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A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences And Personal Development of Undergraduate Students at the University Level

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ABSTRACT: Academic development, the term used for making progress in the university is a complex process and is influenced by more than just grades and curriculum. Qualitative lived experiences define students' academic lives. The aim of this study was to explore these first-hand experiences of students so that a deeper understanding can be gain about factors that foster or hinder academic growth and personal development. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to explore the students' lived experiences and personal growth at undergraduate level. In-depth and semi-structured interviews through purpose sampling technique were conducted for data collection. The respondents of the present study were the undergraduate students of faculty of social sciences from The University of Lahore. Sample of present study were 18 students drawn from population. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. It pulled a conclusion that the academic experiences of undergraduate student are multidimensional in nature and interrelated with social, emotional and identity development. The results indicate that institutional support systems should go beyond academic-based indicators to a more comprehensive assessment of skills in order to really promote student growth and career readiness.

KEYWORDS: Lived Experiences, Undergraduate Students, Academic Career and Growth, University Life

Introduction

Education is considered a critical component in the development of a country. The journey from education to profession represents a critical period in undergraduate students' lives, having both opportunities and challenges. A major goal of education is considered to prepare youth for the workforce by gradually enabling the formation of personal and professional skills and attitudes. So, education gives the foundation for vocational development (Marciniak et al., 2022). Now, generally, it has become much more competitive, and job markets develop at an exceptional speed; understanding student preparedness for this transition has never been more important. The modern job market demands on graduates of higher education institutions as employers are looking for professionals who are not only well aware of their field but are also energetic, ready for continuous development, able to quickly adapt to an unfamiliar environment, and ready to overcome professional challenges (Asefer & Abidin, 2021).

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This research paper explores undergraduate students' lived experiences about the initiation of their academic training and, specifically, classroom learning, which is a preparation for providing critical insights into the complex negotiations between the institution and the workplace. Not all the academic difficulties experienced are blamed on the lack of what students ought to be doing. Although preparation for university study can be attributed, it can also be attributed to the difference between the school and university's academic environments (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Knoesen & Naudé, 2018). These experiences may impact students' willingness and ability to learn as they have to face difficult socio-economic circumstances, which may influence not only their desire to learn, but also their academic attainment in general (Oorlog, 2016).

Today's spotlight on the study's findings comes at a time when the value of a higher education institution has come under scrutiny in light of mounting popular support. According to a Chronicle of Higher Education report, only 24% of graduates believe that their undergraduate education offered great value. Given the financial strains on students and families due to rising tuition at educational institutions, institutions are increasingly under pressure to prove themselves to be cost-effective. Employers have consistently reported skill gaps in graduates across skill areas that relate to being prepared for a career: critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, practical skills, and adaptability.

Successful career development practices have incorporated the following transferable skills, but few institutions do a good job of incorporating these skills into curricular experiences. There is a large gap between the academic's realm and the necessities of the modern world of work. The lived experience" concept highlights an understanding of experience in the phenomenological sense.

What is next after graduation is a big source of stress for undergraduate students. This research tries to listen to their real, lived experiences, their hopes, their anxieties, and all the challenges they expect to face while they try to turn their degree into a meaningful career.

There is a significant gap between classroom learning and the demands of the current workplace. Students feel that most of their education mainly focuses on theory and does not prepare them with the practical skills like critical thinking, communication, and adaptability, which are actually the demands of the present times. The notion of "lived experience" reflects a phenomenological approach that helps to understand how students make meaning of their educational journeys, the challenges they can face when translating academic knowledge to workplace environments, and the factors that contribute to a successful career. Concentrating on student perspectives, this research addresses a critical gap in our understanding of how classroom learning is linked to career readiness throughout the undergraduate experience and what interventions might most effectively support this development.

Previous research has demonstrated that career development learning significantly enhances students' preparedness for the workforce and helps them to acquire those qualifications which are necessary for future careers. This also encompasses activities such as career exploration, research on employers' potential, and practical experiences that help to bridge the gap between academic learning and its professional application. Academic career and growth positively affect students' perceived employability over time, with scholastic and cultural capital serving as significant mediators in this relationship.

