



RESEARCH PAPER

Factors Influencing the Performance of Prospective Teachers in Examinations in Pre-Service Teacher Education Programmes: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Assessment plays a pivotal role in the academic life of a student. External examination systems are intended to maintain standardization. Examinations perform the task of an appraisal of student performance. Within the backdrop of valuing diversity and equity, it is imperative to work towards helping all students succeed. Several factors influence student performance in examinations. These include entry grades, support from family, performance in previous examinations, language skills, test anxiety, study effort, among others (Burnham & Makienko, 2017; Al-Hussaini & Shukor, 2022)). However, some of these factors either facilitate and/or impede student performance at the examinations. The participants in this study were attending a teacher education programme where 40% of their grade is determined internally while 60% of their grade is determined through external exams at the degree awarding university. Understanding these factors required an understanding of multiple realities and varied perspectives; hence, the case study method by Merriam was employed. Data were collected through a questionnaire and interviews that were conducted with the participants. Findings revealed that the students' experiences of assembly, pastoral care and English support classes at the institute contributed to their global personal growth. Moreover, factors such as the exam paper preparation, levels of thinking being assessed, and invigilation practices emerged as impeding factors in their performance at the examination. Recommendations include language as well as other support classes such as academic literacy that need to be made a compulsory part of the curriculum. Further, there is need for non-academic support services as well.

Keywords: Regional Stability Weapons of Mass Destruction, Persian Gulf, Arab-Israel

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Introduction

Assessment plays a pivotal role in the academic life of a student. External examination systems are intended to maintain standardization (Rind & Mari, 2019). Examinations perform the task of an appraisal of student performance. Although the intent of examinations is to inquire whether the student has reached the minimum standard expected of him/her, there is unanimity that examination practices in Pakistan have inherent flaws. These weaknesses to maintain examination standards and credibility (Memon, 2023) are not recent; rather these date back to the mention made in the Educational Policy of Pakistan 1970 and continue to be mentioned even in the present Educational Policy of 2009 such as the assessment of rote learning and the lack of critical thinking (Ministry of Education, 2009), lack of examination planning including table of specification, issues of validity and reliability, lack of accountability of examination staff, issues of lack of transparency in results at the secondary and higher secondary school levels. In Pakistan soon after independence universities were tasked with the responsibility to conduct examinations. Later the Sharif Commission 1959 accorded this responsibility to the newly established Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education. The commitments to improve the examination systems as mentioned in the 2009 policy has fallen short of achieving its intended outcomes (Memon, 2023).

The woes of examination are also observed at higher education level such as at university level, where examinations are merely tests of memory (Hoodbhoy, 2009) and abound with issues of lack of quality assurance in the preparation of examination papers, lack of coordination among departments responsible to hold examinations, insufficient timeframe to complete course outlines within fixed semesters and a lack of IT use, etc. (Pervaiz et. al. 2020).

Research on examinations in higher education by Rasul and Baksh (2011) have identified four categories of factors that affect students' performance in examinations. These are grouped as Extrinsic, Intrinsic, Personal, and Miscellaneous factors. Measuring students' academic performance is often challenging as it is the product of socio-economic, psychological and environmental factors (Al-Muslimawi & Hamid, 2019). Research (Tani et al., 2019; Al-Muslimawi & Hamid, 2019) indicates a positive relationship between socio-economic, psychological and environmental factors; and academic achievement or student performance. Among the factors most reported by research are motivation, students' attitude, prior academic achievement, parents' educational level, personality traits, age, ethnicity and gender. Besides these, factors contributing to students' low academic performance such as social commitments and financial concerns have also been identified. However, these have been underreported (Tani et al., 2019). Student well-being was also reported as associated with academic performance (Hughes & Smail, 2015). Moreover, the need to seek employment while studying, expectations to

fulfill familial obligations that conflict with higher studies responsibilities also emerged as factors that impede student performance (Mlambo, 2011). Empirical studies confirm the positive association between class attendance and student academic performance. This relationship implied that the higher the student attendance, the better was the student performance (Tan et al., 2019).

