

Exploring Perceptions of University Students Pertaining to Grades over Knowledge and Skills

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to study the phenomenon surrounding the perspective of university students preferring grades to knowledge and skills. Three currently enrolled participants were selected from different private universities of Karachi. Participants' interviews were examined through thematic analysis. The findings suggested that students give preference to grades and knowledge, more job oriented focus of the study and made recommendations for institutions and academicians for further probing of the issue in hand.

Keywords: grades, knowledge, university students

Introduction

In current education theory and research the role of students is significant in terms of their thoughts, beliefs and feelings about teachers, peers, situations and events (educational setting). According to the cognitive theories of learning and instruction, students are active recipients of information and grasp knowledge the way it is expected, and reciprocally, the way students perceive the information and events around them highly reflects the system. The way information is usually presented and the way it is perceived is an interesting story as students perceptions are often influenced by the people in action and the situational cues.

Undeniably, the way students perceive learning and the entire evaluation system reflects a trivial image of the education system. Students' perception regarding grades is highly considerable because of two major reasons: motivation to learn and the information that is required for learning. The aspect to be considered is whether grades truly fulfill the criteria or not. The entire scenario is rapidly changing where grades are becoming more important than actual learning and hindering the learning process by deviating students from the way of gaining knowledge. Students try to minimize their chances of getting poor grades by opting for less challenging tasks and easier courses, rather than exploring something new taking up challenging tasks.

Competition is there in any field whether business or education, but it is essential to notice whether it is of assistance or not. Unfortunately, the competition in the education world today is not for the quest of knowledge and skills but for grades. Education is not about learning, exploring and gaining knowledge in many institutions anymore. Education as perceived by many critiques is artificially inflated with grades, and the most destructive type is found in tertiary education which is done on a curve. The bell-shaped curve, with As and Bs are perceived to be as favorable grades, Cs fall in mid-range while Ds are unfavorable grades. It is unfair in terms of promoting the others as threats and a system that appreciates numbers rather than abilities. Nowadays universities are more concerned about Grades or GPAs than whether students learned and understood anything during the programme.

The grading system is also promoted by teachers, which motivates the students to obtain good grades more than learning outcomes and acquire skills that may help them in the future. Thus, grades hamper the learning of the students. Particularistic Practice is a process of converting unacceptable test scores into acceptable ones (Gordan & Fay, 2010). Students who are inclined towards high learning orientation tend to opt for a knowledge and skill based approach in education that eventually creates a distance from them and a grade achievement approach. Therefore, the number of first-class degrees has increased over the past 10 years and has become a standard (Bruce, Birchall, Harper-Smith, Derry & Ross, 2012). The competitive labor-market has also added the

stereotypical factor into students' minds that only a first-class degree can get them a fine job. Now it is to find out what students think about these assessment practices which may relate to the future prospects of the job market.

Literature Review

Evaluation of an education system by means of students' opinions and views is generally a common practice. As a result, researchers never overlook the powerful perception of students regarding any area that is linked to education. Perception is based on beliefs or knowledge and contains a great value in providing critical feedback or suggestion for betterment. Thus, students have always been, and continue to become important in terms of their thoughts, opinions and the way they perceive the entire education system. However, students' input is an integral source, but not the only source of evaluation as both students and teachers hold the ability to understand and modify the education system by means of their beliefs or feedback if it is taken into consideration by the consultants and the authorities.

Globalization has resulted in change of educational needs and expectations of every individual and society (Khan, 2014). Both the individual and the society are competing and striving to be on top, to improve their lifestyle and their outlook towards life in general. For an individual, an impressive feat in college, depicted by high grades determines a promising lifestyle in general. Grades and grading systems in education are perhaps the most important aspect when it comes to the measurement and evaluation of educational objectives (Tippin, Lefreniere & Page, 2012). Assessment or grading is essential and the most basic component to evaluate the effectiveness of an individual's process of acquiring education. It is recognized as an important factor in student learning. Therefore, there exists a direct relation of students with the grades they achieve, and the impetus grades provide to learn and achieve. The relationship is almost cyclic and affects each other.

There are several operating universities and institutions in Pakistan, and the grading system prevalent in these educational setups is either inspired by existing systems or in place according to the institutions'

requirements. There are no major differences among these institutions, but a slight difference in assigning numbers to a particular grade exists.

It is important to understand that the evaluation process has facets linked with the entire institution: educational goals set the instructional objectives, which inform the assessment processes and which subsume 360° evaluation where primary importance is given to student feedback (Al Kadri, Al Moamary, Magzoub, Roberts, & Vleuten, 2011). All these aspects are aligned to deliver the end product; knowledge and skill development in students. This is undeniably an arguable, questionable and debatable topic. However, the present research explores the perceptions of students and the worth and value attached to their perceptions and experiences.

