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Academic Performance, Causal Attributions and Hope to Complete Studies among University Students

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Abstract— The study examined academic performance, causal attributions, and hope to complete university studies among undergraduate students of Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST). The sample comprised of 163 undergraduate students offering Bachelor of Science with Education in their first and second years of study. Data was collected using a questionnaire and focus group guide and was analysed using SPSS – 16 and content analysis respectively. Most of the respondents were males (89%), government-sponsored (85.9%), aged between 18 – 22 years (78.5%), and having cumulative grade point averages (CGPA's)/grade point averages(GPA's) between 2.80 – 3.59 (49.1%). Students used internal attributions than external attributions in describing their academic performance. Students had significantly higher hope of completing their studies. There was a significant difference between year of study and internal attribution; with first year students having a higher internal attribution than second year students. There were significant relationships between students' exact CGPA/GPA and age; exact CGPA/GPA and year of study and exact CGPA/GPA and sponsorship. Internal attribution was positively related to exact CGPA/GPA, hope to complete studies, pathways and agency. There is need for the university administration to use motivation techniques such as rewarding the best performers to instil a sense of competition among students as they strive to complete their studies. There is also need for attributional retraining among undergraduate students such that they can attribute their performances realistically which enhances their hope of completing studies.

Keywords- component; Agency, Attributions, Attributional Retraining, Cumulative Grade Point Averages, Pathways

I. INTRODUCTION

Academic performance among undergraduate students has been studied from many perspectives; individual [1], theoretical [2] and institutional perspectives (e.g., [3]). The concept of academic performance has become a source of concern to researchers, especially as the undergraduate students' performance all over the world is being threatened by several psycho-social and environmental factors. Upon examination of academic performance literature, there does not appear to be one specific or universal definition of academic performance. In academic institutions, academic performance is accomplished by the actual execution of class work in the school setting and is typically assessed by the use of teacher ratings, and examinations. At university, grade point averages (GPA's) and cumulative grade point averages (CGPA's) provide a better rating of a students' academic performance. Academic performance at university can be viewed as a product of two sets of factors; one set originating from the individual student - with each student having a unique combination of socio-economic background and ability; and the other factors related to the systems of education and patterns of imparting knowledge that are organized with in schools [1]. There is an endeavour to discover variables that seem to underpin academic performance of undergraduate students all over the world. The question of how these variables can be managed to improve academic performance of students in Uganda is still a complex problem at all levels of education. Research and literature regarding academic performance of undergraduate students in Uganda seems scanty and not comprehensive. In a few of such studies, four main factors including the students prior academic profile,

socio-economic characteristics, age and gender had significant impact on performance of undergraduate students at Uganda Christian University [3]. Another survey conducted at Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST) revealed that first year students offering Bachelor of Science with Education (BSc. Ed.) program performed poorly compared to other continuing students of the same program as revealed by their low CGPA scores [4]. External factors such as poor teaching methods like lecturing, too many courses offered during the semester, lack of enough reference resources among others were raised to contribute to such poor performances. Up to date, first year students' performances offering BSc. Ed. in MUST still lags behind compared to that of other continuing students [5]. Researchers (e.g., [6], [7]) have revealed that the observed poor performances in first year at university are as a result of failure to adapt to the new university academic and social environments. It is during first year of university that many students are faced with a variety of academic and social challenges. Faculties which admit very many students often pose a great threat to this transition process too.

One student in such *generalist faculties* reported, “it's hard in the first few weeks of university, as you meet someone in the lecture and get to know them, but then you can't find them next time among the 500 other students in the lecture!” [6], pg 1. Such faculties according to school psychologists increase feelings of isolation and timetabling of so many students and subjects often mean that students have few classes shared in common with others they meet. Social support is therefore vital in enabling first year students in adapting to the new environment as it creates academic confidence and helps 'buffer' the stress of the transition process [6], [8]. On the

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contrary, continuing students have adapted well to the university environment, tend to be more focused, lay down strategies for academic success, and always engage in self-regulated learning; which enhances their academic performance [9].

A. *Causal Attributions towards academic performance and relationship with hope to complete studies among students*

The concept of causal attribution, also referred to as explanatory style [10] is used to mean the habitual way people explain the events that happen to them. It also refers to the way people tend to attribute similar types of causes to the events that affect them [11]. The concept of explanatory or attribution style has been studied in a number of disciplines including medicine, politics, work, and education. Attribution arguably remains one of the most relevant areas of research in psychology [12] and especially in educational psychology.