Literature Review

Institutional teachers and other academic staff are very concerned about the threat to the public welfare of graduates who are entering the professions without the skills and knowledge their degree award would suggest and the consequent damage to the reputation of higher education in general (QAA-HE, 2020).

Across qualitative and mixed-methods studies, students reported on academic achievement, such as GPA, as an indicator of success (De Groote & Scoulas, 2022). However, other definitions are also considered in the research that expand the meaning of academic success. Success, to them, was considered when they were able to manage their own learning through processes such as setting goals and being motivated, along with utilizing external supports, such as the resources available to them and support from instructors and family members (Cachia et al., 2018). They also say that "In defining academic success, participants emphasized the process as much as the outcome, highlighting the need to personal and professional development" (Cachia et al., 2018, p. 436). This emphasis on process and fundamental factors highlights a departure from outcomes-based descriptions of success commonly used in education. In the same way, Scoulas and De Groote (2022) found that when defining academic success by good grades and a high GPA, students also defined it as the learning process and application of required skills.

Specifically, among university students, effect size seems to be higher at the career certainty level (Langher et al., 2018). It is important that once a career is decided, students get more involved in their studies (Yu et al., 2018). As a result, they will be keener to continue their personal development at their chosen higher education institution (Bargmann et al., 2021). Peer consultation is also influential to students' academic and career decisions (Pu et al., 2021).

Many factors contribute to the academic achievement of students, such as family, environment, economic situation, study schedule, student's health, and time management skills (Munoz & Portez, 2001). The major factors that contribute to their academic achievement are the family's educational background, which has a great impact on students' thinking, point of view, and academic performance (Ozcan, 2021).

According to Aslanargun et al. (2016), students who have high expectations for their academic achievements usually look towards their relatives so that they provide them with emotional support and show their interest in both their education and themselves. The teacher, who is the focal person in the whole educational system, is another element that can have a big impact on a student's academic success. It is considered that the teacher is an integral component that helps students acquire their behavioral skills, cognitive and affective development, prepares them for good careers, makes them individuals who are well-suited for society, and forms society in the future (Ozcan, 2021).

The study reveals that important variables that affect students' academic achievement are poor grades, family support, accommodations, grades on prior assessment, grades on internal assessment, and online learning activity of students (Al Husaini & Ahmad Shukor, 2023).

Supportive family as well as teacher support and motivation have much influence on student performance. A good teacher has a clear vision which he transfers to his students because, without a vision and mission, teachers and students don't know where to go. At the same time, the classroom environment also has a deep impact not only on students' studies but also on their personal and social development. The

results of exams and tests can also be used to define academic success or accomplishments of students (Saeed et al., 2024).

Experiencing a university education is a vital phase in a student's life (Veldman et al., 2019). It leads from the familiar school environment to the unfamiliar landscape of higher education (Perry & Allard, 2003). This initiation often looks challenging, which requires students to navigate through varied and complex (Allen-Collinson & Brown,2012) 'psychological, social, and educational adaptations'. However, this critical phase and experience of academic life remain underexamined in Asian contexts (Ding & Curtis, 2021), particularly in Pakistan.

The academic challenges are not only affected by students' lack of preparation for university study, but also stem from the basic distinction between school and university academic environments (Hughes & Smail, 2015; Knoesen & Naudé, 2018). The institute environment is distinguished by higher levels of academic support; in the university environment, the dynamics of support work inversely (Scanlon, 2017). Consequently, research in this domain has shown that students usually express dissatisfaction with limited interaction with their lecturers (DeWine et al., 2017; van Herpen et al.,2020). It is also revealed by studies that students have to face many challenges arising from a lack of information regarding their courses, assessments, and other routine academic processes (Bowles et al., 2014; Christie et al., 2016).

While the academic effects are apparent in poor academic performance and achievement (Veldman et al., 2019), the emotional effects include fear, anxiety, stress, and sleeplessness. Ding and Curtis (2021) even reported an extreme case where a student facing these academic difficulties and extreme negative emotions contemplated suicide. Although such extreme impacts of transition challenges are uncommon, a widely reported outcome of unsuccessful transition is dropping out of university.