The grading criterion was developed in the 1700s. Yale University in 1783 had developed a grades depiction terminology which gave birth to the 4-point grading scale. Since then the conundrum continues to baffle students at least, for most of them are unable to find justice in the grade awarded to them. In addition, the educational fraternity is unable to state with conviction the extent of the increase in the knowledge and skills of the students because a high grade point average does not always warrant a highly skilled professional. On the contrary, it has given rise to a competitive streak where teachers and students both heavily rely on how much information one has to give must necessarily get a good grade. The grading system evolved over the years, and a plus/minus system emerged. Grades are distributed on a 4-point based grade point average (Baker, 1999).

The effects of grading may be negative due to the grading system and students may find themselves toppling down a grade level with a difference of a few marks (Baker, 1999). This also accounts for the resentment and the ensuing arguments with authorities and teachers on the grade assigned. How could a mark or two, completely change the grade from an impressive A to A- or B+ to B? What could be lacking in the assignment, test attempt, etc. to push a student to these discomforting level transits? Though the study results showed that teachers and students both have negative impression of the grading system for a particular

business course (Baker, 1999), yet it prevails and continues in all subjects and in all prestigious institutions.

Knowledge and skills are the cornerstones of education in colleges and universities (Rich, 1998). Knowledge and skills to a great extent render the success in individuals' lives: their self-contentment, their job satisfaction, their abilities to acquire a suitable job with a suitable remuneration, and their ability to participate in civic life. A rise in enrollments in higher education programs is seen for a sustainable future across the globe, where previously higher education was available to a very fortunate few. Knowledge and income, hence, have a direct relation with each other on the premise that the educated have a better chance of a better job. But with this the importance of academic achievement is being disregarded and devalued. For the need of a better job and a successful and speedy launch into the earning phase of their lives, most students are disregarding and devaluing academic achievement to greatly valuing grades. One of the reasons for this great value is the fact that a good grade point average (GPA) or cumulative grade point average (CGPA) is the route to success.

Most teachers are also grade-oriented. Their instructional sessions, test papers and assignments are focused towards the criteria usually set by them and the institution (Hunt, 2008). Teachers at the outset of the educational programs or courses drill the importance and value of good grades, especially around the time of tests and exams. Where teachers tend to think that their insistence on achieving good grades will be influencing the students, in actuality they do not realize the same (Reddan, 2012). However, teachers also perceive grading as one of the most difficult tasks in teaching (Frisbie, 1979). "Grading is one of the least liked, least understood and least considered aspects of teaching" (Green & Emerson, 2007, p.2). While some teachers will find it cumbersome to assign a grade, students question the fairness and the reliability of the grade and the teacher. Fairness is important to discuss to understand the perceptions of university students.

Psychometric analyses in many research studies have shown two types of students and student-orientations in higher education; a learning-oriented type and a grade-oriented type (Alexitch, 1996). With inhibitions of fairness in scoring and grading, it is plausible that students could resolve

to be on grade-oriented type (Alexitch, 1996). Therefore, institutional practices could act like a vicious circle, creating grade-oriented types, while creating more competition and struggle in the name of educational excellence (Landrum & Dietz, 2006).

The review of relevant literature suggests that students' perceptions in general are mostly negative towards grades and the grading system. The criteria might be invigorating and competitive in impression but it poses a great difficulty for both teachers and students, for one, it is stringent and may not always depict the accurate academic achievement of the student. The conundrums will continue since the grading system does have its merits and advantages. For one, is helping institutions churn out the best graduates who must have definitely worked their hardest to achieve exceptional grades and rankings. In addition, the students, in a general setting without an exception, are also able to acquire suitable job placement and remuneration, which strongly compliments their achievements. However, the qualitative aspects of grading will continue to be debated, since it has never really been society's mandate to extract the best few in the workforce. The evolving global trends also warrant the universities and the academia must produce able and productive citizens who are able to contribute to the betterment of the society and have self-contentment, self-satisfaction and self-esteem; there can be no other alternative.

Methodology

Study design

This qualitative investigation pursued a phenomenological study method. As per the nature of the study, purposive sampling was done to select participants from different private universities of Karachi. The study was planned to explore the perception of the participants revolving around the phenomenon of grade and knowledge preferences in attaining higher education.

