

# **PERCEPTION OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS PERTAINING TO GRADES KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In education, the perspective of students is highly valuable in providing feedback related to their learning experiences and various other educational trends. Therefore, the research was designed to study the perspective of university students concerning preference pertaining to grades, knowledge and skills. The qualitative research method was opted for the study and included three participants who were currently*

*enrolled in any Private University of Karachi. The participants belonged to three different universities of Karachi in order to get variety in responses. The participants were scheduled for interviews and predesigned structured questions were asked to them. The data obtained from the interviews was transcribed and examined through thematic analysis. The inquiry suggested that students give preference to both grades and knowledge but, grades and academic credentials signifies job prospects more. Moreover, set of recommendations are proposed for institutions and academicians to study the phenomenon further.*

**Keywords:** *Grade, knowledge, Perception, preference, skill.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In current education theory and research, the role of students is significant in terms of their thoughts, beliefs and feelings about the 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 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 (Schunk&Meece, 2012).

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 including motivation to learn and to provide them with the information that is required for learning (Brookhart, 2010). Now is to see, 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 path 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 and taking up the challenging tasks (Siddiqui. U, 2013).

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 schools, colleges and particularly universities, is not for the quest of knowledge and skills but for grades. According to Siddiqui (2013) this dangerous obsession with grades has taken over the intellect of students, parents, educators and hiring industry all together. The education is not about learning, exploring and gaining knowledge in many institutions anymore. Education in many institutions 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 (Zak & Weaver, 1998). It is unfair in terms of promoting the others as threats and system that appreciates numbers rather than abilities. Nowadays Universities seem to be more concerned about the Grades or GPAs than whether students learned and understood anything during the sessions (Gilchrist. R, 1998).

The grading system is also promoted by teachers, which motivates the students to obtain good grades instead of learning and acquiring skills that may help them in future. Thus grades hamper the learning of the students (Bush, 1961). According to Brookhart's (1994) literature examination there are two preferred practices of grading: one meritocratic grading that is favored by students with high-ability, whereas the other is particularistic grading that is usually ideal for students with less ability. 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 knowledge and skill based approach in

education (Eison, Pollio & Milton, 1986) that eventually creates a distance from them and grade achievement approach.

Moving on to the job market that seeks graduates with First-class degrees and screen out the ones who fail to attain it (Peacock .L, 2012). Therefore the number of first-class degree has increased over the past 10 years and has become a standard (Birchall & Coughlan, 2013). 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 is to find out what students think about these assessment practices which may relate to the future prospects of 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 either based on beliefs or knowledge but contains a great value in providing critical feedback or suggestion for the betterment (Reinstein, 2012). 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 (Silberman. S, 2012) 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 (Ojo and Olakulehin, 2006). Both, the individual and the society are competing and striving to be on top or 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. Assessment or grading is essential and 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 can exist 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 the 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 the students. To which extend these have been met is undeniably an arguable, questionable and debatable topic. However, the present research explores the perceptions of the students and the worth and value attached to their perceptions and experiences.

The grading criteria developed in the 1700s; Yale University in 1783 had developed a grades depiction terminology which gave birth to the 4-point grading scale (Dietz and Landrum, 2006). Since then the conundrum continues to baffle the 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 also evolved over the years, and a plus/minus system emerged. On a 4-point based grade point average, the grades are distributed accordingly (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 lacking in the assignment, test attempt, etc. to push a student to these discomfoting 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. Knowledge and skills to a great extent render the success in individuals' lives: their self-contentment, their job satisfaction, and their abilities to acquire a suitable job with a suitable remuneration, and their ability to participate in civic life. There is a rise has been seen in enrollments in higher education programs 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, according to Pollio and Beck 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 a 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. Teachers at the outset of the educational program or course drill the importance and value of good grades regularly, and especially so around the time of tests and exams. Where teachers tend to think that their insistence on achieving good grades will be influencing (read, encouraging) the students, in actual the same does not usually happen (Dietz and Landrum, 2006). However, grading is also considered 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, 2007). 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 perception of university students.

The above stated dilemma of fair grading leads to another aspect of grades and students perceptions. 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. Therefore, the institutional practices could act like a vicious circle, creating grade-oriented types while on the other hand create more competition and struggle in the name of educational excellence.

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, it 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, especially since it has never really been society's need or mandate to extract the best few in the workforce, but, as the evolving global trends also warrant, the universities and the intelligentsia 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 way.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **STUDY DESIGN:**

This qualitative investigation pursued a phenomenological study method. As per the nature of the research purposive, sampling was adopted 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:**

The numbers of three participants were selected based on a criterion; which was ensuring that each participant is currently studying in any private university of Karachi. Each participant belonged to a different University in order to obtain diversified responses. The participants were provided a brief aim of the research and after their willingness to participate in the study, the interviews were conducted. The participants were interviewed and their responses were recorded to ensure every piece of information is noted.

