only to concentrate on the academic education.

Similarly, during the interview, another student Sabina expressed in the following way how she formulated her desire to study:

I always stood first in the classes before entering the university. All the members of my family were successful as the students. They have high expectations from me. I cannot think of anything else except studying and performing well in the university.

Some students expected more from the university, not just good results. They were looking forward to developing themselves as better persons in all respects. For instance, Saied commented, "At first, I had a desire to perform well. I thought that now I'm a university student, so I should at least work for a moderate result. However, my main aim has always been self-development in every area."

Alternatively, there were others who were lacking any of the above goal orientation and had little, if any, motivation to study well. For instance, Jabir did not have any purpose such as obtaining good marks in the examinations or preparing for jobs. He also was not concerned about learning. His aim was to relax and enjoy the university life. Another student from the sample, Sheila, also entered the university without "any specific aim". Her following comments reflected how lack of goal orientation and lack of motivation could happen at the same time:

I did not enter Khulna University with any specific aim. It had been my desire to get admission into The University of Dhaka. To me, The University of Dhaka meant prestige. Moreover, all my friends were going there. My family did not approve the idea of going to a different city and staying there alone. Therefore, I had to choose Khulna University, but did not like my new classmates at the University. I was not happy at all.

It was also found that some students (e.g., Raja) became disheartened immediately after the admission test results for not getting the chance of studying their favorite subjects e.g., Business Administration. But they were able to make a quick recovery from it just before the beginning of the academic activities.

How students became more motivated: Some students discovered interest in academic activities for the first time when they found others doing so. They also came to realize the necessity of education and the expectations of family members and relatives. All such students who started valuing academic activities after entering the university were found to have become performance-oriented rather than mastery-oriented. As Jabir reported:

After around a year, I noticed that my classmates were hard on study. This inspired me to some extent. I felt that I should study, too. At the same time, I also realized that my family and relatives expect better results from me and in social aspect grade is the main yardstick of a student's quality. I started studying devotedly and continued to do so for about one or two terms until I got depressed because I did not see any likely change in the result.

For some students, this period started right after getting some test results. Sheila, e.g., at first felt interested in academic tasks when she got good marks in the very first class test she had sat for. The other students who started their academic life with good motivation power also experienced the same process when they started performing well in the examinations. It was observed that all mastery-oriented students experienced an increase at their motivation level at some point in their university life. For instance, Raja was not interested in taking admission into Khulna University. Not only that, his favorite subject was Business Administration and not

Economics as he had passed HSC (equivalent to A level in England and Wales) from Business Studies Group. But, when Raja performed well in the term final examination of the 1st year 1st term, his motivation to study rose to a higher level. In his own words, "I appeared as one of the best students in the 1st year 1st term examination. This encouraged me a lot. I felt that since I had been doing well at this level, I possessed certainly a good potential." Similarly, when Samira's results were getting better and better for the first three years, she started working harder and harder.

How students lost motivation: If the students did not get the expected grades and if they believed the cause was personal, such as personal problems and limitations, they continued to study with same determination. For example, after the first year Sheila noticed that her extra study could not bring any additional marks, which she expected out of the efforts she had put in. She became busy with some personal problems at the same time. She attributed some of her failures to those personal problems and managed to maintain focus on academic tasks for some extended period.

Samira described a slightly different situation. At the start of the university life, she noticed some elements that seemed problematic to her. For example, she identified that keeping a good relation with teachers might result in having higher marks. But she was doubtful of such external factors and believed these would not influence her case. Nevertheless, when she did not perform to her desired expectation at the beginning of the fourth year, she became doubtful because she had been doing the same things for all the years and following the same study techniques, but the results were completely different! She did not have any clue about the reasons of her past success and the subsequent failures, which made her somewhat frustrated. In this case, the failure of the system to provide a clear picture to the student has created the gloomy outcome. As she reported, "If someone had guided me at that stage, I could have advanced far ahead." At the end of the interview, she also commented, "If the attention of the teachers was paid to the good students as well as to others on the same gradation level, students like me could have enjoyed a better learning experience at the university." The need of proper guidance was not only expressed by students like Samira who went through a loss of motivation, but also by students like Raja who was satisfied with his academic life in the university.

If students did not get the expected grades and if they believed that the reasons for such failure were external, they started experiencing a state of marked helplessness. This is the situation when students believe, however, hard they try, the environment is not responsive to them and they start withdrawing their efforts. For example, Sabina's beginning period in the university was very difficult. She failed in finding a good accommodation, and hence, she could not concentrate much on her studies. Even then she was satisfied by the grades she got in the 1st year 1st term. After that the days grew more difficult and at last bleak for her as she could not perform that well in the next term. She became completely broken-hearted at that time. But she continued to try hard until she realized that "If one could not perform well at the beginning, one loses the attention of the teachers and then it becomes very difficult to be marked out as one of the top students in the class." Similarly, after a period of trying, Jabir also became depressed because he did not see any noticeable change in the results. He said, "Once you are out of a teacher's favorite list, the possibility is slim to see the smile of luck in this regard later on." The same also happened to Sumit whose poor results were attributed partly to his "not working enough" and partly to the cause of the faculty. On the other hand, in addition to suggesting the negative mindset and activities of the faculty, Akash and Mahmud mentioned that they were also lacking in ability, which was an example of low self-efficacy belief (i.e., the belief that he or she can perform tasks) from their part.

