



RESEARCH PAPER

Grades and Glory: A Qualitative Investigation into Business Program's Academic Success at Public Sector University

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to explore the perspective of outstanding learners of the business administration department of a public sector university. The study delves into the factors influencing academic success, the learning methodologies employed by students in the pursuit of excellence, and the significance of grades in shaping their academic journeys. This study involved a qualitative case study approach by using in-depth interviews with six students who attained higher academic standing, providing insights into their distinct opinions and experiences. The results depict a positive influence between students' academic performance and their approach to learning. The study emphasizes the public university's proactive encouragement for students to aim for higher grades, aligning with broader trends in academic institutions. The evolving industrial landscape amplifies the demand for skilled professionals, prompting business schools to underpin the importance of academic achievement. The findings emphasize the dedication of business administration department students to maintaining high grades and actively enhancing their proficiency.

KEYWORDS Academic Performance, Academic Success, Pursuit of Excellence, Public Sector University

Introduction

The educational system in Pakistan, particularly its evaluation through the Grade Point Average (GPA) system, plays a crucial role in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for Quality Education (SDG 4). As highlighted by Shah & Irshadullah (2018), students are recognized as pivotal resources for national economic growth, emphasizing the significance of inclusive and equitable education. Alfian & Othman's (2005) findings, showcasing a positive correlation between academic performance and overall societal development, underscore the role of education in achieving SDGs. In this context, students' approaches to their subjects, level of interest, time management, and support structures such as parental guidance and professors' mentorship directly influence the quality of education and, consequently, contribute to SDG 4. Additionally, fostering an environment that encourages active classroom participation aligns to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote SDG 4. In essence, the GPA system and its associated factors become integral components in realizing the broader goals of global education and sustainable development.

On a 4.0 GPA scale, a GPA of 3+ is universally acknowledged as a creditable score, depicting outstanding academic performance among students at both national and international universities. According to Lang (2007), 3+ standing means attainment of 3 grade points which is equivalent to a grade "B" or above in the percent grade system. The particular percentage required to attain 3+ standing differs among universities, often

interchangeably termed as class rank. Further, class rank has become a prominent performance yardstick nowadays (Luthar et al., 2020)

Several potential factors may influence the maintenance of higher grades in university (Robbins et al., 2009). Students with high academic performance in their past determine the attainment of higher grades throughout the four-year degree program. Whereas, extracurricular classroom activities also play a fundamental role in securing promising grades. Activities include curricular, academic, and social pursuits and the efficient utilization of the resources can significantly influence students' grades (Robbins et al., 2009).

According to Stupnisky et al. (2008), university admission brings a major transition in students' lives as compared to their schooling span. Contrary to the structured school environment where teachers are the leaders, a university student is bound to handle every learning task independently.

Furthermore, the challenges students deal with in university life are their independent learning, managing the registration process, scholarship hunting, specialization, and course selection, securing financial resources, hostel accommodation process etc. When students encounter such challenges, it inadvertently impacts their academic achievement (Stupnisky et al., 2008). A study reflects that while facing such challenges students encounter various types of tensions. Some of the tensions are stress on success and failure, intense pressure to excel, different unfamiliar tasks, keen academic competitions, unique social networking, frequent failures, and awful career decisions. In the view of Stupnisky et al. (2008), when students remain overwhelmed feeling and experience stress and are unable to cope with it, the likelihood of failure increases, potentially leading them to the point of dropping out of university.

Academic learning perspectives are shaped by observing the surroundings and understanding various social roles within the community (Karl & Schwab, 2012). Community engagements and interactions with diverse community characters function as catalysts for the attainment of learning. Furthermore, learning does not remain a singular spell of acquirement of knowledge but rather a lifetime journey contributing to the holistic progression of an individual proficient in adapting to evolving circumstances and addressing challenges (Ahmed, 2014). The process of making meaning is fundamental to learning, involving learners in sharing ideas and perspectives within a learning community (Kuo et al., 2012; Akhtar et al., 2023; Hongyun et al., 2023; Sohu, et al., 2020). Research identifies that learners' viewpoints undergo evolution over time, molded by changes in their surroundings. As the surroundings change, learners not only assimilate new knowledge but also refine their existing understanding (Kuo et al., 2012; Sohu et al., 2019; Mirani et al., 2021; Sohu, et al., 2020). Moreover, the learning process is not limited to a specific location; it can occur both within and outside educational institutions (Karl & Schwab, 2012).

