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NAVIGATING THE ACADEMIA: AN ODYSSEY OF CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE PURSUIT OF LEARNING - A MIXED RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Solat Iqbal Khan [1]

[1] Faculty of Management, Jagran Lakecity University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

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Corresponding Author
Dr. Solat Iqbal Khan,
Solat.Khan@outlook.com

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of the study is to identify the various challenges confronted by the students in Higher Education at Colleges and Universities. The respondents of the study comprised of undergraduates, postgraduates and educational supervisors from prominent colleges and universities of India. The participants of the survey totaled to 381 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 22 supervisors of the total population taken into consideration. A 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to the respondents. Analysis of the document was also carried out for every major and or minor course to consummate the syllabus. Data interpretation retrieved ten main learning challenges faced by students of higher education, namely: challenge of cognition, at being an active learner, adaptation with reading material, instructional barriers, language barrier, time management, assignment burden, and cultural variations in higher education. Our astute findings suggest that organizations of higher learning need to cluster on construction of knowledge through the cooperative interaction between lecturer and the students which becomes a platform for the students to evolve as a learning challenger they were not in the past in higher education. The study underscores the significance of addressing students' instructional concerns within educational institutions. It advocates a collaborative approach, defining clear roles and responsibilities, supporting supervisors in developing effective teaching strategies, and aligning teaching and learning outcomes with discipline, ethics, knowledge acquisition, and student well-being. The focus is on nurturing students' holistic development through student-centered learning, emphasizing inquiry, analysis, and critical engagement. Exceptional educators are marked by their commitment to self-reflection and the continuous enhancement of their teaching to ensure meaningful learning experiences for students.

Keywords: Challenges, Higher Education, Learning, Globalization, Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the realm of higher education, a prevalent illusion persists: the proclamation of delivering unparalleled excellence in both learning and instruction. They proudly extol the virtues of offering a superior learning atmosphere and extraordinary pedagogy. Nevertheless, these establishments frequently find themselves in a state of ambiguity when it comes to delineating the precise results of these aspirations or the tactics imperative for their attainment.

All too often, these institutions falter in their articulation of what truly encompasses exceptional teaching or the fundamental constituents of a superlative learning milieu.

Consequently, they employ a wide range of techniques and approaches in their pursuit of these objectives (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005:1). Their struggle to turn these myths into realities signifies progress in the realm of teaching and learning within higher education. These efforts aim to better guide students in overcoming their learning challenges. In reality, many of the goals identified as improvements in teaching and learning are merely means to a higher-level objective. In the realm of higher education, institutions often boast of offering the pinnacle of learning and teaching quality, characterized by an unwavering commitment to a high-quality learning environment and excellent teaching. Paradoxically, these institutions frequently fall short of providing a clear definition of what constitutes excellent teaching or the essential elements of a high-quality learning environment. Consequently, this lack of clarity gives rise to a multitude of approaches and techniques, all aimed at achieving these elusive goals (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005:1). As a result, institutions engage in a continuous struggle to bridge the gap between these ideals and the realities of teaching and learning in higher education, ultimately guiding students in navigating their learning challenges. It is crucial to recognize that many of the objectives considered as advancements in teaching and learning serve as means to a higher-level goal. To address the multifaceted challenges that students encounter in higher education, it becomes imperative to adopt a multidisciplinary approach to faculty-reviewed teaching (Klaassen, 2018). This contemporary approach revolves around studying a subject or topic from a variety of disciplinary angles, allowing for comprehensive problem-solving. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary curricula further enrich the learning experience. In the context of interdisciplinary curriculum, theories from different disciplines are interpreted, focusing on procedures and meanings. Transdisciplinary curriculum, on the other hand, transcends the boundaries between core disciplines, forging new interdisciplinary backgrounds (Odeh et al., 2017). These multifaceted approaches provide students with a holistic perspective, equipping them with diverse problem-solving skills. Motivating students stands as a pivotal factor in their educational journey. Here, rewards and penalties play a significant role in influencing student behavior and performance. The judicious implementation of rewards can serve as a potent motivator for students, ultimately leading to improved performance. Rewards and punishments, when applied thoughtfully, can yield a plethora of positive effects on student motivation and performance. It is essential to recognize that students enter higher education with varying levels of preparedness, and a key facet of their education should include the cultivation of maneuvering skills to address their learning challenges effectively. Furthermore, establishing a strong foundation in basic problem-solving skills is paramount. As the students progress from primary to higher education, they inevitably encounter increasingly complex challenges, and a robust understanding of fundamental problem-solving becomes indispensable. Additionally, an emphasis on student-focused learning has emerged as an imperative need. Active participation by students in the teaching-learning process serves as a catalyst for their growth and development. Effective teaching practices encompass several key aspects, such as fostering positive student-instructor relationships, promoting cooperation among students, facilitating active learning, providing prompt feedback, emphasizing the importance of time spent on tasks, setting high expectations, and respecting diverse talents and learning styles (A.W. Chickering & Z.F. Gamson, Eds.). These multifaceted goals collectively contribute to a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing teaching and learning in higher education, equipping students to confront the challenges they encounter on their educational journey.