Factors such as study effort, language skills and test anxiety better predict exam performances. Students who adopt a more review-oriented test-taking strategy will perform better on exams than those who do not. Time is also identified as a factor affecting exam performance. Longer exam time duration is associated with u-shaped and inverted u-shaped exam performances. Studies have shown u-shaped relationships between completion speed and exam performances. This may be explained as students who are first to complete exams are those who know the content well while those who complete the exams last also perform well as they are careful perfectionists who are concerned about the details in the exams and their responses. The inverted U-shaped performance may be understood as students who are in a hurry to complete exams tend to make more mistakes and hence perform worse comparatively and the students who complete the exam last are those who do not know the content and wait for the end hoping for divine intervention. Moreover, since taking exams involves considerable reading at higher education level, language proficiency or fluency is associated with better performance at exams (Burnham & Makienko, 2017).

Students who adopt a more review-oriented test-taking strategy will perform better on exams than those who do not. Among a list of learning styles, preferences and strategies it was found that students who review questions from past papers tend to achieve higher academic scores as compared to other methods (Burnham & Makienko, 2017; Jayanthi et al., 2014).

Within the group of pre-service teachers was another subgroup of students who were identified as at-risk students. The history of students at-risk suggest that they are quite capable in the beginning of the academic year/programme but in the course of the programme their performance drops to failing or near failing levels. An 'at risk' student is generally described as one who is likely to fail at school/college. In this context school failure is rather restrictive as it is limited to dropping out of school before graduation. However, school failure in its broader context also includes students who complete high school/college without achieving basic proficiency in core subjects (Kauffman & Owings, 1992). Betts et al., (2017) highlight that besides academic risk there are other factors such as financial constraints, medical or health issues, lack of family support and a realization that teaching is not for them that account for attrition in the programme. Such factors negatively affect the academic performance of students in general as well as of those at risk in particular. The study investigated the factors that affect the academic performance of pre-

service teachers in examinations. Moreover, it also underscored factors that affect

This study presented a holistic picture of the challenges faced by students at the institute/college in general and for struggling students in particular. Understanding these challenges in examinations are integral to adopt informed positions in planning for available slots in the timetable as well additional classes.

Research Questions

The main research question that guided the direction of the study is as follows:

Q. What are the factors that contribute to students' performance in external exams?

Furthermore, the following subsidiary research questions gave focus to the study:

1. What are the factors that impede/restrict students' success in external exams?
2. What factors facilitate student efforts to succeed in external exams?
3. What support structures may be provided to improve student performance?

Literature Review

Examinations measure student progress of the achievement of certain predetermined objectives. External examinations are a necessary component of learning programmes to ensure that students have met the standard upon completion of a semester, year or programme of study (Memon, 2023). As a non-degree awarding institute of higher education, the students of the pre-service teacher education programmes need to attempt external examination at the affiliated university. That said, these examinations are spaced throughout the course of the programme, that is, at the end of each semester of the Associate Degree of Education (ADE) and Bachelor in Education Hons (B.Ed Hons), 1.5, 2.5 and 4 year programmes. Further, the assessment of the students' progress rests on their performance in the internal assessment and external examination components. Thus, 40% of their grade is awarded internally by the institution or college and the remaining 60% rests on their performance in the external examination conducted by the University. This paper explores factors that contribute to the academic performance of students of pre-service teacher education programme in a private institute in Karachi, Pakistan.

Factors that affect student performance are multileveled. That is, these factors are at student, institutional or programme and at structural level (Wikan & Bugge, 2014). Recent Meta analyses have shown that perseverance is a strong predictor of student achievement (Credé et al., 2017). Academic perseverance as defined by Oluremi (2014) "is the extent to which a student could continue engaging in academic activities in spite of difficulties or obstacles" (p. 135). According to Horton (2015) and Oluremi (2014) (behaviour such as self-control which is connected to

academic perseverance Moreover, high-risk behaviour such as a lack of self-control, procrastination, irresponsibility, financial and time constraints may place student success and completion at risk.

Self-discipline/self-control

Self-control or self-discipline have emerged as robust predictors of student success. Self-control as defined by Duckworth et al. (2019) is the self-initiated regulation of thoughts, feelings and actions to pursue enduringly academic goals rather than temporarily gratifying goals. Their review of longitudinal studies underscored that self-control predicts persistence and successful graduation from school and college. However, when students lack strong self-control of their behaviour, they are more likely to give up in the face of struggles, receive poor grades and hence drop out of college/higher education (Horton, 2015).