Enduring learning empowers individuals to become dynamic social agents, adept at taking action, reflecting, and effectively responding to cultural, social, and developmental challenges in their daily lives (Ahmed). The literature highlights the importance of students' perspectives on academic learning and their approach to learning in shaping the quality of their educational outcomes (Duarte, 2007). Students actively contribute to shaping their learning experiences, underscoring the significance for educators to grasp their viewpoints on learning to enhance their teaching styles (Fishman, 2014).

A study conducted by Lang in 2007 depicted that high grades and GPAs are gaining better significance in colleges and universities. This study further describes that a majority of educational institutions rely on this notion when making student's admission decisions (Dakhan et al., 2021; Sohu et al., 2022; Iqbal et al., 2023). Knowing this stance students and their parents aimed at higher GPAs, as these grades are highly valued by such institutions. In line with literature, proficient quantitative skills and critical thinking play a pivotal role, particularly in subjects like Business Statistics (Junejo et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2021; Sohu et al., 2023). These skills are instrumental in achieving higher grades at business schools, especially in quantitative subjects where the ability to solve and analyze business situations with accurate calculations is crucial. Consequently, students often link their grade achievements to their proficiency in critical thinking and quantitative skills (Rochelle & Dotterweich, 2007).

Additionally, Rochelle and Dotterweich (2007) observe a positive correlation between student performance in an introductory marketing course and academic achievement. Another study reinforces this finding by indicating a positive relationship between securing good grades and success in marketing education courses (Dotterweich, 2007; Dakhan et al., 2020; Junejo et al., 2022; (Naveed et al., 2023). Besides, another study suggests that in mathematics courses, the attainment of high grades is also significant, as it directly influences students' performance in the subject.

Since each student undergoes a unique experience, the constructivist approach posits that each student possesses an individualized perspective on learning (Yilmaz, 2008). A literature gap is evident due to the relatively limited number of research studies aimed at comprehending the significance of grades (Hamilton et al., 2021) and students' perspectives on learning practices. These perspectives delve into the reasons behind achieving high grades and potential academic attainment (Shim & Ryan, 2005). Therefore, this study is conducted to fill the gap that exists in previously conducted studies. Hence, the primary aim of the study is to contribute valuable insights for students, educators, and educational institutions by exploring the academic views of students regarding a high level of excellence in studies within the business administration department of a public sector university. Applying a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews.

Material and Methods

The primary aim of this study is to explore the academic perspectives of students who have achieved higher academic standing. To achieve this objective, a qualitative case study approach is deemed appropriate. This approach involves a qualitative analysis where data from a specific institute, along with its contextual background, is presented, aiding in identifying the particular challenges faced by the organization (Choy, 2014). This study focuses on six students, including three males and three females, who attained higher academic standing within the business administration department of a public sector university.

To gather insights, semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted, consisting of open-ended questions. The selected students who met the criteria for higher grades were the interviewees. The data analysis process followed the thematic analysis method as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving three key steps: familiarization of data, coding and categorizing, and presentation of data. This methodology has been adopted to disclose a comprehensive understanding of the academic views and experiences of students striving for higher academic grades in the specified university context.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study enlighten three vital themes that significantly influence the academic landscape for students aiming to achieve a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3 or higher.

These themes highlight distinct aspects of the academic journey:

1. Insights into successful learning approaches for academic excellence.
2. Essential contributors supporting a high level of academic attainment.
3. Key challenges limiting academic excellence.

Unveiling Success through Strategic Learning Approaches for Academic Excellence:

The university provides various learning resources for students, and some students get benefit from these resources resulting a high academic standing. The data indicates that the university offers an array of resources, encompassing the library, online student portal, computer labs, trade labs, and proficient teachers. While discussing these resources and their utilization, an eighth-semester BBA student stated, "Certainly, we utilize internet resources, online books, and the library's book collection, with a preference for reference materials. Undoubtedly, these resources significantly contribute to the exam preparation." This highlights that students achieving higher academic performance make effective use of the university's resources. The student borrows books from the library, utilizing both digital and hard copy formats, demonstrating adaptability to technological advancements. Moreover, the student employs references and course books from the library to prepare for examinations.