Students were also found to have lost motivation permanently because their expectations about the academic environment were not fulfilled. For example, Saied produced the following

comments about how he sundered himself from academic study and became engaged in extra-curricular activities:

Saied: Soon after I had attended several classes, I did not like the pressure. It was too early for me. I did not like the environment: the treatment exercised by the teachers and the culture of my fellow mates. I felt that everybody was focusing too much on study and career. There was nobody around. The person who could commit and vomit would only perform better in such an environment.

Interviewer: What were you looking for?

Saied: You know... something like more extra-curricular activities, debate, etc. I also thought about how performing the tasks assigned to us would help me in getting a job. Then I decided against it because I was not convinced of the worth.

Another student Raja was more concerned with specific problems like cramming. Although he overall maintained a good grade and high motivation level, he commented, "I sometimes faced problems in some courses because I was less interested in cramming. I cannot do that at all."

All these students who found their fall at motivation level had two possibilities: one was to concentrate more on academic study and the other was to become detached from it. So, in this study the pattern we discovered for them was to follow the latter one.

How students survived after losing motivation: The students who lost motivation at the initial stage and those who also experienced it at the later stage owing to poor results (i.e., who experience learned helplessness), they both sought alternative goals, and usually which they ended up with was the preparation for jobs. They formulated the belief that the main purpose of study was to make a good career. When they started believing that their academic education was far from being helpful in this regard, they gradually lost interest in academic tasks. This situation was well described by Samira:

After entering the post-graduate level, I started seeking a good job. The academic education seemed to me more meaningless, having no relevance to jobs and future career. I started preparing for job examinations and allocated less time to academic assignments and progress.

Similarly, Sabina realized that there was no benefit if she underwent tension; rather she would have to study the materials well. She thought that grades were not very important in all types of jobs and a comparatively good one would suffice. When she entered the post-graduate level, in her own words, academic learning appeared "optional" to her and her efforts were "mainly directed towards job preparation".

A different strategy was followed by Saied. As he had possessed some mastery-oriented mindset, he always set his own targets and tried to follow his own routine in order to improve himself as an educated human being. He continued it accordingly in the university life.

How students ended university with high motivation: This study spotted that the end of the university life usually resulted in poor motivation level for most of the students. Loss of motivation happened to them in the early years of the university life as well as in the later years. Some suffered it for different reasons and at multiple times. Here it was noticed that they concentrated only on study, they always got good grades and focused on nothing else, as was clearly observed by Raja. He produced the following text during the interview:

I always prepared myself more or less in the same fashion as I took preparation for my 1st term final examination at the university and fortunately was able to maintain similar results.

I believe that results are indicators of a student's ability. But I never felt the urgency to compete with others. I am satisfied with my university study.

Discussion

This research provides some interesting and important insights into the change of motivation in students over the university life. Among the performance-oriented students in this study, no case of discouragement was discerned at the initial level. During such period, whatever grades the students obtained, they remained satisfied with them. Two factors might have led to this situation. First, the students knew that there were limited seats in universities in comparison with the number of candidates sitting for the admission tests and therefore only good students could enter a university. As a result, they forged low expectations about their university performance. Second, the total university admission procedure implies such a situation which is quite different from the circumstances prevailing in the candidates' former places of study. Sometimes, students with relatively previous excellent academic grades fail to get admission into universities because of their not performing well in admission tests. On the contrary, when other students with relatively low grades seize the opportunity of admission, they form low views of their own potential and also of their future expectation due to their comparatively poor academic performance in the past.

This study has revealed that the students who did not find any improvement in grades became detached from academic activities instead of trying harder. According to those students, once they were out of the competition, the environment made their return difficult. These students got detached from the academic study owing to externalization of the reasons of their failure and the option that they took was to exercise learned helplessness.

The study has also shown how the academic environment influenced the students' goal orientation. Some students started valuing education for the first time because of external factors like grades, recognition or family expectations rather than internal factors like self-enrichment and thus became result-oriented rather than mastery-oriented. The evidence thus confirms Covington's (1999: 127, following several researchers, e.g., Oakes, 1985; Glaser, 1976) assertion that the most important source of self-worth to students is good grades.