Education in university demands a different learning approach. Here, only memorization or superficial absorption of information is not enough. Students have to go through the entire course content and need to understand it comprehensively and deeply. Many challenges are related to matters concerning students' lived experiences in the current education system. Numerous experiences have been stated about students' academic success, as some are mentioned more than others. Most of them are students' psychological and socio-economic state (Berkowitz, Moore, & Benbenishty, 2017).

The literature review also reveals the importance of undergraduate research experiences in developing career-ready skills. Assessment data from Florida Gulf Coast University showed that students who participated in research-oriented capstones demonstrated 40.7% higher overall learning gains than first-year students and 15.1% higher skill levels than peers who completed alternative capstones. These experiences were much more effective in creating critical thinking and information literacy skills competencies, which are highly valued by employers across disciplines.

Statement of the Problem

Institutions have measured student success by numbers alone for a long time: GPAs, retention rates, and how rapidly students graduate. This is just like looking at the cover of a book and thinking that you learn the whole story. This can tell us what is happening, but completely misses the why and the how it happened. They don't

display the real student journey. The fear of feeling lost. The courage it takes to ask for help. The spark of motivation from a club or project that finally made studies feel meaningful. The struggle to balance coursework with a job, family, or students' mental health. If we don't hear these stories, we risk developing student support systems that seem good on paper, but don't work in real practice; we might develop a training program for students so that they can get higher grades. Moreover, without a deep understanding of these lived experiences, universities risk developing support services that, while well-intentioned, may not be able to meet the real needs of their students. A lack of qualitative insight can lead to generalized strategies that miss specific pain points. The big problem is that we are missing the real story of student success. A critical problem is a lack of deep, qualitative understanding of the lived experiences that constitute an undergraduate student's academic growth. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the phenomenon from the students' own perspectives. By exploring the first-hand accounts of undergraduates, this research will provide a crucial understanding that can help to form more effective, empathetic, and student-centered academic policies and support systems that can foster holistic student development and success.

Objective of the Study

To explore lived experiences and personal development of undergraduate students at the university level.

Methodology

The present study was conducted at The University of Lahore in Pakistan. The current study is qualitative research and has adopted a phenomenological research design. The study aims to understand participants' meanings and experiences of the academic career and growth and its impact on their personal development. The goal of the study, as per Creswell and Poth (2018), is really to comprehend the environment that we live in, discover how incidents happen, identify the impact of societal factors, and provide answers to questions about behavior and perspectives. Phenomenology, as proposed by Husserl (1913), seeks to understand the structure and meaning of human experiences. A lived event or phenomenon is explained by the methodology of hermeneutic investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenologists are keen to obtain the description of daily life experiences of individuals regarding the phenomena under study; research terminology for this is the "life world" (Creswell, 2013). The researchers examined their academic lived experiences employing the phenomenological approach of qualitative research. A total of eighteen (18) students were the sample in the study, which was carefully chosen through the purposive sampling technique. A Semi-structured interview protocol was developed for data collection. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data using NVivo 12.0.

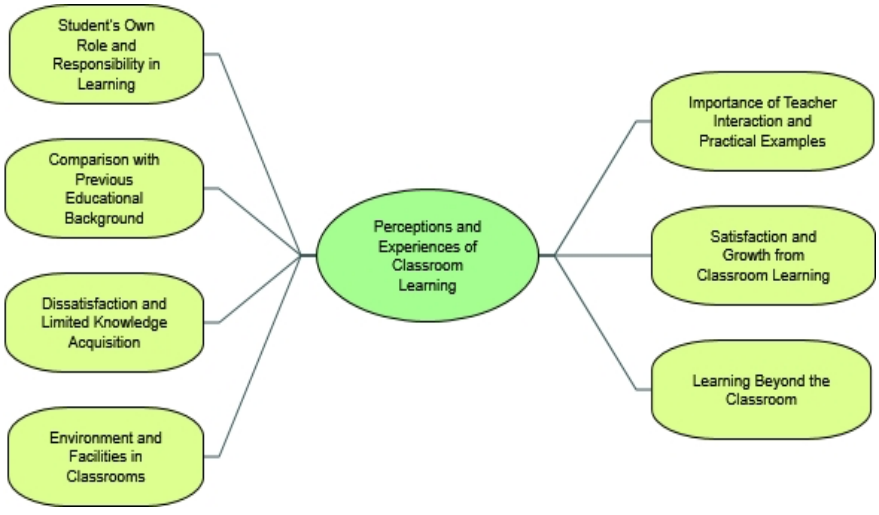
Results

Research Question

How do lived experiences effects personal development of undergraduate students at the university level?