Procrastination

Procrastination is commonly defined as the delaying of tasks to be put off for a later time owing to some reasons (Yazici & Bulut, 2015). Procrastination refers to the delaying of decisions which ultimately becomes persistent and ineffective behaviour. Academic procrastination is heterogeneous consisting of cognitive, affective and motivational dimensions. Procrastination affects most students (Horton, 2015; Yazici & Bulut, 2015). In a study of undergraduate students in Pakistan Saeed, Ullah and Ahmed (2020) highlighted procrastination as an important factor contributing to student academic stress. Research shows that students in college and higher education learn to manage procrastination through completing tasks on time as they spend more time in college. On the affective landscape, procrastination may develop feelings of enjoyment in students as they engage in more enjoyable activities which provide an escape (Horton, 2015).

Irresponsibility

In contrast to much of school life, students are expected to assume responsibility for their learning, class attendance, timely completion of their course assignments and the management of their time in college. This may be rather overwhelming for some students who have no or negligible experience in assuming responsibility for their actions, college decisions or even life choices. This is mainly because their parents assume this role and make decisions for them on a continuous basis. Through denying students experiences and opportunities to become independent and responsible, they are at risk of failure in education and life (Horton, 2015).

Personal Factors

Personal factors are connected to students' life situations and are critical as they may contribute to stress and challenges in transitioning to college life. Resultantly some students may experience maladjustment and depression. This maladjustment is often bolstered by psychological histories entailing dysfunctional family backgrounds, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and mental illnesses and the inability

of students to manage these aspects of their lives is a risk to their personal, academic, social and professional success (Horton, 2015).

Financial and time constraints

Two major concerns for college students have been money and time. Students in college and higher education continuously worry about having sufficient money and funding to meet the financial needs of their programme of study. Additionally, students are also concerned about 'having' enough time to balance study and other commitments. Research highlights that students reported that time being finite often worked against them. They often met with conflicting needs for their times that is between their study and taking care of their families, working and earning money (Horton, 2015). Further, the rigorous demands of semester system such as frequent examinations, assignments, quizzes was challenging for students as they transition from annual to semester based systems (Saeed, Ullan & Ahmed, 2020).

Self-esteem

Self-esteem as a personality trait is closely linked to self-image and self-conscience concepts. People with high self-esteem tend to be more resilient in the face of uncertainties. Studies (Duru & Balkis, 2017; Lackner, 2015; Orth & Robins, 2014) have also revealed that people with high self-esteem are more persistent in the face of challenging situations in comparison to those with low self-esteem. High self-esteem accounts for more self-regulated goal directed behaviour. People with low self-esteem tend to have a more negative disposition to other people and personal circumstances. Low-self-esteem has also been linked to lesser resilience, depression, aggression and lower levels of well-being in adolescents (Stavropoulos, et. al. 2015).

Test anxiety

Burnham and Makienko (2017) in their study highlight that study effort also contributes to better performance in the exams. Further, attempting a multiple-choice exam is predicted well by a student's strategy for using time when taking exams—whether they rush through exams or whether they take advantage of the time available to think about questions and review their answers. Understandably, students with lesser proficiency in the language use more time to complete exams as compared to their more proficient counterparts. Thus, students with weaker English language skills take longer to complete exams. Finally, students with higher test anxiety use time in divergent ways to complete exams. Test anxiety is bi-dimensional having both cognitive and affective sides. This explains that students with higher affective test anxiety would understandably intend to limit the negative physiological and affective states associated with taking an exam thereby trying to be done with the exam as soon as possible. While students with higher cognitive test anxiety would spend more than usual time in the exam as they do not feel very confident in their answers.

Examination paper construction

Literature (Rind & Mari, 2019; Sadiq & Saeed, 2017) on external

examinations at secondary and higher secondary levels in Pakistan has looked at areas such as levels of thinking being tested; the frequency at which questions are asked; the variety of topics used in the examination; issues relating to the management and conduct of exams; the physical environment in examination settings; and, technical errors. These studies underscore that examinations in Pakistan merely test thinking at recall and understanding levels. Further, topics or content of the examination tends to remain restricted around selected few topics, many examination halls do not have sufficient lighting or ventilation and lack furniture. Moreover, misprinting in the question papers and delays in distributing the same, etc. are quite typical.

Categories of Risk Factors

Multiple risk factors impact college persistence and success such as academic under preparation, poverty, being a first-generation college student, being a minority student, having limited English proficiency, having older siblings who dropped out of high school, lacking knowledge about college admissions/matriculation, caring for a child, delayed entry into post-secondary education and financial independence.