Participants

Three participants were selected based on the criterion that each participant is currently studying in a private university of Karachi. Each

participant belonged to a different university in order to keep diversity. The participants were explained about the aim of the research and after obtaining their consent the interviews were conducted. The responses of the interviews were tape-recorded Akhter (pseudonym) was a student of a renowned Engineering University. He was studying Biomedical Engineering. He was a regular student and was also working part-time in an NGO. Sana (pseudonym) was a student of a renowned Business University, studying MBA Executive and also working in a school. She sees her bright future in the educational field once her MBA is completed. Ali (pseudonym) was a student of BBA final semester doing his majors in Finance from a reputed university in Karachi. He has plans to study further along with working in a Multinational as a Finance Executive and to excel further.

Measures

The study's source of data collection was in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in participant's own university setting. The participants were allowed to be bilingual whenever they felt the need.

Procedure

The in-depth interview responses of each participant were transcribed into English. The themes were identified through thematic analysis of the transcribed data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study revealed both parallel and distinct opinions of the participants. The data analysis discovered the following aspects:

Perceptions about education

All three participants expressed their views with complete confidence during the interview. They believed that education helps an individual to groom and upgrade at any point of time. From a futuristic view, education allows to work better and create opportunities for sustainable and life-long growth. Educational training helps in developing

a long term view and persistent intelligence. Sana explained in her response how she felt the need to acquire further education. She pursued two master level programs when the previous one left her dissatisfied. She mentioned:

“I was not keen on acquiring further education after my Bachelors. I began working in a school and discovered I have something to give; but before that I needed to upgrade myself. I pursued M.A. Education from a semi-private women’s university in Karachi. I was not satisfied. I wanted a more challenging learning opportunity and experience. I went for another Masters, this time in an elite private university. Anyhow, the reason for acquiring education was to upgrade myself, so that I may give in a better way.”

Sana’s response reveals that education is never a waste whether one makes use of it or not. If a person is career-oriented and stays in the loop, then at some point in time she feels the need to be upgraded in the information. However, both male participants Akhter and Ali focused more on career opportunities and professional development. Akhter stated:

“My reason to acquire education was to get better career opportunities and professional grooming.”

There is no doubt that university education, training and nature of knowledge contains a profound tendency to develop professional knowledge, critical thinking and systematic approach towards learning amongst the practitioners. Likewise, Ali in his responses confirmed that education nourishes one’s mind and helps to grow intellectually. Ali elaborated his view pertaining to the significance of education by reporting:

“Education helps you stay relevant in your field so professionally you become a valuable asset to your organization. It is also extremely important for the growth of the individuals themselves because it grooms you to be a better citizen. The more you learn the humbler you become because it helps you realize that you are in fact, quite ignorant. Education gives you the knowledge and training to make smarter decisions in your professional and personal life.”

Knowledge and abilities contribute the most in the success of a career; the lack of it can cause ineffectiveness in performance (Johnson, 2003). Ali's response is primarily true in terms of acquiring education for professional growth and getting ample opportunities, as developing a career is a ceaseless outcome of a comprehensive maturation and evolution of both knowledge and aptness.

Perceptions concerning education system

In this study, all three participants shared views that were extremely individualistic, based on their perceptions. Sana believed that the education system still has room to improve when she compared one institution with the other. Whereas, the responses of other two participants showed a few similarities. Sana shared her experience by stating:

"We have to improve, a lot! I must say there are a few higher education experiences that are worthwhile and certainly to go for. But they are just a few. The character of our nation must improve to provide such teachers in higher education institutions who will create a great impact in the lives of many. Neither you, nor I have met teachers as such."

Education plays a vital role not just in humanizing students but in developing a sense of self and existence amongst them in the world. Therefore, the responsibility of an institution is to provide such experience and platform to the students where they can rise above the basic needs of the materialistic world and search for one's self. Ali in his responses questioned the accessibility of education for all, which is limited to a certain population these days. Education systems are there to nurture, but they are doing a limited job in terms of the evolution of the entire population. Ali shared his opinion by asserting:

"Private universities are of course, commercially driven. However true this might be, private universities still offer a better quality of education compared to public universities. The only issue is that they should be more accessible to the general public, especially to the economically downtrodden"

classes so that they can fulfill the actual purpose of education i.e., to improve lives and not just help the rich get richer and leave the poor without a chance.”

Perceptions regarding grading practices and competitive environment

Normative grading system, based on curve, discourages collaborative learning and brings several consequences with it. Normative system creates disengagement with studies among students, lessens motivation, and increases examination and evaluation anxiety and affects interpersonal relationships (Crooks, 1988). Sana believed that there is a lack of check and balance when it comes to assessment and grading practices, as every university seems to be following its own system or a system that has been enforced. Sana shared her experience by expressing:

“With my experience I have come to know that there are conspiracies in the universities to purge a particular number of graduates each year. There is no measure of quality in testing procedures, in one program, a student is demanded to undertake various forms of evaluation, mostly memory-based or application-based. These again are arbitrary in form, purpose and outcome. Hence, the practices are questionable and not reliable.”