Supporting this perspective, another student from the Business Administration Department, currently in the final semester of the BBA program, shared insights into utilizing university labs. He elaborated:

"Certainly, I utilize them extensively. My specialization is in finance, so we have the Bloomberg Trade Lab, which proves immensely beneficial. Whether it's topics like fixing, portfolios, or anything related to finance, I can obtain the necessary information for different countries, stocks, and share prices. We easily access this information through the lab, as other websites are often unreliable and lack comprehensive knowledge."

This indicates that the university gives free access to reputable sites such as Bloomberg to the students. The student finds it helpful and acquires pertinent information from these platforms, enjoying unrestricted access to valuable insights on market conditions, stocks, and shares, ultimately enhancing their awareness and application of knowledge within the classroom setting.

Moreover, the perspective of another student in the final semester of the BBA degree program sheds light on utilizing various university resources, including teachers, books, and internet services. He shared:

"I visit the teachers' office, and nowadays we have many resources available. As I mentioned, many reference books are available in the library. If there's any topic you want to explore, you just go to that domain, find the book, and if not, then there's an easy way – you do some searching, surfing on Google. Do some internet searching on your topic; there are hundreds of resources on one topic. If you still don't understand, then, of course, we must consult with the teacher.

These findings point out the student's utilization of technology, using it to seek answers to queries. He leverages library resources to access books and, importantly, utilizes the guidance of teachers by visiting their offices to clarify doubts. Maintaining a study routine is an essential aspect of achieving high grades as it aids in enhancing learning. Interviewed students emphasized the significance of a structured study routine in directing them to achieve their academic goals. A graduate of the BBA program who completed her degree last semester shared her views about her study routine. She said that it should be adopted at the beginning of the first semester, adding:

"Maintaining a study routine is important, but you cannot maintain it the way you write your timetable because there are a lot of things that occur without planning. But it's important to make your timetable at the start because, becoming a senior, you better know yourself. You know how you can study, so in the start when you are a novice, you should work on the study routine or say timetable."

Findings reveal that while this student maintains a study routine, it isn't strictly adhered to; adjustments are made as needed. This highlights the importance she places on a study routine at the beginning of the semester, but as she gains knowledge and her study approach matures, she develops a clearer direction. Consequently, towards the end of the semester, the emphasis on a strict study routine diminishes as she gains a better understanding of her academic needs.

In the context of maintaining a study routine, allocating specific time for studying is also important. Data from interviewed students indicates that higher achievers in academics prioritize their study time, attend classes regularly, and actively participate. Discussing the allocation of study time, one of the senior students studying in the 8th semester of the BBA program shared their experience with his routine:

"If I talk about academics, the courses of BBA, I hardly spend 15 minutes or half an hour daily. Whatever I listened to in class, I just overview that. But the first and foremost thing that I need to maintain my grades is to be an active listener in class. One should remain attentive throughout classroom learning that helps reduce stress related to assessments and results."

The response directs that the student who consistently maintains high grades places high importance on being attentive in the classroom. He actively participates in class activities, listens carefully to the teacher's lectures, and dedicates 15 to 30 minutes each day to revise the entire session. This strategic approach, involving post-class revision and note-taking, has been instrumental in sustaining a GPA of 3+ throughout the degree program.

In any university, there is a prioritization of higher academic standing. Students realize that achieving excellence in grades has a high importance. The collected data indicates that students interviewed for this study have consciously decided to strive for higher academic standing throughout their degree program. An interviewee from the BBA program shared insights into this mindset, stating,

"Initially, I wasn't overly concerned about achieving high academic standing when we first joined the university. However, later on, we realized that various organizations have set standards, and to apply for positions like GTP or OG1, or OG2, higher grades are a prerequisite. This realization becomes ingrained in students' minds, motivating them to pursue higher academic standing, as they recognize its importance for their prospects after graduation."