As a general rule, students who are considered to be at risk of failure or dropping out of college, experience multiple risk factors. King as cited in Horton (2015) grouped at-risk students in four categories as listed below:

1. those who are **academically unprepared** as a result of poor educational experiences (poor preparation, low expectations, or academic failure);
2. those who have **individual risk factors** such as cognitive, health, neurological or psychological factors that contribute to academic failure (traumatic brain injury, learning disabilities, chronic illness, psychological problems, or student attitude toward learning);
3. those with **familial risk factors** such as troubled household functioning, dependent care issues, values concerning education, and lack of financial resources; and;
4. those with **social risk factors**, such as conflicting ethnic or cultural values, or traumatic peer exchanges, and social interactions (King as cited in Horton, 2015, p. 85).

It may be surmised from the literature reviewed in this research that several internal factors such as self-discipline, procrastination, irresponsibility, anxiety and external factors such as history of abuse, domestic violence, financial and time constraints expend influence on students' performance in examinations. While students who are at risk- of failing the programme or examinations may experience a multitude of factors such as limited language proficiency, dependent care issues, chronic illness, disabilities, etc. adversely affecting their performance.

Methodology

The factors that contribute to students' performance in external exams are not the same for all as some students have had better and richer learning in their school and college experience. Understanding these factors will require an understanding of multiple realities and varied perspectives

(Mertens, 2015). Such an understanding reflects an epistemological orientation involving multiple realities such as in qualitative research. The unit of analysis is the phenomenon of students' low and high performance in external exams. Hence, the case study method by Merriam will be used (Yazan, 2015).

The phenomenon of interest in this study is the performance of students in external exams. In order to understand factors that contribute to the performance for the better or the worse it is imperative to explore these factors with the intent of providing students support services that will complement the teaching and learning processes thereby contributing to student chances of greater success in external examination.

The study was conducted in a private teacher education college/institute in Karachi. It is affiliated with a public sector university in Karachi. The college continues to work on lines of equity and fairness and continues to provide teacher education to all strata of society. While it offers its services to those who can afford its nominal fee, it also caters for those hailing from lower strata who struggle financially albeit demonstrate potential. It provides opportunities to prospective teachers to complete their pre-service teacher training through merit based scholarships. Within this backdrop the college/institute seeks to adopt an informed position in making decisions regarding support services to be provided to its students.

Sampling procedure

Since the intent of the study entailed the exploration of factors that facilitate and hinder students' performance in external examinations, it is imperative that the sample comprises students of mixed ability. Hence, the sample would comprise students who performed well, those who performed moderately as well as those who struggled / failed in the external examinations. For each of the three strata employed in this sample four students were shortlisted based on the following three-point criteria as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Criteria for selecting sample

Criteria	Sample size per criteria
1. Those who reported having experienced more than two risk factors as identified through King's At Risk categories in higher education	12
2. Performance in external exams	
Performed well (scored 75+)	4
Performed Moderately (scored between 50 to 74)	4
Struggled (scored less than 49 or lower)	4

In order to select a deliberate sample that is representative of each strata needed, purposive sampling was employed. Purposive sampling deliberately selects a sample that is most relevant to the research questions

(Bryman, 2004).

A questionnaire was sent to all students of four cohorts. Two of the B.Ed Hons 2.5 and two of the 4 year programme. Once filled and submitted, students-at-risk were identified on the basis of those who experienced more than two risk factors as indicated in literature (Kings as cited in Horton, 2015). Of all the students who filled the questionnaire (n=27), approximately 44% (n=12) were identified to be at risk per King's at-risk categories (as cited in Horton, 2015).

Further, the exam scores of the students who submitted the questionnaire were then looked at to identify students falling into three strata based on their performance in external exams, that is, those who performed well, those who performed moderately and those who struggled with their performance. Data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed through arithmetic mean and percentages. While data collected through the interviews thematic analysis.

Demographics of the sample: Who are these prospective teachers?

There was considerable diversity in ages of participants. The three major age groups represented in the sample were 18-20, 21-23 and 27- 29 years of age. This is understandable as the programmes that the participants were enrolled in were full day programmes and a majority of these participants were continuing their studies immediately after intermediate and/or graduation; hence, the 18-20 years group was larger than the others. That said, there was also representation of participants > 30 years. The participants of the study were attending a regular programme at the teacher education institute and since classes would end after one o'clock, around 15% of the participants were employed after class hours. A majority of the prospective teachers (85.2%) was not employed.