The progress of a nation is highly dependent on the educational systems; the quality they provide impacts the success of the students and all together the success of a country (Xu, 2011). Therefore, the educational practices including assessment and evaluation need to be upgraded as time changes. Akhter shared his views regarding the grading practices by stating:

”Assessment and testing practices are quite traditional and need to evolve with the changing times. Students should be assessed based on how they are taught. Tests need to focus more on the upper levels of cognitive learning of Bloom’s taxonomy instead of assessing only their knowledge and comprehension skills. University level education prepares

students for their jobs and so assessments should focus on their evaluation, application and creation skills.”

A child has an innate desire to compare himself with the others in every possible manner. Initially, formal competition was restricted to sports only, but now it is affecting education also. It is not the fault of an individual as society educates him/herself to compete and exercise all the abilities he/she owns (Verhoeff, 1997). Competition can be both encouraging and discouraging in the context of higher education. In Sana’s case, competition highly depends on the environment in which it entails and the aim it carries. She defined competitiveness as:

”There are two ways to see competitiveness: one way determines the best in a group of individuals, the other determines creative contribution of all, equally and accountably. I advocate for the second determinant. If I have the second environment, I feel creative and intelligent too. In the absence of it, I am not motivated and often feel negative emotions of either being too smart or too dumb in the presence of such a competitive group.”

Undeniably, competition exists in every culture and education is to communicate that culture, as a child is not born with a culture but embraces it later. This culture needs to be incorporated in the life of every child so they become characteristic and get prepared to deal with the hardships later in life. Ali takes competition as a healthy activity by declaring:

“As long as the competition actually helps you learn and improve, I think it’s a necessary element as it drives a student to getting better.”

Whereas, Akhter defined competition as a way of exploring and knowing oneself in depth. Theories suggest that competition is one of the most effecting way of motivating students and providing them with constructive feedback to perform better both in academics and later in life. Akhter believed that there is no harm in comparing oneself with others as it is a useful activity. He affirmed that:

“In the competitive environment of education, we can compare ourselves with others so we can easily get to know our weaknesses.”

Competition in education promotes a complete practice of abilities, guarantees a balance distributed between benefits and encumbrance, promotes high standards and progress in various fields (Crooks, 1988).

Perceptions relating to academic credentials:

Studies have shown that students who are more interested in extrinsic values put emphasis on grades, marks, standards, reputation and competition in general. Whereas, students focus more towards intrinsic values tend to look for intellectual competence, professional or personal growth. Ali shared his views regarding the race for grades:

”I believe that a student should think in terms of themselves and forget what grades others getting. As long as the student has achieved what they set out to achieve and they are satisfied with the grades they have, nothing else really matters. Grades are a reflection of learning up to a certain point, but they are based on tests, the results of whom are extremely circumstantial. So if grades are based on overall performance, they can be credible.”

Grades only provide information that is helpful in determining the progress of student learning. Research shows slight or no prevailing relationship in determining the adult accomplishment through grades. Grades tend to be limited to academic performance, but may not signify the overall life achievement of an individual. Sana’s beliefs are quite similar when she expressed:

“I think grades do not reflect the true potential and performance of a learner, especially given the fact that the evaluation methods and techniques are not qualitative, comprehensive and all encompassing.”

Students increasingly recognize educational credentials in determining their future employability; consequently, they sense a strong need to enhance their values in the labour market by increasing their performance in academics (Tomlinson, 2008). Sana believed that apart from grades, academic credentials contain greater value in the job market. She confirmed the significance by narrating:

”Good education ’! greater value ’! greater job opportunities.”

Regardless of a slight difference in perceptions of preference of grades and knowledge in education for future prospects, all the three participants strongly believed that academic credentials along with the skills one owns signify a person’s true abilities. Education in any era is not a waste, but helps in every possible visible or hidden manner (Lee, 2005).

Conclusion

Hence, it can be concluded that students see the importance of grades, knowledge and skills in terms of pursuing a satisfactory career in their lives. Whereas, they believe the system has created this success route map for them, where the name of the institution, grades or academic credentials remarkably signify better job prospects. Though students have an understanding of all the flaws the educational system has, this has become the demand of the labor market, and they are intentionally or unintentionally obligated to follow the established trend. Thus, the phenomenon can be further studied in order to understand the larger population, as the study is limited to a few cases and cannot be generalized. The findings of the study might support the private educational system in modifying their objectives for providing education and for the job market also to demand for candidates with academic credentials and without disregarding knowledge and skills.

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