The findings emphasize the substantial importance placed on higher grades in the job market. At the start of the semester, the mentioned student was initially unaware of the significance of higher academic standing, not attributing much importance to achieving higher grades. However, as the awareness of corporate policies requiring higher grades for job eligibility increased, the student shifted focus and began prioritizing higher academic standing throughout the BBA degree program.

Similarly, another BBA student in the 8th semester interprets the direct link between higher academic standing and job market success. She shared:

"The job market demands high grades; only those who can apply have higher academic standing. So, I motivated myself not to take low grades; instead, it should be high, so I make my efforts on that basis."

These findings explicitly reveal the student's intentional focus on achieving higher academic grades, driven by the belief that maintaining high grades makes job acquisition easier. The student's dedication to hard work stems from this focus, motivating her to consistently strive for and maintain high grades throughout her degree program.

Data from interviewed students further highlights the connection between hard work and consistency toward goals. Echoing this sentiment, a student from the business department in the last semester of the BBA program shared in her interview:

"Hard work begins when you set your own study objectives and, on that objective, you set your directions to follow, and you don't withdraw from that objective. For me, hard work is very important because till today, whatever I have done is hard work."

These findings highlight the strong correlation between setting study objectives and diligent effort. The student emphasizes the significance of objectives in providing direction, and the pursuit of hard work becomes a means to achieve those set study objectives.

Another student from the final semester of the same BBA degree shared her views on the significance of achieving higher academic standing. She stated:

"Higher academic grades are a requirement for all companies, making them significant not only for my academic career but also for my professional journey afterward. In my job, I not only need higher grades but also additional skills – practical abilities such as computer skills and others. However, higher grades remain a necessary component."

The findings demonstrate the student's awareness of market demands and the realization that students with higher grades are more likely to succeed in the competitive marketplace. Despite recognizing the importance of enhancing skills, particularly in areas like computer proficiency and practical know-how, she doesn't overlook the role of higher academic standing in shaping her career.

In the academic realm, extra-curricular activities assume a significant role. Students actively involved in such activities demonstrate greater engagement in their studies compared to those who abstain. Data reveals that participation in extra-curricular activities not only contributes to skill development but also aids in achieving higher

grades. An 8th-semester BBA student from the business administration department highlights the importance of such activities:

"Of course, we ought to participate in sports activities and in different events as well. Students should participate in such events because this keeps them active physically and mentally. This provides extra knowledge apart from the traditional one that helps in career growth, to nourish yourself, to build up as a more career-oriented person."

The findings uncover that this student, maintaining a higher academic standing, attributes significant importance to extra-curricular activities. To him, these activities offer a platform for acquiring skills beyond what traditional books provide. He emphasizes the role of extra-curricular activities in learning diverse skills such as time management, communication, and decision-making, contributing to personal and professional development.

However, it is noted that excessive focus on extra-curricular activities, particularly at the start of the semester, can adversely impact academic performance. A BBA student, part of this study, articulates this perspective: "Yes, it should be done, but not at the beginning. During the initial semesters, it's advisable to avoid it. However, towards the end of the semester, you can participate, as doing so at the beginning may lead to a loss of study time, hindering the maintenance of high grades, as the focus tends to shift.

The student suggests that, according to their perspective, to sustain higher academic grades, students should engage in activities towards the end of the semester when grades are already maintained, allowing them to shift their focus to other pursuits, such as extra-curricular activities. They caution that involvement in extra-curricular activities during the initial semesters may lead to a diversion of focus, potentially impacting grade maintenance.

Factors Contributing to the Attainment of Academic Excellence

An examination of a widely accepted interpretation inherently involves the examination of its underlying influences. This facet of my study delves into the intricate details of the significant factors influencing students interviewed, propelling them to achieve higher academic standing within the Business Administration Department of a public sector university in Sindh, Pakistan. The data reveals that these students attribute their success to the university's grading policy, emphasizing its pivotal role in keeping them aligned with their academic goals. A senior BBA student in her final semester highlights the benefits of the system, stating, "The grading policy serves as a motivator, encouraging students to dedicate themselves to their studies. There is a kind of feedback loop whereby the possibility of failing pushes us to work hard and maintain higher grades." This perspective illustrates how the university's grading process motivates students to exert significant effort in their academic pursuits, establishing a sense of accountability for their ongoing success in the degree program.