Under professional and experiential learning, it is the time to draw your time and mind from the theoretical learning. The traditional way of blackboard and textbook teaching has not shown much better results. The need of the time is professional and experiential learning. There are a variety of approaches to impart experiential learning into the life of students, which are as follows:

1) Apprenticeships: Offer students a chance to sample a profession, typically under the guidance of an experienced mentor in the field.
2) Clinical experiences: Hands-on experiences directly linked to a specific area of study for a set duration.
3) Fellowships: Financial support for students undergoing education or research, typically provided by educational institutions, corporations, or foundations.
4) Field work: Provides students with the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge in a real-world setting outside the classroom.
5) Internships: Offer students a chance to explore a career field and gain work experience.
6) Practicums: Part of a study program where students work under supervision, applying theoretical knowledge.
7) Service-learning: Benefits both students and the community, addressing societal issues like homelessness, poverty, education, and pollution.

8) Simulations and role-playing: Imitating real-world situations to study and predict behaviors and outcomes within a fictitious context.
9) Student teaching: Allows candidates to apply their knowledge and skills in partner schools and reflect on teaching experiences.
10) Undergraduate research: Engages students in systematic inquiry and research, immersing them in exploring debated questions and contributing to significant inquiries.
11) Volunteering: Allows students to contribute to their community through organized or informal efforts of their own choice. "Furthermore, other important aspects to be added to the list include dynamic and experiential learning, a learner-centric approach, comprehensive and transformative assessment, wise and insightful learning, and fostering individual growth and development."

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

"The ever-evolving curriculum and instructional methods are profoundly impacted by recurring amendments and the formulation of new educational policies. The integration of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the cultivation of 21st-century skills within our educational framework promises not only to enrich the learning experiences of our students and educators but also to equip our youth with the tools necessary for their forthcoming pursuits. Fostering and nurturing creativity among our students, coupled with harnessing the full potential of technology to facilitate skill development and learning in innovative ways, assumes paramount importance in an educational era where success is often gauged through standardized assessments" (Alismail & McGuire, 2015).

To substantiate the need for specific targets in evaluating teaching or assessment strategies and addressing the challenges encountered by scholars in higher education, Angelo (1995) introduced a compelling model. He underscored the importance of the Teaching Goals Inventory encompassing higher-order critical thinking skills, essential academic proficiencies, discipline-specific knowledge and competencies, liberal arts and academic ethics, vocational and career readiness, and holistic personal development. These outcomes are deemed essential for 21st-century graduates, equipping them with lifelong skills and values that every educated individual should possess (de Guzman, 2006:49-50).

Boud and Falchikov (2005) emphasize the transition from a predominantly summative assessment approach, fixated on specific standards and immediate outcomes, to a more enduring form of assessment. This shift is seen as instrumental in nurturing highly engaged learners who not only take charge of their own learning but also continue to evaluate their progress long after the course has concluded. They assertively critique the prevailing forms of formative and summative assessment, noting that existing criticisms primarily revolve around their impact on in-course learning rather than post-graduation learning outcomes.

Boud and Falchikov (2005) draw attention to the pivotal need for a balanced integration of formative and performance-based assessment procedures. This equilibrium aims to mitigate the limitations inherent in conventional unseen summative assessments and norm-referenced standardized tests. Formative assessment, involving periodic monitoring of a student's progress accompanied by constructive feedback, is a significant investment in terms of both time and resources. Therefore, academia must take proactive measures to ensure that it is implemented in an authentic manner, contributing significantly to the holistic development of students.

By incorporating formative assessment into the educational landscape, higher education institutions can effectively address many of the learning challenges that students face. This integration has the potential to yield better-prepared graduates who have actively engaged in transformative learning experiences.

A tripartite appeal, as discussed by Green (1971), underpins the quest for an improved and more engaging teaching paradigm in higher education. Effective teaching at this level hinges on the ability to entice students into learning, by highlighting the allure of knowledge acquisition, thereby reshaping students' beliefs and conventions (Light, Cox, & Calkins, 2009).

The first facet of this appeal centers on teacher-oriented instruction, primarily driven by content delivery. This approach aligns with the traditional classroom lecture model, characterized by teacher-led instruction and theoretical teaching.

The second stage shifts the focus to student-oriented teaching, prioritizing student learning and comprehension. This phase involves active nurturing, stimulating critical thinking, and fostering analytical and interpretative skills

within the student's cognitive framework. It also serves to diminish negativity within the student, promoting a more constructive learning experience.

The third and pivotal stage involves the active interaction between the lecturer and the student. This interaction bridges the gap between student and teacher, akin to an apprentice-master or doctoral candidate-supervisor relationship.

Despite numerous endeavors and extensive research conducted by various institutions, comprehensive definitions and strategies for these three teaching approaches remain elusive (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005:1).

In pursuit of eternal excellence in the teaching-learning process, dedicated educators continue their efforts, although much work remains on the horizon in higher education. While every institution aspires to be a beacon of knowledge in the cosmos, the reality often falls short of this ideal. Institutions are continually striving for supremacy in higher education, yet the path forward remains unclear. In this field, complexity and complacency are incompatible, and each new research endeavor represents a fresh launch, albeit one that may lose its luster over time.