It is also an important finding that students entering the university are likely to come up with different learning objectives – some students are performance-oriented while others are mastery-oriented, and some others may not have any particular objective and with different motivation levels. Some of the respondents we interviewed expressed their feelings of being left out of the mainstream and some emphasized on the need of more guidance. An education system that is supposed to promote the welfare of only one type of students (e.g., only those who are result-oriented) is likely to discourage others. For example, if students are praised by teachers at the university for the progress they have made, compared to their past achievements where parents at home, for their wards, only value coming top at examinations, there the young learners who are not having the fully matured mental make-up may lose their sense of direction and become at times confused of what to do (Moè *et al.*, 2009: 270). Here, a combined plan and a positive outlook can dissolve the contradiction of goals between different parties. Formulation of a detailed plan before the starting of class, which includes opinions from a wide variety of groups like teachers, professionals, academicians, former students, the students themselves and their guardians, can prescribe a sense of positive direction at the initial phases that can act as a motivation force for students of all categories. To have more diverse opinions that can encourage and recommend interventions, seminars, workshops etc. can be arranged. Besides, a plan has some additional advantages. Some mastery-oriented students cannot cope with the pressure and anxiety that stem from academic activities and as a result become alienated from study. A plan can help them to stay focused if they find that academic tasks are linked to their ultimate goal –

mastery of the subject. Finally, a comprehensive plan that is revised and updated from time to time by incorporating opinion from all parties concerned can act as a guideline to any person involved in the academic process at any time and also assist in effective decision making. Besides, a set of learning strategies needs to be developed that includes knowledge of activities such as how to process information and techniques and also how to bolster self-efficacy.

Education is not a zero sum game. The tendency to define it only for the top few students harms everybody in the process. When performance becomes the only yardstick and students face intense competition, they often focus more on activities such as cramming that ensure success in the examinations but that does not increase learning. Moreover, an environment only promoting competition may increase anxiety and the fear of failure in a student (Pintrich, 2003: 116). Likewise, results and praises are extrinsic rewards – they are extrinsic because they are not linked to the act of learning itself (Condry and Chambers, 1978, as cited in Covington, 1999: 129). To save students from this kind of discouraging situation and harmful environment, Pressley *et al.* (2003: 158) has suggested the strategy of emphasizing the need of their self-improvement over the need of outperforming others. A more detailed study by Deci, Koestner and Ryan (2001) has also come to the same conclusion. Encouraging students to cooperate with one another is important in this respect because researchers have found that students often learn more when they work mutually (e.g., Johnson and Johnson, 1985, 1979, 1975, as cited in Pressley *et al.*, 2003: 158). Additionally, proposals are made to support students' self-determination behavior, which is believed to increase the quality of learning (Deci *et al.*, 1991: 325) and benefit for both individuals and society (Deci *et al.*, 1991: 342).

Research has shown that performance-orientation can diminish even the top students' ability because once they reach their desired level, they do not usually feel the necessity to bring about further academic progress (Pressley *et al.*, 2003: 158); and thus, not reaching to their true potential. For example, result-oriented students whose position is on top of the class may produce the false belief that they have done everything right. Outside the university authorities, therefore, the need for greater consciousness from the students' part is no less important because every strategy, whether formulated by them or not, would have the main impact on their life and livelihood.

This paper has revealed how important the creation of a fair and transparent evaluation system is for the encouragement of both the performance-oriented and mastery-oriented students. Especially the result-oriented students want to see that their efforts are converted into grades. If the evaluation system is not sound, the students who obtain poor marks in the examinations may fail to understand the reasons behind such performances. Sometimes students may identify faults with the evaluation system or alternatively they may falsely start believing it to be unsound. To increase the student's faith in the evaluation system, steps should be taken to improve the system, for example, reading and explaining written answers in the class, comparing two or more papers, etc. Emphasis has to be put on the students' actually believing in the assessment mechanism.

Most importantly, the present paper has illustrated how students were having difficulty in continuing study for a long period with the same determination and frequent reassurance. The students have always to be reassured that they are achieving something valuable and the significance of academic tasks should be made clear to them. In this regard, bringing the successful former students and the potential professionals at the university and making interaction with them can help both the teachers and the students to keep abreast of recent developments and trends in the field. Additionally, this can exert immediate positive effect on students' motivation level and help them to maintain their composure in the face of any kind of difficulty, for instance, even when they find it problematical to prepare for jobs or to contend with personal problems.

Limitations

The data used in this study were the respondents' self-reported data and no type of verification was done to ensure their accuracy. Additionally, some may argue that the collection of past data at only one point in future may result in loss of data due to memory failure. In that case, it is asserted that if any experience really makes a lasting impression on a student's motivation level, he or she should not have any difficulty remembering it. Therefore, in this study what is counted as the most important is the varied experience of the respondents. However, there could be some underlying irresistible factors which were actually responsible for changes in the quality of the respondents' motivation, but the respondents were not aware of them. Since the present paper has emphasized the students' own insights, it has therefore not attempted to identify those underlying factors.

Conclusion

The present study has explored how student motivation changes over the university life from the students' own perspectives based on a purposive sample of students of the Economics Discipline at Khulna University. For proper understanding of this phenomenon, a qualitative approach can be more meaningful, which has been used and delineated in this study. This research suggests that certain factors downgrade students' enthusiasm not only at the time of starting academic activities at the university for the first time, but also at any later stages of their university education. On the contrary, students sometimes receive stimulus from certain aspects of their personal and academic life. The present paper has not only identified those factors and stages, it has also explained the environment of the institution and linked to it certain interventions that can lead to the initiation and sustenance of strong motivation level in students at universities. By focusing light on student motivation at the university life from the students' personal perspectives, this study has produced an improved understanding of the phenomena; and it may prove useful to academic planners, teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders related to this sector.

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