Akhter (pseudonym) was the student of a renowned Engineering University. He is a student of studies Biomedical Engineering and looking forward to see his career in this new emerging field. He is a regular student and also works part-time in an NGO, once he gets free from his studies.

Sana (pseudonym) was the student of a renowned Business University. She studies MBA Executive and also works in a school. She sees her bright future in educational field once her MBA is completed.

Ali was the student from a well reputed University established in Karachi. He is a student of BBA final semester doing his majors in Finance. He has plans to study further along with working in a multinational as a Finance Executive and excel further in the same field.

### **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. Then themes were recognized through thematic analysis of the transcribed data.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study revealed both parallel and distinct opinions of the participants currently attaining education. The data analysis discovered the following sightings:

#### **PERCEPTION ABOUT ATTAINING EDUCATION:**

All three participants expressed their views with complete confidence during the interview. However, all three believed that education helps the individual to groom and upgrade at any point of time. From a futuristic view, education allows to work better and create opportunities for a sustainable and life-long growth. Educational training helps in developing a long term view and persistent intelligent (Giles, 2013). 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 dissatisfactory. 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 Master's, 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, 2013).*

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

*“My reason to acquire education to get better career opportunities and professional grooming” (Akhter, 2013).*

There is no doubt that University Education, training and nature of knowledge contains profound tendency to develop professional knowledge, critical thinking and systematic approach towards learning amongst the practitioners (Clark, 1987). Likewise, Ali in his responses provided the conformity 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 individual 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” (Ali, 2013).*

Knowledge and abilities contribute the most in the success of a career; the lack of it can cause ineffectiveness in performance (Johnson, 2011). Ali’s response is primarily true in terms of acquiring education for professional growth and ample opportunities. As developing career is a ceaseless outcome of a comprehensive maturation and evolution of both knowledge and aptness (Alexander, 2011).

#### **PERCEPTION CONCERNING EDUCATION SYSTEM:**

Hongjiang (2011) mentioned that students may have different perception regarding the Higher education system depending on their educational experiences and cultural background. They tend to have different expectations regarding the teaching and learning practices. Here, all three participants shared views that were extremely individualistic depending on their perception. Sana believes that education system still has a room to improve when she compares one institution from the other. Whereas, the responses of other two participants show minor 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” (Sana, 2013).*

Education plays a vital role not just in humanizing the students, but in developing a sense of self and existence amongst them in the world (Secrist, 2006). 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 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” (Ali, 2013).*

#### **PERCEPTION 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, increases examination and evaluation anxiety and affects interpersonal relationship (Crooks,

1988; Mckeachie, 1986). Sana believes that there is a lack of check and balance when it comes to assessment and grading practices, every university is probably following its own system or a system that has been enforced. Sana shares 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” (Sana, 2013).*

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

*“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” (Akhter, 2013).*

A child has an innate desire to compare himself with other in every possible manner. Initially formal competition was restricted to sports only, but now it is getting a grip in education also. It is not the fault of an individual as society educates him to compete and exercise all the abilities he 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 with. 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” (Sana, 2013).*

Undeniably, competition entails in every culture and education is to communicate that culture, as a child comes into this world and embraces the culture he is exposed to. This culture needs to be incorporated in the life of every child so they become characteristic and 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 (Ali, 2013)*

Whereas, Akhter defines competition is 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 a constructive feedback to perform better both in academics and later in life. Akhter believes that there is no harm in comparing yourself with others as it is a useful activity. He affirmed that:

*“In competitive environment of education we can compare of our self with others so we can easily get to know our weaknesses” (Akhter, 2013).*

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 (Rich, 1988).

### ***PERCEPTION 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 (Stark, Bentley &Lowther, 1991). 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” (Ali, 2013).*

Grades only provide information that is helpful in determining the progress of student learning (Strommer & Erickson, 1991). Research shows slight or no prevailing relationship in determining the adult accomplishment through grades (Eble, 1988). 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 expresses:

*“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 no qualitative, comprehensive and all encompassing” (Sana, 2013).*

Students increasingly recognize educational credentials in determining their future employability; consequently they sense a strong need to enhance themselves professionally while acquiring education to attain a significant place in labor market (Tomlinson, 2008). Sana further believes that apart from grades, academic credentials contain greater value in job market. She confirms the significance by narrating:

*“Good education → greater value → greater job opportunities” (Sana, 2013).*

Regardless of slight difference in perceptions of preference of grades and knowledge in education for future prospects, all three strongly believe that academics credentials along with 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.

## **CONCLUSION**

Henceforth, 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 signifies

the better job prospects. Though students have an understanding of all the flaws educational system has, but since this has become the demand of the labor market, 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 few cases and cannot be generalized. The findings of the study might aid 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 the knowledge and skills.

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