Upon their academic achievement, students always advance different explanations for their success or failure. As people habitually make explanations for their own success and failure, they begin to develop expectations for how they will respond and perform [13]. Such expectations subsequently affect their future behaviors and emotions [14]. Weiner's theory of Causal Attributions [15] cites luck, task difficulty, ability, and effort as the key factors for ones achievements. These perceived reasons for achievement are interpreted along three dimensions; locus of control (internal vs external), stability (constant vs changing) and controllability (globality vs specificity). Thinking negatively or positively according to ones explanatory style has a great impact on one's educational achievement. Several studies (e.g., [2], [10]) suggested that students who attributed negative events to global, stable and internal causes had lower CGPA's than those with optimistic attributional styles. Students with higher grades during their freshman year explained bad academic events with external, unstable and specific causes compared to those with lower grades who used internal, stable and global explanations [2]. Successful student have been found to attribute their performance more to internal factors than unsuccessful students [16]. A tendency to make internal attribution following success and external attributions following failure has been interpreted in terms of a self-serving bias for providing enhancement, protection of self-esteem and one's self-concept [17]. Generally, Weiner's attribution theory of motivation and emotion emphasizes that causal attributions are influenced by outcomes (e.g., success and failure in examinations) and have an effect of future behaviours as they affect the choice, intensity, hope, efforts, and persistence of such behaviours [18]. The latter statement implies that our causal attributions affect our levels of hope and persistence in certain events. High-hope students always make internal attributions for their success. Additionally, high-hope students have high levels of motivation [19] due to the fact that they establish their goals based on their previous performances. High-hope students are intrinsically motivated and always pursue their goals and perform well academically [20]. On the contrary, low-hope students focus on performance goals and engage in superficial, rote-level processing of information which lowers their academic achievement [21]. Low-hope students do not develop realistic learning strategies and easily give up on a task upon encountering barriers as they cannot

think of other pathways to overcome such academic challenges leading to frustrations, loss of confidence and lowered self-esteem [22].

The present study therefore sought to investigate the factors related to academic performance of undergraduate students at MUST, their causal attributions towards academic performance and the impact of such attributions on their hope to complete their studies. The study was important because of the overwhelming need to understand the various aspects of the problem of poor performance at MUST, as the university designs effort to rejuvenate its education system. The findings of this study helped in providing an insight into the attributions held by undergraduate students that are used to explain their academic performance. Basing on the findings, the various stake holders can work together to change the causal attributions of university students. It is necessary to understand how students perceive and react to success and failure at university level before one can formulate appropriate policies and design relevant interventions. This expected change in attribution will eventually result in improved academic performance. Understanding academic performance from the student's view of point can also help in the design of interventions that foster academic competition among the students.

B. *Scope*

The study was conducted at MUST. First and Second year students offering BSc. Ed. for the academic year 2012/13 comprised the sample. The study was limited to students' academic performance, causal attributions, and hopes to complete their respective courses at the university.

Academic performance was assessed from the students GPA/CGPA scores and GPA/CGPA categories. According to the MUST examination rules and regulations manual, students GPA/CGPA scores are categorized into four groups as follows; 4.40 – 5.00 (first class honors) ; 3.60 – 4.30 (Second Class Upper); 2.80 – 3.59 (Second Class Lower); and 2.00 – 2.79 (Pass degree).

On the other hand, casual attributions refer to the judgments about what causes persons behaviors or performance. The causes are either characteristics of the person or the situation [23]. The study explored both internal and external attributions students adopted in describing their academic performance.

Finally, hope can be defined as a desire and the confident expectation of its fulfilment. It is a unidimensional construct involving an overall perception that goals can be met ([24], [25]). Hope is a goal-directed thinking made up of two necessary components. First, there are pathways thinking, which reflects the person's capacity to conceptualize one or more avenues of arriving at the desired goal. Second, there is agentic thinking, which taps thoughts aimed at initiating and sustaining movement along one's chosen pathways toward a desired goal. In this study, the students hope to finish his/her university studies was examined including whether students lay down strategies so as to enable them finish their studies (pathways) and the extent to which they pursued the laid down strategies (agency).

II. METHODS

A. Research Design

The study adopted the QUAN-Qual model of mixed research design in which quantitative data was collected first and was heavily weighed than qualitative data [26]. It focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Mixed methods research designs provide triangulation, complementarity and deeper understanding of the phenomena under study than what is available from a single methods design [27] which allows for enhanced validity, interpretation, clarification, and illustration of key findings [28]

B. Instruments

A questionnaire and focus group discussions were adopted for this study. A questionnaire was used because it was easy to use, yields a lot of data within a short period of time, and was cost effective. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections including the bio-data section, academic performance section, casual attribution section and hopes to complete university section. The bio-data section had questions related to sex, age, year of study, religious affiliation, sponsorship, residence status and subject specialties of the respondents. Academic performance of students' was assessed by questions such as exact GPA/CGPA, and CGPA/GPA classification.