Further, those who were employed worked for 2, 4 and even more than 5 hours a day as shown in figure 6. These prospective teachers were employed after class hours as tuition teachers or school teachers in afternoon shift schools to make ends meet as they shouldered financial responsibility in their families as reported in the focused group discussions.

Punjabi emerged as the first language of a majority (37%) while Urdu was the first language for the next majority group of the sample (30%). Other languages such as Gujrati, Sindhi, Saraiki and English indicated by remaining participants as first languages reveals that there is rich linguistic diversity among students at the institute.

Given the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing, the participants reported that they did not have problems in reading; however, they did acknowledge challenges in writing. While the participants shared that reading was not a challenge, 22% were certain that they experienced linguistic barriers which were profoundly experienced in oral communication and writing. This perhaps reflects the need for students to have some proficiency in listening and speaking in the target language which is also the medium of instruction at the institute.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented thematically in the following section.

Contribution of learning experiences to prospective teachers' development

All the participants mutually agreed that their experiences at the institute have made a positive impact on their academic life. They shared that equal treatment of all students is a positive feature at the institute. Further, another participant shared that this was the first institute where she experienced that rote memorization was not encouraged. It was the diversity at the institute that had broadened her ways of thinking and helped her understand multiple perspectives (Munira). Helping students move beyond their weaknesses and not highlighting the same was yet another way of developing resilience in students that helped them in trying and retrying. A couple of the participants also appreciated the development in their skills of communication through the opportunities and experiences that they have had at the institute.

Values and student academic performance

On the whole, the participants shared various ways in which the institute has contributed to their personal growth. Of these, its contribution to their growth as persons was highlighted. This growth comprises first and foremost a development in attitude. Their experiences at the college has inculcated values such as responsibility, punctuality and commitment in them. Munira shared that,

In the first semester when we joined we were not very committed to our studies but now we are very much committed. We are becoming more responsible as people. We also now understand that we have to be loyal and faithful and only then will our students be loyal.

She spoke of the reciprocity that the development of values had not only in them as students but how it would help them as teachers. Further, Sania expressed that commitment, dedication and an understanding of what words mean is what she developed among other things through her learning experiences (Sania & Alia).

Moreover, the participants also expressed their growth in terms of their confidence and communication skills. Almost all the participants vouched that they experienced strides in their confidence. One also shared that at an interview she surprised herself by how she spoke. She said that prior to coming to the institute she would never have been able to speak so confidently but it was her experiences here that helped her develop into a more confident individual. Sukaina also pointed out that it was the English support classes that were held after class hours that contributed to her confidence in the language.

Influence of Question Paper Quality in Examinations

With regard to the external exams' students expressed their concerns about the question paper that was given to them. They shared that these papers are generally not well prepared. The instructions are often missing.

Such as they recalled one particular experience where students began attempting all the questions given in the paper when half way through the paper it was announced that a specific number of questions needed to be answered. Students expressed that this robbed them of their time and they felt that they could have been more focused and worked on those answers that they knew the best and could have planned and written responses of better quality.

Another participant Alia, felt that “*kisi ny neend sy uth kr paper banaya aur woh hi photocopy hogaya*” (somebody woke up from their sleep and made the paper and that was only photocopied). The lack of proof reading of some papers added to students’ challenges at the exams. Moreover, Alia also highlighted the grammatical errors in framing the questions rendered it difficult to understand what was being asked. Additionally, she expressed that although they were being taught in assessment courses how to design objective type items such as MCQs professionally, however, at the external exams these were not being implemented. Sarim added, “The objective paper if any was given at any point during the exam. This caused us great distraction and broke their chain of thought when thinking and writing their answers to the essay type questions. After doing the objective paper and then getting back to the particular train of thought was quite challenging.”

Sania highlighted that the Urdu paper was handwritten and the handwriting was not very neat which made it quite a challenge to understand. Annie and Aamir both commented on the format of response that is important to teach students. At the external exams and per their experiences there is a particular format of organizing responses such as having an introduction, conclusion along with headings. Teaching students, the particular format facilitates student understanding of attempting extended response questions.

Yet another challenge at the external exams was the c in course outlines. Anita, Annie and Syra shared that a couple of courses in the B.Ed Hons programmes such as 2, 2.5 and 4 years have similar titles of course but quite different course topics. They recalled that in one examination for one particular course, the majority of the paper came from the two units which were not a part of one programme. However, since they had been familiar with those topics, they managed to clear the examination.

