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Academic success: Is it just about the grades?

Dr Moira Cachia, Dr Siobhan Lynam and Dr Rosemary Stock

Researchers examining academic success often quantify it in terms of assessment grades. This assumption is questioned here by considering the students' understanding of academic success. The presented study aimed to identify students' views of its definition and the factors they perceive as crucial in attaining it. Sixteen undergraduate Psychology students at a modern university in London, United Kingdom took part in one of three focus groups. Participants defined academic success as: the accomplishment of the learning process; gaining subject knowledge; and developing employability skills. Thematic analysis of the collected data resulted in two themes: extrinsic elements, including teaching content and the student support structure; and intrinsic elements, including motivation, self-directed learning and personal skills. The discussion of these results at the conference led to the conclusion that achieving academic success and minimising skill gaps for employability post qualification requires the intrinsic elements to be addressed as an integral part of the compulsory programme rather than presented as optional add-ons.

Keywords: academic success; personal development; student engagement; support, employability

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Vignette

A second year student requested an urgent appointment for academic advice from her personal tutor. She demanded an explanation of how the degree classification was calculated to make sure she pitched her efforts correctly for the upcoming assessments, in order to achieve the final grade that she had in mind (which was a 2:1). Her reasoning was that in order to maximise her employability it was crucial to balance her time between achieving the required grade and gaining the appropriate level of work experience.

Introduction

The concept of academic success has generally been associated with the attainment of summative assessments, as stipulated by learning outcomes. However, York, Gibson and Rankin (2015) argue that the meaning of this term is debatable as it has an “amorphous” identity, depending on varying subjective perspectives. Indeed, while academic success can be attributed to the attainment of knowledge demonstrated through high assessment grades, it can also refer to the graduates’ capacity to secure a professional role related to their degree. After analysing the literature on the use of this terminology in different subject fields, York et al. identify six elements which define it, namely: “academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational outcomes, and post-college performance” (p. 5).

Factors influencing academic success

Academic success has been attributed to student factors as well as teaching factors in the literature. Mihaela (2015) considers psychological factors, beyond intellectual ability, to have an impact on academic achievement. Through the application of personality testing, this author concludes that there are significant differences in personality between students

with high attainment and those with low attainment. Participants' test scores on assertiveness, conscientiousness and emotionality correlated significantly with their grades, establishing that students' interpretation of their learning experience can lead to different academic results. Moreover, Busato, Prins, Elshout, and Hamaker (2000) assert that the students' learning style and achievement motivation relate to their academic success, showing that individual characteristics play an important role.

However, the teaching provision also plays an important role. Naude, Nel, van der Watt, and Tadi (2016) highlight the need for higher education practitioners to enhance a growth mindset in students and an internal locus of control, making sure that university settings encourage the development of intrinsic motivation. Hence, responsibility is placed on the educators to instruct and instil development of these abilities, through purposely included aspects of the curriculum.

Assessments are a compulsory component of university programmes, having both a formative and summative function. Practical tasks with clearly-communicated usefulness are more effective in preparing students for employment, rather than traditional assessment methods, such as examinations (Keppell & Carless, 2006). Students perceive assessments as beneficial to their learning if they are explicitly aware of how they build on their current skill set and their relevance to their future career (Lynam & Cachia, 2017). This therefore leads to the understanding that students are more likely to engage in the learning process if they can relate the set assignments to their employment ambitions.

The presented research paper

The research questions were: How do university students define academic success? What factors do students perceive as facilitators of their academic success? This study aimed at informing higher education practitioners when planning teaching and learning activities,

ensuring that a student-centred approach promoting engagement is implemented. Ethical approval was obtained through the School of Human and Social Sciences' ethics committee at the University of West London.

A qualitative design was adopted, with focus groups as the method of data collection, utilising a semi-structured interview guide to stimulate discussion. A voluntary sample of 16 Psychology undergraduate students took part in one of three focus groups lasting 1 to 1.5 hours each. These included 5 males and 11 females aged between 19 and 53 years of age (Mean age: 29 years; mode: 19 years) with an average grade of 2:1 in their assessments. Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was then conducted on the data transcripts.

Data analysis and interpretation

In defining academic success, participants emphasised the process as much as the outcome, highlighting the need for personal and professional development. The following student quotes illustrate these points. (focus group (fg)):

...to feel that you are achieving and growing as an individual (fg1); ...knowing who you are... and how you impact on other people... (fg2); ...getting as much information and applying it in life..., more than doing good at an exam... (fg3).

