

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE DISTINGUISHING COMPLETERS AND NON-COMPLETERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

By

SARWAT SULTAN *

MARTIN HAGGER **

* Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan.

** School of Psychology & Speech Pathology, Curtin University, Perth, Australia.

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the findings of a study conducted on identifying the psychological and socio-demographic factors contributing in completers and non-completers of distance learning program. A sample of 232 distance learners ranging in age between 25-45 years old participated in this study. For psychological factors, the Perceived Competence Scale Williams & Deci, (1996) and Achievement Motivation Scale Murray, (1983) were administered to them along with socio-demographic variables namely age, gender, disability, employment and marital status. Participants' average scores in mid and final examination were used as their academic performance. Findings showed that completers of distance education have been found significant higher on perceived competence and achievement motivation (i.e. work, mastery, & competitiveness) than non-completers. Results also revealed that psychological variables of perceived competence and achievement motivation are significantly positively related with completers' academic performance than that of non-completers. Furthermore, it was identified that the distance learners who were younger age group, female gender, non-disability, nonworking conditions, and single status completed their program having higher academic performance. While non-completers' academic performance was found more poor in older group, male gender, disabled, employed, and married students. On the basis of these findings, it is underlined that formulation of policies for distance education and curriculum should be based on consideration of these factors.

Keywords: Academic Performance, Perceived Competence, Achievement Motivation, Distance Learners, Socio-demographic Variables.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is defined as the educational system where students and their instructors are physically at distant, they communicate through writing using the modes of letter mail, email, fax, or computer conferencing, they talk verbally by telephone, audio or video conferencing, or involving close contacts such as face to face tutorial sessions (The Commonwealth of Learning, (COL) 2003). The globalization of distance education supplies several chances for developing countries to understand the goals and objectives of education system. Universally, the students' interest in distance education that is comprehended as a practical selection by many learners, colleges, and universities is becoming greater and rich in latitude with the progress of

knowledge and communication technologies (Gibson, (1993).

Peters, (1999) was also confident in maintaining that distance education is not only extending and broadening educational possibilities, but also, minimizing differences and high monetary values and prices, induces curriculum modifications, and assists in encountering the workforce demands. As a matter of fact, distance education has served to get rid of several typical obstacles to working peoples' involvement in learning programs (Ojokheta, (2000). The increasing popularity and acknowledgement of distance education system, and the realization and identification of its value and significance in supplying distance learners with better and nouveau educational opportunities accessible in gaining traditional teaching

ways that they get, contributed to the shift of many typical individual mode institutes to double mode ones (Oladejo, (2010). All over the world, the reputed and long-familiar Universities such as Stanford, Yale, Northwestern, and Dartmouth, Pennsylvania State University (US), California Institute of Technology, University of Washington, Curtin University Australia, University of Toronto (Canada), Open University (UK), and the Open University of Japan have followed distance education programs to teach business, arts, engineering, and education (Hardy, (1999). Pakistan as a developing nation that thrusts and embraces distance education also has an Allama Iqbal Open University to provide University education to her citizenry.

With the growth, progress and increasing rate of distance learning system, it is vital and critical to ascertain the performance and success of learners in programs (Kotey, & Anderson, (2006). This is depending on the reality that the caliber, prime and criterion of the program can be estimated by learners' completion ratio of education and their academic performance (Dunlap, (1999). Nevertheless, this has been detected and determined that the outcomes obtained so far from this method of learning vis-à-vis distance learners' academic performance are not as successful and impressive as actually assumed and expected. Many of the distance learners do not complete their education and remain unsuccessful due to a large indefinite number of reasons (Ojokheta, (2000).

According to Willis (1994), high self-efficacy beliefs, motivation level, perceived competency, maturity, and self-discipline are generally assumed as vital and necessary usual characteristics of successful learners for the attainments of distance education programs and for the continuity of students in these programs thus there is the dire need to dig into some of the psychological and socio-demographic factors that could have strength to anticipate students' academic performance in distance education (Keegan, (1993). The thrust to conduct research on these factors is not unrelated with the realism that piteous and crushed academic performance of distance learners has grievous and un-playful significances for the program, development of

education in a country, and for distance learners themselves as well.