To maintain higher academic grades and garner recognition within the university, students must employ specific strategies. The data collected from interviews conducted for this study depicts the key practices adopted by students to attain high grades. A student from the eighth semester of the BBA program shares insights, stating, "Maintaining consistency in studies and a commitment to continuous learning are crucial. I maintain a focused approach, particularly in the realm of business studies. My

strategy involves acquiring in-depth knowledge in the areas I am studying, ensuring a solid grasp of the subject matter."

These findings indicate that sustaining dedicated study habits and an unwavering commitment to continuous learning are essential. The student adopts a focused approach, especially within the field of business studies, aiming for a profound understanding of the subjects studied. This strategic approach plays a pivotal role in maintaining higher academic standing.

In a similar vein, another senior BBA student emphasizes the routine of giving presentations as a facilitating factor and shares that:

"Like presentations in an international conference where students present in front of external professionals, it helps you when you give any presentation in class. You gain confidence, and you perform better as compared to others who haven't experienced any conference presentation. Indirectly, activities like presentations enhance teamwork skills and confidence."

According to this student, engaging in extracurricular activities such as conference presentations aids in improving presentation skills and provides confidence, contributing to enhanced performance in the classroom. Additionally, it fosters teamwork skills, giving her an edge over classmates who have not participated in such extracurricular activities.

Certainly, when students engage in extracurricular activities, their social circles naturally expand. The data collected from interviews with students indicates that in the last semester, students tend to prefer studying in groups as their circle of friends grows. Discussing the influence of social learning, a student from the Business Administration Department enrolled in the BBA program in the last semester shared:

"It helps in this way that we study together, remember things better and memorize. For example, for marketing-related subjects, we study in groups and discuss with each other about brand launching, brand advertisements, brand flaws and advertisement flaws etc. These things help us memorize because when something is told, it is better remembered."

The findings discussed above describe the significance of social learning. Students learn more effectively through group discussions. The student emphasizes that studying in a group helps her remember and memorize things. Specifically, in the field of marketing, studying in groups allows them to exchange information about market developments, brand launches, the activities of other brands, new advertisements, and even the flaws of various brands. The student asserts that the interactive discussion of different ideas within the group facilitates easier retention of these ideas.

Key Challenges Limiting Academic Excellence

In any scenario, both positive and negative aspects coexist, and this research reflects a balance between these two facets. While positive factors propel the pursuit of higher academic standing, some challenges impede this academic goal. The following excerpt from the collected data exemplifies how excessive involvement in extracurricular activities hindered one student's learning and grades. She explained:

"In the 5th semester, during the first job fair and subsequent startup events, we had holidays scheduled three days before our exams. During this time, I participated in an international conference arrangement. While others were dedicating their time to studying, I was occupied with conference preparations. The next day, I had an exam on statistical influence, and it went very badly because I didn't manage my time to study as I was engaged in conference activities all day."

These findings identify that participating in extra-curricular activities, especially around exam days, has hampered this student's studies. During the holiday period before exams, this student was engaged in organizing an international conference, leaving little time for exam preparation. Consequently, her grades in the statistical influence subject were adversely affected. This highlights that excessive and untimely involvement in extra-curricular activities is a significant factor impacting this student's academic performance.

Similarly, another student shared views regarding extracurricular activities:

"Individuals who fail to achieve higher grades are often more engaged in extracurricular activities. Additionally, they tend not to exhibit a strong commitment to diligent effort, as they commonly hold the perception that they can study at the last minute and still successfully comprehend the course material. It's essential to clarify that dedicating a single day to intensive study is not considered genuine hard work, as true diligence involves consistent and continuous effort over time."

These findings endorse that individual who do not attain higher academic standing are frequently actively involved in extracurricular activities. Moreover, they often lack a robust commitment to consistent and diligent effort. This is compounded by a common belief among them that they can postpone studying until the last minute and still grasp the course content successfully. The interpretation emphasizes the negative impact of engaging in extracurricular activities without a concurrent dedication to sustained, consistent effort on academic achievement. The notion that intensive study on a single day does not equate to genuine hard work underscores the importance of ongoing and persistent diligence for academic success.