Figure 1

Main Theme: Perceptions of Classroom Learning



Sub Theme 1: Student's Own Role and Responsibility in Learning

Several participants believed that the main factor in successful classroom learning is the student's own determination, interest, and effort. They stressed that even with good teachers, learning will only happen if the student actively engages with the material.

R1 explained: *"Yes, we should go to the same department for which we have a goal. The role of the student is also important. The goal is fixed by the student. The teacher has to come and guide you. The main role of the student is how much he can achieve; how hard he can work."*

R9 shared: *"If I look at it subject-wise, it depends on whether I have an interest in that subject or not. If I have an interest, then I want to gain more knowledge about that subject. It depends on student... I study by myself."*

R12 emphasized mindset*: "When I was coming to the university, I used to ask, what I will learn today? If I come with this mindset, I will learn something. If my mindset is to complete the attendance, or my parents have sent me, I have to complete the time, you are not learning that."*

Sub Theme 2: Importance of Teacher Interaction and Practical Examples

Some participants highlighted that collaborative teaching and practical examples related to real life make classroom learning more effective. They preferred teachers who engage, question, and demonstrate concepts rather than reading directly from slides.

R12 emphasized mindset: *"When I was coming to the university, I used to ask, what I will learn today? If I come with this mindset, I will learn something. If my mindset is to complete the attendance, or my parents*."

R2 said, *"Classroom learning is good when teachers interact much with students. If they just make students to do slide reading and leave, then it is of no use. Instead, they should engage students in something practical and give examples from practical life."*

R11 added, *"If the teacher engages us, we remember what we've learned. But if a teacher just comes, teaches, and leaves without interaction, then it's hard to absorb or even understand whether we're truly learning."*

R14 shares their experiences, *"Many teachers even after the class share their experience about their job, how they get their job, how luckily, they came to university. We get enough knowledge from classroom learning."*

Sub Theme 3: Comparison with Previous Educational Background

For students who had studied in other institutions—especially religious seminaries—their views on classroom learning were shaped by those earlier experiences.

R4 explained, *"Our professors teach us what they have prepared daily. We have gotten more knowledge from Jamia than from the university. We read 100–200 books there. Here, in the 5th semester, we read only one book in a semester. Half of those books we have read in Jamia already."*

Sub Theme 4: Satisfaction and Growth from Classroom Learning

Some participants expressed high satisfaction with their classroom learning. They valued the punctuality of teachers, the quality of content, and the knowledge gained.

R5 shared, *"Yes, absolutely. The teachers come on time. They teach on time that is fine. We gain knowledge from that. Alhamdulillah till now, my knowledge has increased. We can say, the sky is the limit." R10 explained: "The classroom learning environment is good... Yes, I understand it well. And to a great extent, we use it in our practical life as well."*

R17 valued continuous improvement, "*Yes. We are learning a new thing daily and this will definitely help us in future Insha'Allah." R18 also noted, "Yes, of course, in classroom, teachers come and teach us, and give us new knowledge... They are helping me a lot in achieving my goals."*

Sub Theme 5: Dissatisfaction and Limited Knowledge Acquisition

Some participants felt that their classroom learning in university was below their expectations, which has a strong focus on grades rather than true understanding.

R3 said, *"Classroom learning is average. We get some knowledge."*

R7 expressed frustration, *"I would say average. Not too much... The university only cares about the GPA of the students. It doesn't care how much knowledge we have."*

R8 pointed out the lack of skill-based teaching: *"I don't think so. Not at that level... We don't know what to do in the practical life... I think there must be some kind of skills. They should teach us how to deal with this in the future."*

Sub Theme 6: Learning Beyond the Classroom

Several participants said they gain knowledge outside regular lectures—through seminars, YouTube, documentaries, and peer learning.