In addition, persistent unimpressive academic performance of distance learners coupled with high drop-out rates can make the program quite unacceptable as an alternative channel for providing standard and quality education to the people Edwards, (1996). Like, executive heads of workers will not be agree to allow their employees to get advance education in distance learning program if the expected and hoped goals with respect to improved outcomes are not ensured. At last, the longing, desires and ambitions of the learners may not be fulfilled that in turn may later lead to frustrations, much stress, feeling of dissatisfaction, letdown and failure and likely, suicide. The radically distinctive nature of distance learners draws their psychological and socio-demographic factors worthy and desirable of exploring in this research (Marland, Patching, & Putt, (1992).

From the preceding literature review, it can be derived that limited studies have been conducted to investigate the variables that portend the academic performance of distance learners while those that even subsist focused mainly on demographic variables as an element in their investigations (Biner, Bink, Hufman & Dean, (1995); Kumar, (2001). Numerous researches have been done on academic performance particularly on formal students, but not much work has been carried out on distance learning students within the educational system (UNESCO, (2001). Also, little research has been carried out to see the differences in the factors associated with academic performance of distance learners who complete or pass out and who do not complete the program or remain failure in the end of final exam. To break up this strand, the need for broadening the subject of information in order to assist or amend the poor academic performance of distance learners was called for, and has served as the prompting component for attempting the current piece of study to meet the existing significant research gap. The present study has thus examined the relationship between academic performance and student's psychological and socio-demographic characteristics such as age,

gender, disability status, employment status and marital status.

Research Questions

Having established a theoretical base for addressing the factors affecting distance learners' performance, we needed to conduct an assessment to determine what learners' performance regressed on. Based on the stated problem above, the study was focused on following research questions:

1. To what extent would completers and non-completers of distance learning program differ on perceived competence and achievement motivation?
2. To what extent would the psychological variables namely perceived competence and achievement motivation are related to academic performance of completers and non-completers in distance learning program?
3. To what extent would the socio-demographic variables namely age, gender, disability status, employment status and marital status are associated with academic performance of completers and non-completers in distance learning program?
4. To what extent would completers and non-completers of distance learning program differ on socio-demographic variables?

Method

Participants

The participants were 232 distance learners (male = 110 & female = 122) enrolled in Distance Learning University. Their age range was between 26-45 years old (mean age = 36.24, SD = 9.67). Purposive convenience sampling technique was used to approach the participants. The term 'Completers' was used for those students who were declared as 'pass' in the final examination and 'Non-completers' were those who were declared as 'fail' due to low scores. The selected factors included in the study as predicting academic performance were the students' psychological variables namely perceived competence and achievement motivation, and socio-demographic variables namely age, gender, disability status, employment status and marital status.

Instruments

Data was collected through the following questionnaires along with a socio-demographic variable sheet.

Perceived Competence Scale (PCS).

The Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) was developed by Williams and Deci (1996). It is a short 4-item questionnaire with 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 indicating "not at all true" to 7 indicating "very true" designed to assess constructs from Self Determination Theory. The PCS assesses participants' feelings of competence about, say, taking a particular college course, engaging in a healthier behavior, participating in a physical activity regularly, or following through on some commitment. A person's score on the PCS is calculated simply by averaging his or her responses on the four items. Cutoff score is 13 and a score higher than 13 is considered as high competency level. The original version of PCS has the split-half reliability of 0.83 and the translated version has the reliability coefficient of 0.77.

Achievement Motivation Scale

Achievement Motivation Scale Murray, (1983) measures the need for achievement consisting of three dimensions with 5-point rating scale; work, mastery, and competitiveness (a) the work factor containing 6 items represents "The need to work hard and to do an excellent job", (b) the mastery factor containing 8 items reflects "A preference for difficult and challenging tasks for splendid functioning", and, (c) the competitiveness factor containing 5 items describes "The enjoyment of interpersonal competition and the need to succeed". Item no. 1 and 3 are reverse scored from the mastery subscale to obtain a total score or score on each subscale. Internal consistency of the scale was found to be 0.71.

Academic Performance

Students' average scores of mid and final examinations were used as their academic performance in their distance education program.

Procedure

Utilizing the survey research design, this study was descriptive in nature which is of the "ex-post facto" type.

This is because the researcher has not manipulated any of the variables of the study. Students of distance learning education were contacted to participate in the study. After completing an informed consent sheet, participants were then given a booklet containing two measures along with a demographic variable sheet. Both scales were presented in English language and were administered one week prior to taking their final examination. They were requested to fill out questionnaires about their perceptions of competency and achievement motivation in distance learning education. Students' scores in their mid and final examination were obtained from teachers on request. The data was coded numerically (i.e., no names were used) to protect the participants' privacy.