Overcoming Challenges in Teaching and Learning (Greeno, Collins & Resnick, 1992), teaching involves surmounting obstacles and addressing students' difficulties during their learning journey. Learning is a reciprocal process where educators impart knowledge, and students must engage their cognitive abilities, maintain their psychological well-being, foster cohesion, display unwavering commitment, and always strive to give their best. Achieving this requires the cultivation of various contextual elements in the learning environment (Zimmerman, 1989; 2000). When students transition to a secondary educational level, they encounter specific challenges that demand navigation. These challenges include adapting to new learning settings, acquainting themselves with different educators, adjusting to new teaching approaches, and forming relationships with new classmates, among other factors. Navigating the Complexities of Higher Education (Webster & Hadwin, 2013), the transition to college and university education can be a challenging metamorphosis, often requiring extensive support to facilitate a smooth shift. In a thorough exploration of the experiences of first-year higher education students, it became evident that students' comprehension skills and motivation (Webster & Hadwin, 2013), emotions (Boekaerts, 2011; Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz & Perry, 2007), well-being (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Heikkilä, Lonka, Nieminen & Niemivirta, 2012; Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012), and various aspects of social and collaborative learning (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway & Krajcik, 1996) are intricately linked to their learning outcomes.

Consequently, higher education institutions must prioritize these aspects and adopt a holistic approach to address these challenges effectively. While contemporary education involves changes in teaching and learning methods, the primary challenges faced by higher education students are related to shifts in teaching approaches, learning environments, and new subject matter (Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Middleton et al., 2004).

Among these challenges, motivation stands out as the most complex and prominent one. By investigating a single weekly challenge reported by students each semester, a comprehensive list of six main challenges emerged, as categorized by Webster and Hadwin (2013). These include psychological motivation, goal maintenance and attainment, policy formulation, cognitive challenges, Ikigai (sense of purpose), and a myriad of other obstacles. It's noteworthy that some students consistently faced the same learning challenges week after week, showcasing their adaptability in addressing these issues. This investigation into task-specific challenges provided invaluable insights into students' experiences. While the findings discussed here are noteworthy, it's important to recognize that a student's psychology, life circumstances, and learning are influenced by a myriad of factors (Zimmerman, 1989). The concepts of emotions and well-being, while significant, may not be the sole determinants of a student's learning process.

Negative emotions, such as frustration, stress, depression, humiliation, melancholy, and weariness, have been found to have a crucial impact on a student's academic success (Pekrun, Frenzel, Goetz, & Perry, 2007). Hughes and Smail (2015) have underscored the importance of a balanced lifestyle in relation to students' academic achievements. Insufficient physical activity, coupled with negative thoughts, sleep disturbances, substance misuse, and social isolation, can directly impede a student's learning.

In conclusion, while sentiments and well-being are essential, a student's academic journey is shaped by a complex interplay of numerous factors, including their psychological state, lifestyle choices, and emotional well-being. Encouraging positive psychology, emotional well-being, and cognitive health, along with balancing leisure activities and social interactions, can significantly enhance a student's higher education experience (Hughes & Smail, 2007).

Contrary to the notion that academic success relies solely on teaching and exams (Heikkilä et al., 2012; Middleton et al., 2004), it's essential to remember the adage that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." When students passionately pursue their chosen courses and take responsibility for their education, they often perform exceptionally well (Hughes & Smail, 2015). Furthermore, it's crucial to acknowledge that educational challenges can compound when students face concurrent disorders. For instance, students dealing with anxiety or depression may experience shorter attention spans and difficulties with cognitive processes and cohesion.

Top of Form

Proactive and wise encouragement in higher education can yield significant results, as evidenced by research (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009). This type of support affects students' commitment (Boekaerts, 1996) and is linked to feelings of burnout (Tuominen-Soini et al., 2012).

The absence of emotional connection in students' lives not only influences their thoughts and actions but also impacts their progress, engagement, performance, and well-being (Boekaerts, 2011; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). Therefore, it's crucial to recognize the challenges students face and how they affect the learning process, as discussed in the self-regulated learning theory.

In summary, many concepts challenge first-year higher education students, and difficulties arise when students lack the necessary skills to overcome these hurdles (Schweinle, Turner & Meyer, 2008). Further exploration is needed to understand the nature of these challenges and how to address them effectively.

Top of Form

We must also analyze how automated learning can help students navigate various learning challenges. Perhaps the most dynamic aspect of the connection between automated learning and challenges is the research indicating that learning challenges provide students with opportunities to regulate their learning (Hadwin, Järvelä & Miller, 2011; Järvelä & Hadwin, 2014; Perry, 1998; Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000). When students realize that something isn't quite right, they often activate their skills to overcome these challenges (Winne & Hadwin, 2008). To create such opportunities, students need to be adaptable in their learning processes. They should monitor their recognition, motivation, emotions, and behavior in alignment with their learning goals and contextual factors (Pintrich, 2000).

While we have yet to explore the intricacies of the relationship between provocations and self-regulated learning (SRL), research indicates that self-automated learning skills not only contribute to improved learning outcomes but also better equip students to handle challenging learning situations (Perry, 1998; Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000).