Influence of Examination Duration on Student Performance

Most participants were unanimous in their opinion that the time set for the paper in several of the exams that they took was not appropriate to the paper set. They felt as voiced by Sania, “Sometimes the papers are very lengthy and the papers are for two hours and we cannot even think properly. We simply have to read the questions and then write whatever comes to our mind.” When probed she added that the impulse to complete the paper outweighed the preference on thinking over their responses and they had to write whatever came to their mind. Munira added, “In two hours sometimes we have to do ten short questions and five long

questions.” Anita recounted from her experience that during one exam they were expected to attempt a total of 11 questions which was very challenging and compromised on the quality of their answers. Kamran shared yet another experience that a paper was scheduled on a holiday in which roads are blocked and since he arrived late due to the closure of the roads, he and his classmates had to rush and write even without thinking much as they had already lost almost an hour.

Creating Optimal Exam Hall Environments for Student Success

With reference to their experiences of external exams, the environment of the exam hall/room most often tends to hinder their optimal performances during the exam. While examination halls are supposed to be quiet and peaceful places so that students can do their exams with maximum concentration, this was not the case with certain invigilators who were very loud changing places and talking to one another while the exams were in progress. Further, a participant shared that in the first semester exams there was a strict and thorough invigilation practice during the exams and hence this helped in better performance in the examination. Regarding the infrastructural reality at the examination site, a participant shared, “Sometimes the fans are not working, the lights do not come on, and the desks are so dirty. In one examination in which the fan was not working and I asked to change my place but there was no other place. And so when I was writing my paper, it was getting wet with all my sweat. So these factors stress you.” As reflected in the words of the participant, the physical logistical arrangements of the examination site also contributes to students’ performance in the examination.

Study techniques that influence student examination performance

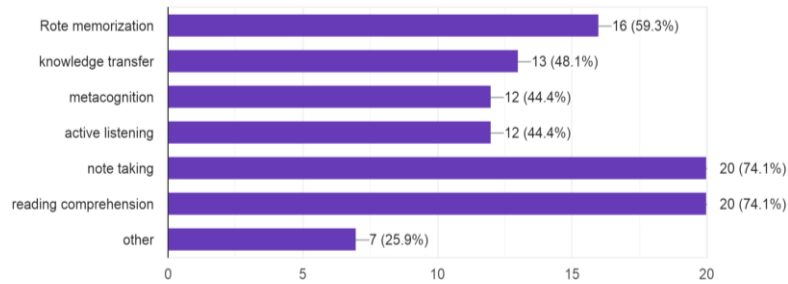
Nearly all the research participants were of the view that the internal examinations that were held at the end of the semester or mid-semester were of great value in their performance at the external exams. Anita shared that the internal preparation for course work and assignments at the institute contribute to such a thorough understanding that questions in the paper can be easily attempted. She went on to add that “even if we did not have to study before the exams we could attempt them easily.” The assignment tasks and questions in the internal exams were of higher order thinking and critical thinking levels. This, as was explained by the participants, was helpful in attempting the exam papers as the external exams asked for simple recall level content and other levels of thinking and since their understanding was developed at higher levels, writing responses at lower levels of thinking was quite doable.

When asked about the study techniques that the prospective teachers used in internal and external assessment through the questionnaire, they shared that the study techniques that they used during course work (figure 01) and external exams (figure 02) were quite different.

Figure 01

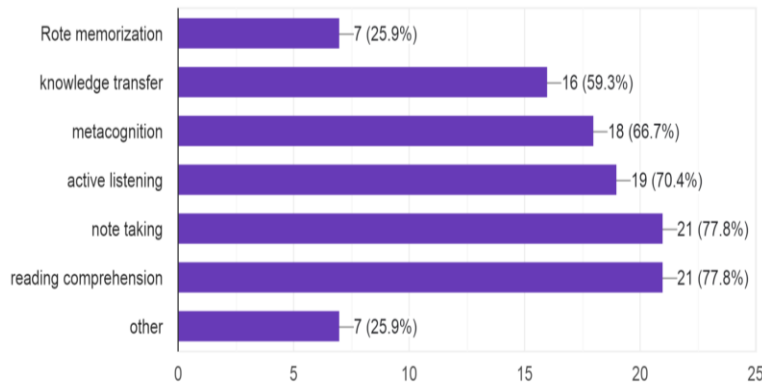
Study techniques during external examination

A CASE STUDY



For a majority of students, study techniques such as rote memorization, comprehension and note taking were used largely in preparation of external examinations whereas for course work, students used a variety such as metacognition, active listening, knowledge transfer in addition to note taking and reading comprehension. Evidently rote memorization was least used during course work yet was most resorted to in the external examinations.