Similarly, another senior student from the same department shared his experiences of disconnecting from social media while studying. He added:

"If there is important work and a looming deadline, I turn off the internet on my mobile and laptop. No notifications mean no distractions. Once I finish my task, I switch it on again."

This student's approach to discipline study time is commendable. He practices turning off the internet on his cellphone and laptop when there is important work with a deadline. By doing so, he eliminates distractions from social media notifications, allowing him to focus entirely on his studies.

While discussing the obstacles and strategies to overcome them, a BBA student in the 8th semester during his interview shared valuable suggestions for fellow students. He suggested:

"Consistently keep a diary and craft a daily to-do list. For instance, if I receive an assignment today, I ensure to plan and complete specific tasks related to it tomorrow. By organizing your activities, life becomes significantly more manageable. Create a daily to-

do list outlining the tasks for the next day and adhere to it consistently, avoiding postponement. Delaying tasks only compounds problems, so it's essential to tackle them promptly."

This student's insights reveal a methodical approach to scheduling activities, encouraging other students to adopt a similar practice by maintaining a diary and diligently completing the listed tasks each day. He emphasized that this systematic approach brings ease and eliminates worries from students' lives. Additionally, another BBA student in the 8th semester advised regarding participation in extracurricular activities. She said:

"During the initial four semesters, refrain from participating in extracurricular activities. Starting from the fifth semester, engage actively. Prioritize hard work and continuous effort. Follow recommended textbooks and read articles suggested by teachers. The crucial aspect is to concentrate on teachers' lectures; and take thorough notes of everything the teacher conveys. If writing is challenging, consider recording the lecture and listening to it at home, as this can be immensely beneficial. Additionally, utilize the internet as a resource, especially if you're not adhering strictly to textbooks."

The suggestion received during the interview was that fellow students should consider engaging in extracurricular activities starting from the fifth semester. The recommendation is to abstain from such activities until the fourth semester, as it might disrupt the learning process. Additionally, the student emphasizes the importance of hard work for success, encouraging others to persevere until they achieve their goals. Furthermore, the student provides specific advice for classroom success, including active participation in teacher lectures, reliance on course books, thorough note-taking during class, and recording lectures for later review. The student also advocates using internet sources to deepen understanding of various course concepts

Conclusion

The attainment of higher academic standing emerges as a pivotal factor in the university lives of students, shaping their academic trajectories and acting as a benchmark for performance evaluation, echoing sentiments emphasized by Lang (2007). The global significance of achieving elevated grades is emphasized, especially within the context of business institutes, where academic success is intricately linked to market demands. The study's consistent findings illuminate the public university's proactive approach to encouraging students to strive for higher grades. This institutional emphasis aligns with the broader trend in academic institutions, driven by the recognition that companies actively seek individuals with robust academic achievements.

The evolving industrial landscape has led to a heightened demand for proficient professionals, compelling business schools to elevate the significance of academic performance. In tandem with this trend, corporate entities increasingly exhibit a preference for candidates demonstrating superior academic standing, as elucidated by findings from Waseem and Zarif (2012). This nuanced study not only delves into the experiences of students within the Business Administration Department but also unveils a collective determination among them to attain elevated academic standings. Moreover, the study underscores students' active engagement in skill enhancement endeavors, portraying a resolute commitment to academic excellence in response to the discerned market demands.

Within the context of SDG 4, the nexus between the evolving industrial landscape, heightened academic expectations, and student endeavors in the Business Administration Department aligns with the broader global aspiration to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. SDG 4 specifically aims to facilitate access to quality education, promote skill development, and foster a conducive learning environment. The discerned commitment among students to excel academically reflects a microcosm of the overarching objective of SDG 4—equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in the evolving socio-economic milieu. As business schools respond to market demands by emphasizing academic excellence, they contribute to the realization of SDG 4, thereby fostering a cadre of proficient professionals capable of navigating the complexities of the contemporary industrial landscape.

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