A significant discovery in the field of teacher education, as exemplified by Heikkilä et al. (2012), revealed a strong connection between students' self-regulated learning and their overall well-being, intellectual confidence, and academic success during personalized learning conditions.

Another noteworthy finding indicates that self-driven and dedicated students, experience less stress and difficulty compared to those who exhibit dependency or interdependency in their studies or lack a clear regulatory approach. Self-driven and motivated students consistently engage in teaching and learning, which often leads to enhanced performance and growth (Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer & Nordby, 2002). Such students display a heightened enthusiasm for acquiring knowledge and demonstrate a strong commitment to learning (Boekaerts, 1996; Pintrich, 1999; Zimmerman, 2011). Their zeal, persistence, and enthusiasm provide them with a natural capacity to overcome obstacles more effectively (Zimmerman, 2002).

For instance, Perry and Winne (2006) suggested that students with strong self-regulated learning abilities possess a repertoire of strategies and action plans that they can select from depending on the challenges they encounter. While it is clear that there is a correlation between automated learning skills and challenging interpersonal learning environments, further exploration and testing are required before implementing these findings.

While independence in learning can empower students, it also opens the door to potential pitfalls. Students, still in the learning stage, may encounter challenges without adequate guidance, leading to tougher obstacles ahead (Hadwin, Järvelä & Miller, 2011; Järvelä & Hadwin, 2014).

Furthermore, research by Panadero, Kirschner, Järvelä, Malmberg & Järvenoja (2015) highlights that self-motivated and self-driven students tend to perform exceptionally well. Enthusiastic students consistently outperform their less motivated counterparts. Another study by Järvelä, Malmberg & Koivuniemi (2016) establishes a connection between students' interpersonal learning abilities and group learning outcomes. **This relationship between individual and**

group learning prompts us to investigate the interplay between learning challenges and students' self-regulated learning potential in both individual and collaborative tasks.

In summary, to enhance self-regulated learning, students often require substantial guidance, including active instructions and examples (Azevedo & Cromley, 2004; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2005). Perry and her colleagues (2002) found that students tended to discontinue their efforts when they perceived a lack of support and encountered exceedingly difficult challenges.

Conversely, self-motivated students who faced challenges with minimal support thrived and effectively managed their difficulties. This underscores the importance of fostering self-motivated learning skills through promotion, encouragement, morale-boosting, and timely guidance, allowing students to independently tackle their challenges. Therefore, the transition to higher education often necessitates students becoming self-driven learners.

While the significance of self-motivated individual learning is evident, it is equally essential to understand the specific demands and unique obstacles encountered by students in individual and collaborative learning settings. **The connection between challenges and self-motivated learning, along with the circumstances that compel students to solve problems on their own, remains a subject requiring further exploration and detailed study.**

Furthermore, it is essential to investigate how self-motivated learning enables students to better handle the quantity and complexity of challenges they encounter. This leads us to our second research question. Whether a challenge significantly impacts a student's cognitive abilities depends on its level of difficulty. When challenges are exceedingly tough or equivalent to the size of a mountain, a student's performance may drop from a distinction to a first or second-class grade. This dual concept applies to both moderate and tough challenges.

A comprehensive analysis and interpretation of this cohesion is essential because resistance during learning can hinder the learning process (Malmberg et al., 2014). However, the learning experience can become more effective when students' skills and abilities align with the challenges they encounter in their learning (Schweinle et al., 2008).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research study utilized a mixed research approach to gather data on the learning challenges faced by higher education students. The researcher employed interview questions and open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The survey involved 381 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 22 supervisors from various colleges and universities in India.

Questionnaires, which utilized a 5-point Likert scale, were distributed to all 403 respondents, while interviews were conducted with 5 undergraduates, postgraduates, and supervisors. To ensure a higher response rate, the researcher randomly selected classes with more than ten students and obtained proper permission from the relevant supervisors to conduct interviews in their classes. The researcher made no more than three attempts to contact each course supervisor, with a minimum of five days between attempts.

Data scrutiny was performed by a senior professor from the same university. Interviews were conducted exclusively in classrooms with the approval of the respective course instructors. The researcher took stringent measures to maintain the strictest confidentiality of the data obtained from all participants. Furthermore, all interview scripts were promised to be and were indeed destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis: The CQ data underwent theory-directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) to gain an overarching understanding of the challenges. Self-regulated learning theory played a significant role in this analysis, as it provided support for the assumptions made during data categorization, given the various concepts associated with this theory. The analysis process encompassed three phases.

Firstly, the data was segregated into two distinct categories: individual learning challenges and collaborative learning challenges. Individual learning challenges pertained to situations where students were studying independently, while collaborative learning challenges were associated with situations where students were studying in small groups with their peers.

Secondly, all the data was organized into three primary categories, which align with aspects that students can influence through self-regulation (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2011): (a) Cognitive learning challenges: These descriptions focused on challenges related to students' or groups' skills and knowledge. (b) Motivational learning

challenges: These descriptions highlighted issues linked to students' motivation and their willingness and ability to learn and study. (c) Emotional learning challenges: These descriptions addressed challenges connected to students' emotional experiences during learning.