Figure 02
Study techniques used in course work



This difference in the quality of various aspects of learning being assessed, paper preparation, format, grammar of questions. Alia shared, “The institute’s internal papers are quite different from the external examination. First, grammatically the papers make sense. Second, the format of these papers is easy to follow. Such as instructions like all questions carry equal marks or ten marks are written upfront right in the beginning. In some papers in the external examination the instructions are not very clear. The instructions on top of the paper are different, from the marks at the end of each question.” Moreover, the participants shared that there was a particular format to attempting questions and writing answers at the external exams such as writing headings for the answers and using different coloured markers for different parts of the answers. The participants felt that this made a difference. That said, Annie expressed that with the necessary support such as orienting students on how to attempt questions at the exams and through studying and writing topics

and subtopics one can manage to get through the written examinations. Annie also revealed that in one of the semester's external exams she felt that the paper contained questions that were perhaps prepared by the faculty of the teacher education institute because the depth of thinking required to respond to the questions resonated with the cognitive levels that the faculty used in discussions in the class. Further, the questions required opinions regarding the content.

Impact of Personal Factors on Student Performance

With regard to other factors as highlighted in literature that influence student performance in exams and are also associated with being 'at risk' students, is the factor of low expectations. Some of the participants shared that the low expectations of faculty developed feelings of low self-esteem that restricted the effort they could have expended.

Moreover, household/domestic responsibility plays a role in students' performance in course work thereby negatively affecting their performance in exams as well. However, for a majority of the students (59%, n=16) they felt that this was not the case, while 6 participants responded that domestic responsibilities did take its toll while the remaining 5 were uncertain about the influence. Perhaps these statistics could be explained by the fact that most of the prospective teachers attending the programme were not employed anywhere and were full time students of the programmes. While a few of these students were engaged in employment such as giving tuitions, or part-time teaching in learning centers, etc.

Discussion

This study intended to explore factors that affect prospective teachers' performance in external examinations at the end of semester. The study underscored both factors that facilitate and impede prospective teachers' performance in the examination. Moreover, this study was conceptualized and conducted to make informed decisions about the continuity and future planning of the support service provided by the teacher education institute.

The prospective teachers who participated in the study were enrolled in the 2.5 and 4 year teacher education programmes. Findings showed that through their development in the pre-service regular teacher education programme, the prospective teachers did not merely develop improved understanding of education, teaching, learning and assessment; rather their growth transcended to varied dimensions of personal growth such as that of self-discipline and self-control. This occurred through rigorous internal assessment practices comprising both formative and summative assessments. Students who developed these qualities of self-discipline reported the success that they experienced in the teacher education programme. The finding that self-discipline is a predictor of student success resonates with that of research literature (Duckworth et al., 2019). It is important that self-determination and self-control are developed in students as such characteristics play a role in student success.

Responsibility on the part of the students is integral to student success. As evidenced in this study, students who engage in goal directed behaviour such as planning their time and creating timetables to manage assignments etc. are more likely to experience success even in examination contexts as they work hard throughout the semester to develop their understanding, skills and dispositions resulting in doing well even in a summative paper and pencil examination. Moreover, positive experiences of students such as their growth in confidence ushered through support classes impacted their self-esteem positively thereby resulting in self-regulated goal directed behaviour (Stavropoulos, et. al. 2015).

Another significant category of factors that have the potential to influence prospective teachers' performance in examinations are logistic-related factors such as the preparation of question papers, time, speed, etc. Participants enumerated countless challenges in attempting to decode the question paper that was often riddled with grammatical and formatting issues coupled with course outline mix ups. These challenges are perhaps not new to the educational landscape of Pakistan as voiced in literature on external examinations (Rind & Mari, 2019; Sadiq & Saeed, 2017). Further, these examinations that are tests of speed and power would negatively affect students if the question paper is not clear and legible. This compels students to write quickly often at the cost of reading and/or re-reading their papers compromising on the quality of the responses written. Examination time was reported by students to have negative effects of their examination performance. This finding corresponds with the inverted U-shaped performance as shown in studies which may be understood as students who are in a hurry to complete exams tend to make more mistakes and hence perform worse comparatively (Burnham & Makienko, 2017).