Results

For Descriptive Analysis, mean and standard deviation, and for Inferential Analysis, correlation and independent sample t-test were computed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 19) to determine the relationship of psychological and socio-demographical variables with distance learners' academic performance. The questions were tested in the study at 0.05 levels of significance.

Table 1 shows the comparison between the completers and non-completers of distance education in terms of their perceived competency and achievement motivation along with its subscales. Findings suggest that completers have been found significant higher on perceived competency and achievement motivation (i.e. work, mastery, & competitiveness).

Table 2 reveals that psychological variables of perceived

Scales	Completers (N=97)		Non-completers (N=135)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Perceived Competence	22.73	5.35	14.91	9.40	3.61	0.00**
Achievement Motivation	73.09	7.19	51.97	11.34	4.16	0.00**
Work	24.15	5.65	20.20	6.07	1.99	0.043*
Mastery	32.76	6.66	20.14	11.91	2.94	0.00**
Competitiveness	19.17	6.08	15.69	7.07	3.68	0.00**

df. = 230, * p < 0.05, **p < 0.001

Table 1. Differences between Completers and Non-completers for their Scores on Perceived Competence & Achievement Motivation

competence and achievement motivation are significantly positively related with completers' academic performance than that of non-completers.

Table 3 shows the mean, Standard Deviation, and t-values for the scores of completers and non-completers' academic performance in respect to their socio-demographic factors. Findings clearly demonstrate that for both samples the opposing factors are contributing their roles in their academic performance. Completers who are with the younger age group, female gender, non-disability, nonworking conditions, and single status have higher academic performance. And non-completers' academic performance was found more poorer in older age group, male gender, disabled, employed, and married students.

Discussion

In any institution, academic performance of learners seems to be one of the central measure for estimating educational standard and quality of that institute. From the several researches conducted in the past have left the impression that the distance learners' academic

Variables	Academic Performance	
	Completers	Non-completers
Perceived Competence	.72**	.37*
Achievement Motivation	.86***	.11
1.Work	.48*	.05
2.Mastery	.63**	.12
3.Competitiveness	.67**	.24*

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Table 2. Correlations of Psychological and Socio-demographic Variables with Completers and Non-completers' Academic Performance

Variables		Completers (N=97)			Non-completers (N=135)		
		M	SD	t	M	SD	t
Age	26 -35 years	3.12	0.74	2.64**	1.48	0.63	1.29
	36 -45 years	2.41	0.23		1.11	0.37	
Gender	Males	2.21	0.35	3.91** *	1.21	0.61	2.19*
	Females	2.59	0.41		1.84		
Disability Status	Disabled	2.29	0.19	2.17*	1.34	0.16	1.48
	Non-disabled	2.71	0.47		1.56		
Employment Status	Employed	2.15	0.65	3.75** *	1.67	0.89	2.73*
	Unemployed	3.06	0.54		1.83		
Marital Status	Married	2.27	0.08	2.19*	1.07	0.68	1.13
	Unmarried	2.78	0.54		1.33	0.63	

df. = 230, * p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Table 3. Differences in the Academic Performance of Completers and Non-completers in Relation to their Socio-demographic Variables

performance in the last decades is not impressive in many of the colleges and universities in the world Holmberg, (1999b). This study therefore, has provided a Correlational account for distance learners' academic performance through the investigation of students' psychological factors namely perceived competence and achievement motivation, and also some socio-demographic variables namely age, gender, disability status, employment status and marital status with a consideration to amending completer and non-completer distance learners' academic performance. A close examination on the available review literature about the performance of completers and non-completers in distance education is almost empty and barren of concentration on psychological make-up of distance learners. An individual's achievements and success is directed by many psychological variables and socio-cultural stimulators that drive behavior Moore, & Kearsley, (1996). Therefore, this study was planned to address the factors contributing in successful distance learning.

To answer the first question, the independent sample t-test was employed to compare the perceived competence, and achievement motivation between completer and non-completers of distance learning program. Findings (Table 1) revealed the significant differences in the levels of these study variables. Completers were found with high achievement motivation in their examination than non-completers. Results also suggested that completers perceived themselves as more competent than non-completers.