This structured approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Emotional learning challenges encompassed descriptions in which students' detailed challenges associated with their feelings and emotions impacted their studying. However, during the second phase of organization, it became evident that students often reported challenges related to tiredness, stress, and health that couldn't be easily classified as cognitive, motivational, or emotional challenges. Therefore, a fourth category, named (d) well-being, was introduced.

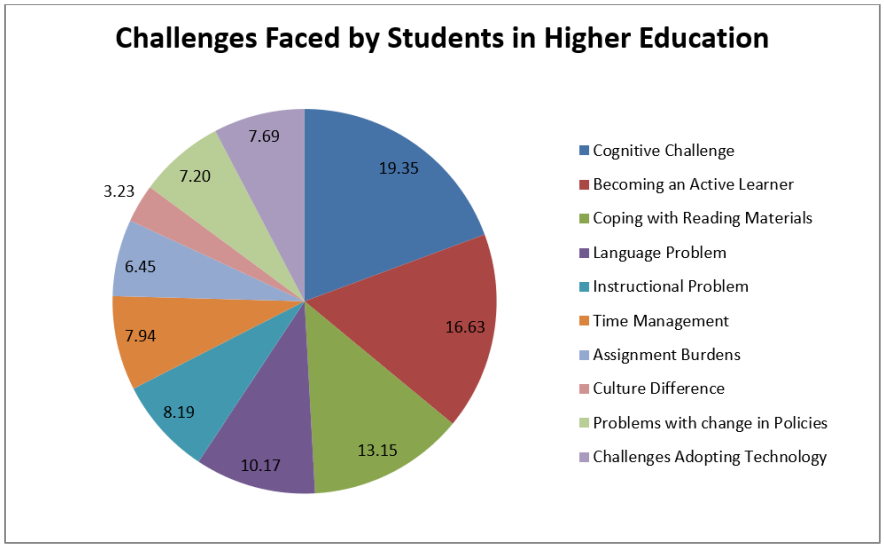
Thirdly, sub-categories were established for the four main categories that emerged during the second coding round. This process unfolded in four distinct phases. Firstly, similar challenges, such as "For me, it was really hard to understand what the teacher was asking me to do" and "I didn't understand what I have to do," were grouped roughly into the same category. During the second round, the researcher began labeling these categories based on the specific challenges described in students' responses (for instance, the two mentioned challenges were categorized as "Task understanding challenges"). Thirdly, the frequencies of the sub-categories were examined to determine whether any of them needed consolidation. In total, 24 sub-categories were identified, with cognitive learning challenges comprising 4 sub-categories, motivational learning challenges comprising 8 sub-categories, emotional learning challenges comprising 9 sub-categories, and well-being challenges comprising 3 sub-categories. This meticulous process ensured a comprehensive classification of the challenges.

4. FINDINGS

A comprehensive data collection approach was employed, which included interviews, open-ended questions, and document analysis, to enhance the reliability of the data. The study revealed that students in higher education face a range of common challenges, as illustrated in Pie Chart 1. These challenges include cognitive difficulties, the need to become active learners, coping with reading materials, instructional issues, language barriers, time management, the burden of assignments, cultural differences in higher education, and adapting to new policies and technologies.

However, it's noteworthy that a total of 15 students (3.72%) out of the 403 respondents expressed significant concerns about the frequent changes in educational policies and their impact on their learning experience.

Chart 1



Pie Chart 1 Main Challenges Faced by Students in Higher Education (percentage).

4.1. COGNITIVE CHALLENGE

One of the most significant challenges encountered by a substantial number of higher education students is the cognitive challenge, with 60 students (14.89%) highlighting this issue in their learning experiences. This suggests that

students entering university should already possess a higher level of cognitive ability. Upon admission to a university, students are expected to think logically and express themselves academically. This viewpoint was reaffirmed through interviews with three supervisors.

One supervisor emphasized that students should actively seek knowledge through reading and asking questions and those who embrace this challenge will excel in higher education. Another supervisor noted that, on an average, postgraduate students exhibit greater independence and maturity compared to the undergraduates. They are self-motivated and diligent in their studies. It's worth noting that expected learning outcomes vary from bachelor's to master's and doctoral degrees. Doctoral students, in particular, face the most significant cognitive challenges compared to master's and bachelor's degree students. Some doctoral students unanimously expressed difficulties in dealing with abstract concepts in their courses. For instance, within a course comprising 30 students, eight of them encountered difficulties in grasping certain qualitative research concepts such as 'signification column,' 'cogency sphere,' 'scrutiny of character,' 'competency audit,' and 'reciprocal succession.' Regarding the concept of 'cogency sphere,' some students found it challenging to differentiate between the ideas of indifference, individuality, regularization, and assimilated sections. Additionally, four students expressed that the concepts of 'archetypal' and 'string of words' posed difficulties when interpreting text scrutiny in qualitative research.

