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STUDENTS' PASSION FOR GRADES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The shrinking labour market and employers' obsession for talent have increased the challenges for students in universities to achieve higher academic grades for improved employability. Researchers have suggested different factors that contribute towards students' enthusiasm for grades during the educational career. The focus on this phenomenon in higher education has so far been restricted to developed countries. The purpose of this study is to investigate empirically the predictors of students' passion for university grades in institutions of higher education in Pakistan in a milieu of dwindling job opportunities under prevailing economic environment.

The study is based on primary data, collected through a structured questionnaire from 242 students studying in higher-education institutions. Factor analysis, correlation and regression analyses were used to determine the effects of pressure for employability, academic self-concept, parental interest, psychological pressure, academic recognition, and financial concerns on students' passion for academic grades.

The study revealed that pressure for employability; academic self-concept, academic recognition, parental concern, and psychological pressure were the main predictors of students' passion for academic grades. Financial concerns did not indicate a statistically significant effect on criterion variable. The study provides useful insight to policy makers in higher education institutions to formulate appropriate academic interventions to foster students' endeavours to excel in learning pursuits.

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Introduction

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

There is a growing tendency among students to strive for higher grades than with learning. Policy makers in higher education institutions should identify the factors that contribution toward students' passion for higher grades.

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

The primary purpose of education is to promote learning among students and enhance the understanding and foster tolerance enabling students to make significant contribution towards society. According to Wood (2009), higher learning focuses on academic learning as well as social and moral development of students within educational experience. The students' priority on achieving higher academic grades seriously hampers the achievement of moral and social values. The overall result of such academic experience is not holistic. Students' passion for grades is embedded in achievement motivation theory (Schunk, 2007) and its sub theories of expectancy value theory, cultural influences, self-worth theory and familial influences (Jones, 2008; Schunk, 2007). Achievement theory focuses on student need to do well and excel (Bembenutty, 2010). Within this context, the students' place high value on grades as an outcome and exert extra efforts to achieve it (Romanowski, 2004). Researchers relate achievement motivation to two theories in the field of education of education; functionalism and higher order thinking. The first deals with values and norms for functioning in the society namely independence, achievement and universalism (Pai & Adler, 2005). In educational institutions, grades are the determinant of performance and progress (Westacott, 2008). In higher order thinking, the focus is on the need to develop high order cognitive skills for academic success to make significant contribution in the society (English, 2008; Wood, 2009).

Researchers have found students' changing priority with main focus on higher academic grades than the learning outcomes (Peters, 2008; Thomas, 2011). Students perceive that higher academic grades offer lucrative opportunities for future employability and career advancement (Chamberlain, 2009). Milonopolulos (2007) argued that students are focusing more on attaining higher grades that development of social and cognitive skills. Gilroy (2008) found that students resort to professors' harassment to achieve high grades. Romanowski (2009) found that students' performance is targeted toward grades on any expense. Story et al., (2008) determined that many students prefer extrinsic rewards for their motivation to perform and are less intrinsically driven.

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