Interestingly, the study techniques used for internal course work inclusive of examinations was similar yet different to the study techniques used by the prospective teachers in external examinations. First, reading comprehension coupled with not taking emerged as the most used study techniques by prospective teachers in both internal course work and external examinations. However, the usage of rote memorization as reported by the students varied in both instances. Prospective teachers reported more usage of rote memorization in the external examinations in comparison to the internal course where they reported very less usage. Focusing on comprehension of content and the habit of note taking has been reported by students to be valuable study strategies across academic situations such as during course work as well as in the external examination. Hence, note taking is a valuable study strategy that affects student performance (Haq & Khalil, 2022).

With regard to students who were identified to be at risk low expectations of faculty at the teacher education institute developed feelings of low esteem which was reported to have negatively impacted student effort. This findings corroborates with what is known as the Pygmalion Effect in

literature (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Wang, et al., 2018) which implies that a teacher's expectations of a student's performance has the potential to influence the student's performance. Teachers when having high expectations for students create conducive learning environments that facilitate student motivation. Teachers' expectations have impact on students' competence beliefs resulting in student development of positive beliefs about their competence. To the contrary when teachers have low expectation for their students, they may not create the required supportive learning environments which would inadvertently restrict student motivation and lead to lower competence beliefs (Siems-Muntoni, et al., 2024). Hence, this finding illustrates the criticality of developing positive teacher expectations to stimulate student motivation thereby facilitating student learning outcomes.

Domestic responsibilities were reported to have negatively impacted student performance. A few of the participants shared that their domestic responsibilities inadvertently affected their performance in the examination. Research literature too highlights that at the individual or student level factors such as time spent on paid work and at the structural level financial constraints had negative effects on student performance. The number of hours a student is engaged in paid work negatively influences student performance and not merely whether the student is engaged in work or not. Employment negatively affects student performance when students are engaged in 15 or more hours of paid work per week (Wikan & Buggie, 2014).

Recommendations

The findings of the study warrant the need for student support services. These support services need not be limited to cognitive or academic services rather these need to be of organizational and emotional nature as well.

1. The cognitive or academic support services should cater to students' use of the target language, i.e., English. Many of the prospective teachers being developed at the teacher education institute hail from less affluent backgrounds and for whom English is a third or in some cases a fourth language. Almost all of these prospective teachers appeared to be at risk. For such prospective teachers, support in the English language is absolutely necessary. Hence, in this regard support classes in functional English for those who struggle to communicate their thoughts and ideas needs to continue or be re-started. Given that this need is felt by a selected number of students and not all, hence, functional English should be planned as a needs basis course and not made compulsory for all.

2. Additionally, at this level of higher education it is not sufficient merely to communicate ideas in spoken English rather there is pressing need for prospective teachers to acquire and/or learn skills of academic English. Since the programme of study is an Hons degree in Education it is imperative for students to conduct as well as report research. Academic writing is thus necessary for all students as the completion of the action

research is conditional to their successful completion of the programme. In this vein, academic reading and writing needs to be considered a compulsory co-course for all entrants in the programme.

3. Another significant finding that emerged from the study related to an organizational perspective of preparation for study inclusive of examination. This would involve exam paper preparation sessions in which students are made aware of organization of responses and types of questions and how they should attempt these. Developing speed and power writing skills also appeared to be necessary to help support the prospective teachers for the component of examinations both internal and external. Moreover, skills of group study if beneficial to the prospective teachers and timetabling or balancing study and other commitments could be shared to help them maximize their time effectively.

4. The need for emotional guidance also emerged very strongly in this study. Prospective teachers as young as 18 years of age join the 4 year programme and often they are still in the process of seeking guidance and developing coping strategies. For all students the pastoral care practice at the teacher education institute was much appreciated. Hence this practice needs to be continued regularly in each semester. Further, understanding the important relationship of self-concepts to holistic development and academic achievement, sessions on motivation, self-confidence and self-regulation strategies need to be held during the course of the programme to facilitate prospective teachers' positive development of the same.

Conclusion

This study explored factors that influence pre-service teachers' academic performance in examinations. The study underscored various factors that either facilitate or impede students' academic performance. However, this study was limited to one private teacher education institute in Karachi.

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