To excel in their learning, postgraduate students are required to invest a significant amount of time, effort, and enthusiasm in preparation for their classes. Some doctoral students voiced concerns about their ability to conduct folklore and societal fieldwork, stating that it was a skill they were still developing. Two doctoral students emphasized that writing a thesis felt like "regurgitating everything they had absorbed over the past few years." Many master's students, as well as some doctoral students, found it challenging to translate what they had learned in active classroom settings into writing. One doctoral student admitted during an interview that "integrating learning into research is a daunting task." Similarly, master's students found that while theory was easy to learn and study, putting that knowledge into practice presented significant challenges.

Furthermore, addressing personal biases in concept interpretation presents a significant challenge for a majority of postgraduate students (over 90%). Postgraduate students need to cultivate objectivity in their thinking and develop scientific skills for data interpretation. Four postgraduates interviewed emphasized the importance of not exaggerating the data collected in their studies. Two interviewed supervisors also stressed the need for students to be truthful and sincere in handling data. Overall, most postgraduate students acknowledged the need to work diligently to absorb class teachings and apply them effectively in their studies. Four doctoral students mentioned that they often had to revisit chapters multiple times to fully grasp the content provided by their supervisors. Two master's students noted that certain content-related issues were initially confusing but became clearer over time due to a lack of theoretical support in their studies. This clarification of concepts remains a challenging aspect for the majority of higher education students, from bachelor's to doctoral degrees, as highlighted by six interviewed supervisors.

Eleven undergraduate students found it challenging to analyze the pros and cons taught in their program. Four undergraduates mentioned the difficulty of connecting course content to their future profession, a challenge faced by many. Typically, inexperienced undergraduates in the field of education encounter cognitive challenges related to grasping the consequential aspects of the field, understanding the lecturer's perspective, comprehending new ideas, applying theoretical concepts, and absorbing insights from peers, classmates, and colleagues. Responses from the questionnaires completed by the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students (over 80%) reflected these challenges as follows:

1) a huge lot of theory and reading.
2) a new way of learning as the base is missing.
3) a lot of new terminologies and vocabulary creep into their syllabus creating a huge barrier.
4) a flood of new ideas and pros and cons in the syllabus and in learning.
5) a lot of self-study.

4.2. BECOMING AN ACTIVE LEARNER

The second most challenging situation faced by the majority of higher education students was the need to actively engage in learning. For 51 students (12.66%), being actively involved in classroom learning without prior preparation was deemed impossible. Ten students interviewed stated that they required 2 to 3 hours of preparation to ensure active participation in class, as failing to do so would render them passive observers. This challenge was common among both undergraduates and postgraduates.

Students needed to tap into their personal capabilities for acquiring knowledge to better prepare themselves for class. Other reasons why some learners struggled to actively grasp the subject matter included personal factors such as:

1) they may not be able to deploy their mind into learning as they hadn't prepared for the class (n=5)
2) language barriers and other constraints transform them into mute spectators that further restrict their speaking skills (n=5)
3) their failing to participate in the class leads to an inferiority complex whereby lacking leadership traits (n=4)

The term "interactive learner" was regarded as a subject deserving careful research and analysis, according to two supervisors. Active learning was likened to nourishment for the mind, with classroom engagement through discussions and activities promoting cognitive development and expanding the sphere of understanding. It was noted that even if a student did not verbally contribute but actively observed and listened, they could still be considered an active learner. Therefore, the interpretation of active learning's meaning-making process varied among individuals.

However, it was emphasized that active learning should not be seen as a magical solution or shortcut to enhanced learning in higher education. It was acknowledged that active learning might not be suitable for all students or all courses. Approximately 13.4% of students expressed a preference for passive learning over active learning. Additionally, some students favored lectures over excessive discussion and presentations in the classroom. Technical teachings and learnings were seen as more effective when lectures were delivered with care. Several students highlighted specific challenges they faced, such as constructing attitude scales and writing achievement test items. They found these tasks to be intricate and preferred documenting them in writing rather than presenting them verbally in class.

4.3. COPING WITH READING MATERIALS

Understanding the assigned reading material posed a challenge for 36 students (8.93%) among the 403 respondents, encompassing both undergraduates and postgraduates. Among them, 34 students found completing weekly assigned readings to be particularly challenging. Some described the volume of reading material as daunting and difficult to manage, with eight undergraduates and five postgraduates expressing these sentiments during interactions.

Each student typically enrolls in six courses per semester, and when each course requires reading four to five articles weekly, the workload becomes formidable and demanding. Many students found it challenging to keep up with multiple articles distributed after each class, often posted on the OnCourse websites. Several supervisors, in interviews, likened this challenge to untying a Gordian knot.

To address this, one supervisor allocated one hour of mandatory reading, discussion, and question-raising, emphasizing the importance of careful analysis and interpretation of the reading material. Another supervisor echoed these sentiments and encouraged students to engage with the reading materials, post questions for discussion, and participate in classroom discussions after the lecture.

4.4. LANGUAGE BARRIER

Language emerged as a significant concern for both international and non-English speaking students, creating a substantial divide in their educational experience, particularly in active learning settings. Among the 101 international students who participated in our questionnaire interviews, 24 (24.1%) expressed deep challenges related to language.

These students often encountered new and complex vocabulary during their classes, leading to frequent dictionary consultations in the classroom. For some international students, English was not their native language, making it challenging to fully grasp the class teachings. Consequently, the language barrier hindered classroom interactions,

question-asking, and doubt-clearing processes, as these students struggled to express themselves clearly in class and while communicating with their peers.