The question about the relationship of perceived competence and achievement motivation with completers' academic performance was examined through the employment of pearson product correlation (Table 2). Results from this analysis depicted the significant relationship of completers' academic performance with academic performance and achievement motivation. Statistics from this analysis implied that the completers' academic performance of distance education is associated with psychological composition of their perceived competency level and their achievement

motivation levels. Also the socio-demographic variables of age, gender, disability, employment, and marital status contribute in their better academic performance. This question has aided the researchers in identifying whether the participants possess those learner characteristics necessary to be successful distance learners. It means for a successful learner, the perception of competency, and motivation for achievement is crucial element. Students' gender, age, marital status, employment status, and disability status also significantly account for their academic performance. These findings are in line with the work of Carbonaro, Michael, et al (2006) who reported the significant contribution of socio-demographic variables in the academic performance of distance learners. .

The most important finding centered on the question four which was called for measuring the differences in the completers and non-completers' academic performance in distance learning in relation to their socio-demographic variables. Independent sample t-tests were computed (Table 3) to compare the gender, age, marital, disability, and employment status for both completers and non-completers separately. For completers, findings showed that the age group 26-35, females, non-disabled, unemployed, and unmarried students perform academically well as compared to the age group 36-45, males, disabled, employed and married distance learners. For non-completers, the results are opposite to that of completers. Though the results indicated insignificant differences in the contribution of variables, but the mean analysis revealed that non-completers with the age group 36-45 years, male gender, disability, employment, and marital status have poor academic performance than those non-completers with the reverse variables.

Limitations & Suggestions

Though the psychological and socio demographic variables studies in the present research have been found ascertain and influential in determining and predicting the academic performance of distance learners, but still there are numerous psychological factors that could be associated with academic performance such as

personality traits, efficacy level, and computer anxiety. Also there is a long list pending to study their effects on academic performance such as rural/urban, urdu/English language, and difficulty level of curriculum. Thus it is suggested to study these variables in future so that the distance learning program can be made more effective and accepted because to be sure the distance learning has become a key to success in spreading and providing the education in any country. The contribution of distance learning in providing educational opportunities cannot be over emphasized. Moreover, it is important to mention here another limitation of this study that linked to its sample size and sampling technique. Due to the small sample size selected through convenience sampling, the findings are not able to generalize; therefore the future research is expected with a representative sample through a probability sampling.

Summary

This study ventured on findings broadening the subject of knowledge in educational psychology especially in the field of distance education. Thus, the study added the understanding in complying these two objectives. First, the findings have affirmed the relationship of the psychological and socio-demographic variables, particularly perceived competence and achievement motivation, age, gender, employment and marital status with distance learners' academic performance. Hence, it is underlined from the findings of this study that preparation of distance education policies and curriculum should be based on consideration of these factors. In short, both psychological and socio-demographic aspects must be considered to certain that distance learners are adequately prompted to learn and then to perform best academically.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarwat Sultan is presently working as the Vice President of Pakistan Psychological Association. She has done her Doctorate in Applied Psychology in 2009, and has recently completed post doctorate from Curtin University, Australia in 2013. She is the Chairperson of Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan-Pakistan. She has contributed more than 50 research articles in national and international journals, has presented 40 papers in conferences at National and International levels, and has supervised more than 100 dissertations. She has one book published in Germany to her credit. She is a distinguished teacher having experience of 15 years. She is also the HEC approved supervisor for the Ph.D scholars in the subject of Psychology. She is an active member of American Psychological Association. At She is also the Associate Editor of Journal of Pakistan Psychological Association.



Martin Hagger is a research professor with diverse research interests in the areas of health and social psychology. His main focus is the social processes involved in people's "self-regulation" of social and health behaviour. His research applies social cognitive and motivational theories to understand and to intervene and change diverse health behaviours such as physical activity, eating a healthy diet, smoking cessation, alcohol reduction, anti-doping behaviours in sport, and medication adherence. He is the Director of the Health Psychology and Behavioural Medicine Research Group at Curtin University. He is also editor-in-chief of *Health Psychology Review* and *Stress and Health* and editorial board member of eight other international peer-reviewed journals. In 2013, he was awarded the title of John Curtin Distinguished Professor, a "high honour that recognises capacity to provide significant and sustained contribution to the University". He was also awarded Researcher of the Year in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Curtin University.