Two main themes, extrinsic factors and intrinsic factors, were identified to summarise participant students' perception of what contributes to their academic success. Table 1 provides an overview of the thematic analysis derived from the transcripts of the three focus groups. While a thorough presentation of the results is beyond the scope of this paper, below is an outline of the analysis and interpretation of the collected data.

Table 1. Themes, subthemes and codes derived from the data analysis and interpretation

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Intrinsic factors	(1) Self-Management	Taking responsibility
		Dealing with setbacks
		Self-awareness
	(2) Motivation	Short and long term goals
		Interest in subject
		Willingness to learn
	(3) Personal Skills	Professionalism
		Communication
		Managing workload
Extrinsic factors	(1) Teaching Provision	Quality of resources
		Staff availability
		Feedback
	(2) Support	Family support
		Social support
		Financial stability

Firstly, extrinsic factors refer to the teaching provision and the support available. The teaching provision includes the quality of resources, staff availability and feedback: ‘the lecturers are really good at replying... they’re not giving you the answer... but it points you in the right direction’ (fg2). However, students do not put all the responsibility on their educators. They also seek to have a stable support structure beyond that offered by their tutors, such as their immediate family: ‘they are always behind me, they are always checking about my course work, about my exams, if I’m doing well, that I’ve got the books I need’ (fg1). Support also comes from their flatmates, course colleagues and other social groups.

Moreover, financial stability is an important extrinsic element as most students are gaining their independence at this life stage and learning to manage their own spending.

Secondly, intrinsic factors comprise self-management, motivation and personal skills. Self-management refers to the act of taking responsibility for their learning, dealing with setbacks and being aware of their own capabilities. Participants spoke of the need to be proactive: 'If you don't understand the work, you need to go back to the lecturer or use the internet or use books. Stop blaming it on others and start being responsible for your actions' (fg3). Motivation is also considered to be an important intrinsic element. Academic success is preceded by an interest in the subject, willingness to learn and setting both short and long term goals: 'higher education, it should be something that makes you willing to keep on going, keep on researching, keep on informing yourself' (fg2). The third intrinsic element is the development of personal skills such as communication skills, professionalism and also learning how to manage their workload: 'Time management is... giving time to some things that you want to do, and organisation is making yourself do something, making the choice' (fg1).

The intrinsic and extrinsic factors are highly inter-related. For instance, the teaching provision allows for the practice and development of the personal skills required to achieve academic success.

Discussion and reflections

The opening vignette served as an avenue for discussion at the conference presentation. Attendees acknowledged the complexity of academic success. Conference participants came to the conclusion that similar student attitudes are typical across different universities and academics recognised their responsibilities in students' personal and

professional development, beyond teaching the subject material. The conference keynote address by Professor Sir William Wakeham (2017) proposed that employability skills development is most effective when embedded within the degree programme, rather than presented as an add-on provision. Academics are aware that add-on activities are considered as an extra, optional or unnecessary event by some students. Hence it seems plausible that students are more likely to engage in activities that enhance the intrinsic factors identified in this study if they are incorporated within the course. The rationale, benefits and expected outcome from these activities need to be communicated with students in order to stimulate involvement.

Engaging students to define their understanding of academic success provides an avenue for exploration, and therefore planning of how they can achieve their goals throughout their time at university and beyond. The teaching and learning provision can also be tailored to fulfil the needs of different student groups.

The way forward

The key messages from this research presentation and discussion were the following:

1. Academic success is perceived by university students as both a process (personal development) and an end goal (university qualification).
2. Developing employability skills is perceived by the students to be as important as gaining knowledge for academic success.
3. The students are aware of their responsibility to take charge of their independent learning but also acknowledge the need for support to develop the required skills.

These three points show that while students acknowledge their obligation to be proactive through their programme of studies, academics must also keep their students' employability in mind. Learning activities need to be pitched accordingly. However, these

findings are based on research conducted with Psychology students. Hence it would be interesting to examine how students in other disciplines understand and interpret academic success, and what factors affect its attainment.

The implications derived from this conference presentation are that university programmes should incorporate personal skills development, including: communication, self-presentation, organisation, time management and stress management. Moreover, they must provide opportunities for enhancing self-awareness such as identifying their learning style, their goals and dealing with challenging situations. The challenge for universities is providing the required avenues of student support. Scheduled personal tutor meetings, online discussion boards, assessment feedforward sessions and increased staff availability were all elements put forward by conference attendees.

However challenges to implement such provision were also noted, particularly: managing the high student numbers on most programmes; and maintaining student engagement, particularly those who have multiple roles during their studies, such as employment and family commitments. Further exploration of how to address and overcome these challenges is required.

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