4.5. INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEM

Instructional methods posed a challenge for 27 students (6.7%) across five different courses. The initial issue stemmed from vague syllabi provided by their supervisors, with six students reporting a lack of clarification and poorly structured lecture delivery. The feedback and criticism from both lecturers and supervisors were deemed unproductive and lacked value in helping students improvement.

Another problem emerged with disorganized classes and unclear teaching materials provided by supervisors, marking the second incident of inappropriate teaching conditions. Taking a more negative view, a couple of interviewed students advocated for well-informed timetables instead of chaotic classroom adjustments. They believed that effective classroom management would inspire better learning among students.

4.6. TIME MANAGEMENT

Within the open-ended section of the questionnaire, 22 out of 403 students (5.46%) raised this issue. While it was an underlying concern among undergraduate students, it became more critical among postgraduate students who were also working part-time or full-time jobs. Fourteen out of twenty part-time postgraduate students who were employed reported a significant challenge in balancing their coursework and professional work in the questionnaires, a sentiment echoed by one of the interviewed supervisors.

Balancing classroom study with professional commitments is a common challenge faced by family people. Many working professional students struggle to find time for their studies after work and fulfilling family obligations, as voiced by two interviewed supervisors. These supervisors observed their students rushing to class and then back home or to the office after their classes. The management of the 24 hours in a day determines our future, in this regard, seven doctoral students and four master's students revealed in interviews their struggle to find a balance between time spent on their courses and their jobs or professions.

4.7. ASSIGNMENT BURDENS

Fifteen students (3.72%) found assignments to be a significant burden and challenge. This issue was consistent among both undergraduates and postgraduates. Some courses imposed a heavy load of assignments, which overwhelmed six of the postgraduate students interviewed. For example, one course required completing eight to ten mini assignments, while another had 5-7 small assignments. Despite these assignments being extracurricular and ungraded, they still placed a substantial time demand on students, who needed to read relevant study materials thoroughly to understand the assignment requirements and intricacies.

Undergraduate students also faced a variety of assignments, as revealed by two students during interviews. An undergraduate student typically had around 24 assignments to complete when enrolled in six courses. Assignment load and challenges remained a major concern for most higher education students. While having one or two large assignments might reduce interaction, it could be less confusing. However, all supervisors unanimously agreed that multiple smaller assignments encouraged student interaction with educators and provided students with multiple and timely feedback, following the principle of "no pains, no gains."

4.8. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The least of the concerns, mentioned by only seven respondents (2.37%) in the questionnaires, was the issue of cultural differences. However, this issue significantly impacted many international students. Cultural differences posed challenges for international students, especially regarding topics related to a nation's traditions and ethics. While the number may seem small, these seven international students unanimously expressed that cultural differences hindered their adaptability to the classroom culture.

For some international students, their native country's teaching and learning culture was traditional, typically involving lectures followed by note-taking. This stark contrast made it challenging for them to participate, interact, and engage in classroom activities in their new educational environment. In their native country, interrupting, asking questions, engaging in classroom discussions, and interaction were often discouraged or considered a taboo.

While some students actively worked to overcome these challenges and participated in class discussions, and many needed individual encouragement from their supervisors. Supervisors recognized that some students appeared as passive observers but were still aware of what was happening in the class. Despite the initial hurdles, efforts were made to bridge the gap caused by cultural differences.

4.9. CHANGES WITH NEW POLICIES

Frequent and recurring policy changes can significantly impact the education system, curriculum, and teaching and learning methods. To benefit both students and teachers, having standardized policies and core educational standards with a 21st-century influence would be highly advantageous. This approach can pave the way for success and development, moving away from the traditional focus on class rankings and instead fostering research, creativity, and the development of unique ideas and thoughts through artificial intelligence and technology (Alismail & McGuire, 2015). Positive policies should aim for the following objectives:

Education should prepare students for competence and employability not only within their country but globally. The design of educational patterns should encourage the development of creative ideas and thoughts, leading to research in various fields. Students should be well-prepared to tackle the next course in their educational journey. Cultural and traditional values should be integrated into education. Policies should promote research, critical thinking, and creativity among students. Education should mold students into responsible national citizens (The Encyclopedia of American Politics, 2014). A policy that ensures no student is left behind in any field would be a valuable asset to any society.

4.10. CHALLENGES WITH BLOOMING OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

Technology has become an integral part of the daily life of the average person, and this holds true for students as well. It presents both challenges and opportunities in education. Students are not just accustomed to technology; they are also highly proficient in using it. Instead of engaging in physical activities, they are drawn to video games and are constantly connected to their smart devices, such as iPods, laptops, desktops, phones, and social networks (Flannery, 2010).

Furthermore, Murphy (2015) notes that technology has revolutionized the way we view teaching and learning. This transformation has put pressure on educational authorities to change teaching methods, shifting from traditional supervision to tech-savvy teaching, with a greater focus on student-centered learning. Some progressive institutions have even implemented "Bring Your Own Device" (BOYD) policies, which have increased student engagement and interaction while reducing teaching costs (Daggett, 2014).