R7 explained, *"To enhance my knowledge, I read extra books. I watch documentaries. I look at things that relate to me."*

R8 said, *"I take help from YouTube lectures and do self-study."*

R16 described a group-learning approach: *"In my friend circle, we attend online seminars from other universities... then we do its debriefing together... because of this we are able to study with better take as compared to those students who joke on the slides."*

Sub Theme 7: Environment and Facilities in Classrooms

Physical conditions and facilities were mentioned as factors influencing learning.

R10 appreciated the environment, *"The classroom learning environment is good. Like, the lights and everything is clean in the classes. And it is such a peaceful environment. There is no one who creates a lot of disturbance."*

R6 pointed to distractions, *"Sometimes, when there is no fan, we open the door. If there is noise, it disturbs us. So, it is good that we are taught in a room."*

Table 1

Frequencies of Respondents of the Study

Themes	Frequency	Respondent IDs
Student's Own Role and Responsibility in Learning	3	R1, R9, R12
Importance of Teacher Interaction and Practical Examples	3	R2, R11, R14
Comparison with Previous Educational Background	1	R4
Satisfaction and Growth from Classroom Learning	5	R5, R10, R14, R17, R18
Dissatisfaction and Limited Knowledge Acquisition	4	R3, R7, R8, R13
Learning Beyond the Classroom	3	R7, R8, R16
Environment and Facilities in Classrooms	2	R6, R10

Discussion

Overall, students described classroom learning as a valuable but highly variable experience formed by mutual engagement of teacher and individual effort. Many were of the view that good learning occurs when teachers go beyond slides and provide practical examples, collaborative discussions, and real-life applications. While some expressed their deep satisfaction with knowledge gained, others felt the system only prioritizes grades over true understanding, which leaves gaps in the practical world and in the skills gained. A frequent sentiment was that final learning depends on the student's own effort, curiosity, discipline, and willingness to gain knowledge beyond the classroom through the habit of self-study, by attending different seminars, and through peer collaboration. The role of our educational systems has also been observed in academic growth, touching on the limits of students' own intentions when they make educational choices. It also tackled the relation of academic achievement and vocational development, to personal development discussing their lived experiences. Educational policies suggest the importance of unravelling the association between education and personal development to map more effectively how today's generation make sense of who they are and who they will become at university (Kuhl et al., 2019). The results of this study can guide future research and applied work on the relation between education and personal development in educational systems. This study shows that students enter university with a great ambition in life. It is the responsibility of the university to guide the students so that, according to the expectations of the institutions, they can be

successful in their academic careers (Antonelli et al., 2020). Previous research reveals that students' main focus is on getting a degree rather than other academic and social activities. They are mostly interested to get a degree because they want to do jobs after studies, rather than they can discover hidden talent (Cheng et al., 2020). Morimoto, and Yang (2013) observed that it is very important to improve the academic preparation of students for entering a university. This study has implications for students who should be motivated to study and help describe why they are enrolled in universities and how they should be supported in the institute. This will also help faculty and counsellor members to understand the barriers for students in a university.

Conclusion

Overall, students hold mixed views on whether university is adequately preparing them for practical life. Many s various perspectives that enhance both professional and personal development. Others, however, feel that the focus remains mostly on theory, with insufficient emphasis on hands-on skills, career preparation, and real-life application. Several note that success finally depends on individual effort, practical engagement in extracurricular opportunities, and personal discipline. While for some the university experience aligns well with their goals and it raises confidence for their future life, others believe it falls short in providing the comprehensive preparation that is needed for the competitive job market.

Recommendations

The following were the recommendations of the study.

1. A larger sample in the longer context can be used. Phenomenological studies later on could involve students from various other fields, types of institutions, and areas to determine whether or not the encounters are comparable or different from those in this report.
2. A longitudinal design can be helpful to follow the experiences of students to track the changes in student experience from entry to graduation.
3. This study's findings could be extended to the identification of the prevalence of these experiences in a mixed or quantitative study that did not aim to replicate the study.

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