However, the widespread adoption of technology in education is not without its challenges. Nager (2013) highlights that educators often view technological experimentation as beyond the scope of their job descriptions. Additionally, some senior educational supervisors are reluctant to embrace new technologies, sticking only to what they are familiar with (Harwen, 2013). It is clear that for our educational system to thrive, we must fully embrace and adapt to the latest technology. A well-designed curriculum should be responsive to the ever-changing impact of technology, catering to evolving societal needs and the learning requirements of students (Aydin, 2013d; Parson & Beauchamp, 2012).

5. DISCUSSION (FINDING)

Following thorough, impartial, and scientifically rigorous investigations, including open-ended interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis, we have uncovered several significant findings that hold great value in the field of education, particularly for higher education students. Our study revealed that the students we interviewed shared major and critical concerns regarding the challenges they anticipate during their higher education journey.

Cognitive difficulties, encompassing both psychological and intellectual challenges, were identified as the central issues faced by all participants, as these difficulties serve as the foundation for other obstacles. Alongside cognitive

challenges, students expressed their struggles in coping with reading materials, language barriers, instructional problems, time management, assignment burdens, cultural differences, changes in educational policies, and challenges stemming from technological advancements. In addition to these major hurdles, there were also minor obstacles to contend with.

Cognitive challenges were reported by approximately 14.89% of the participants in their educational journey. Our findings indicate that cognitive abilities need to be significantly enhanced, scoring at least 8 out of 10 on a scale, as students transition to higher education or enter university. Active learning plays a pivotal role in adult education, a perspective emphasized by Lawton and La Porte (2013). Transformative learning in higher education hinges on the reevaluation of interpretations and the construction of meaning from one's experiences, as noted by Mezirow (1991, p.12, as cited in Lawton and La Porte, 2013).

Approximately 15.84% of participants considered active classroom learning to be a challenge. They believed that dedicating a minimum of 2.5 to 3.5 hours daily for preparation before class was essential to be active learners and also to engage in classroom discussions.

Connecting theories becomes effortless for learners, and classroom discussions flow smoothly when students adequately prepare before their lectures. This approach helps them establish connections between theories and real-life examples, as advocated by Salama (2010). However, translating this concept into action proves more challenging than expressing it in words. Actions, as the adage goes, speak louder than words, but they are often challenging to execute, while words are easily articulated. It is essential to work diligently and quietly, letting one's accomplishments make the most noise.

A small percentage of students (4.08%) cited challenges with the assignment burden, and a smaller proportion (1.05%) mentioned cultural differences. Assignments hold significant importance for both students and supervisors. Students benefit from assignments as they facilitate learning and exploration, while supervisors use them to assess students' capabilities and learning outcomes. The primary concerns related to assignments are their quantity and length, requiring careful consideration (Ismail, 2005).

On the other hand, only 1.05% of students identified cultural differences as their primary challenge, primarily stemming from international students at the institution. Most international students cited language barriers as their second most significant challenge, as English was a secondary language in their home countries. This highlights the importance of fostering a sense of belonging within the institution to help students adapt to the challenges posed by cultural differences.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings highlight students' concerns regarding instructional issues within their classes. To establish an effective educational institution, a collaborative and cooperative approach is essential. This includes ensuring that the appropriate authority and responsibility for learning are clearly defined and motivating and supporting supervisors to develop effective teaching strategies, and setting realistic and practical expectations. The teaching and learning outcomes should align with principles of discipline, ethical teaching and learning, knowledge acquisition, and a strong commitment to students' well-being, as well as the creation of innovative ideas (Hall and Ramsay, 1994).

This underscores the importance of facilitating and nurturing children's development, a responsibility shared by both supervisors and educational institutions. As stated by McGee (1994: 81), a student-centered learning tradition, from primary schools to tertiary education, emphasizing holistic and individualized learning, is the need of the hour. Learning involves the transformation of knowledge from the teacher to the student, a process facilitated through experience, observation, discovery, social interaction, educational and behavioral research, and individualized challenges. This model, aimed at delivering excellent education, is a preference for every educational institution.

An educational institution must have a unified vision driven by its accomplished educators. These educational supervisors' cognitive processes, thinking patterns, and principles should be rigorously followed to yield positive outcomes. The core emphasis of this entire structure lies in fostering a strong interaction between teaching and learning, which ensures comprehensive development and growth of students. Research and feedback are valuable only when teachers reflect upon them and utilize the information to enhance both their teaching and the curriculum. Continuous

research, analysis, interpretation, and refining of teaching methods are key characteristics of outstanding educators (Kember et al., 63).

University education differs significantly from secondary education. Our findings indicate that students in universities should not only possess the ability to answer questions but also the skill to ask questions. In university settings, students not only acquire knowledge but also learn how to analyze, interpret, assimilate, and critically engage with study materials. The ability to observe phenomena and make informed decisions becomes an integral part of a university student's life. In conclusion, it is essential to highlight that the defining trait shared by all exceptional teachers is their commitment to self-reflection on their teaching practices and their continuous efforts to enhance their students' learning experiences. They actively seek to verify the learning outcomes as perceived by their students.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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