The 72-item casual attribution Questionnaire (CAQ) assessed the casual attributions of the students towards academic achievement. The items measured casual attributions for success (internal) and failure (external).

Responses to the CAQ are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The reliability of the CAQ is 0.813 [29]. The scale provided subscale scores for internal attribution (range 36 – 180) and external attribution (range 36 – 180). High scores on the CAQ reflect a significant effect of this factor in explaining success or failure.

Hope to complete university was measured by the 12-item Hope scale used to measure dispositional hope. The Hope scale has two subscales; namely pathways subscale and agency subscale. The subscales consist of four items each. Responses on the Hope scale are measured on a 8-point rating scale, ranging from definitely false (1-point) to definitely true (8-points). The reliability of the Hope scale is 0.86 [30]. The scale has subscale scores for pathways (range 4 – 32) and agency (range 4 – 32). Therefore, the total scores on the Hope scale ranges from 8 - 64, with high scores representing higher hope of completing university studies.

C. Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

Focus group discussions with students were conducted a month after collecting and analyzing quantitative data. This was meant to get in-depth understanding of the different patterns identified from analyzing quantitative data. Groups of 10 students were interviewed in each year of study. Students in these groups were purposively selected depending on their sex, age, residence, religious affiliation, subject combination,

sponsorship and academic performance so as to collect in-depth information on academic performance, casual attribution and hope to finish university within the context of the above demographic characteristics.

An interview guide was also used during the discussions because it achieves a high response rate, probes and prompts the respondents and yields detailed information about personal feelings, perceptions, and opinions. The application of focus groups is supported in the literature with several advantages being outlined: it encourages interaction among participants, enhances the quality of the data, and elicits the student perspective ([31], [32]).

D. Data Management and Analysis

A quantitative approach to data management was employed using SPSS – 16. The scores on each of the two scales (CAQ, and Hope Scale) were entered into SPSS – 16 and later used to calculate the total scores on each scale used.

Mann – Whitney, t-tests and Kruskal – Wallis were used to find out any significant differences between social demographic characteristics and the study variables. For the qualitative data, content analysis was used to describe the relationships among the study variables.

Correlations were used to establish the relationships between academic performance, hope to complete university and the different demographic characteristics such as age, sex, among others

III. RESULTS

The sample comprised of 163 undergraduate students offering Bachelor of Science with Education program in first and second year. Second year students were 80 with 9 females (11.2%) and 71 males (88.8%). First year students were 83 with 9 females (10.8%) and 74 males (89.2).

A. Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Respondents from first and second years were approximately the same with 83 students (50.9%) from first year and 80 students (49.1%) from second year. The majority of the respondents were males (89.0%), non-residents (84.7%), government sponsored (85.9%), Christians (Catholics, Protestants, Born-again; [92.7%]) aged between 18-22 years (78.5%) and with majority offering Biology/Chemistry subject combination (42.3%). The age of the respondents was according to the questionnaire grouped in two categories; 18-22 years were 128 (78.5%) students and 23–27 years who were 35 students (21.5%).

B. Academic Performance of Students

Results indicate that most students (49.1%) scored between 2.80-3.59 (second class lower); 46 students (28.2%) scored between 3.60-4.39 (second class upper); 36 students (22.1%) scored between 2.00-2.70 (pass degree) and 1 student (0.6%) scored between 4.4-5.00 (First class).

In the age bracket of 18-22 Years, 61 students (47.7%) had CGPA scores between 2.80-3.59 yet one student (0.8%) had a CGPA score of between 4.40-5.00. A large number of students (54.3%) in the age group 23-27 years had CGPA scores

between 2.80-3.59 yet no students had scores between 4.40-5.00. Exact CGPA/GPA differed significantly ($U = 1518.500$; $p = 0.004$) between the 18-22 age category (mean rank = 87.64) and the 23-27 age category (mean rank = 61.39). Students in the age bracket 18 – 22 years had higher exact CGPA/GPA's compared to students in the age bracket 23 – 27 years.

Second year students had a slightly higher exact CGPA/GPA compared to the first years ($t(161) = 2.446$; $p = 0.016$).

Regarding sponsorship, 12 privately sponsored students (52.2%) scored between 2.00-2.79; 9 students (39.1%) students scored between 2.80-3.59; and 2 students (8.7%) scored between 3.60-4.39. Government sponsored students significantly differed from private sponsored students with regard to the current exact CGPA/GPA ($U = 694.000$; $p < .001$). The mean rank for the government and private sponsored students respectively were 88.54 and 42.17. Thus, government sponsored students performed better than the private sponsored students did.

Generally, there were no significant differences in the performance of students with regards to residence, religious affiliation and sex.

C. Causal attributions towards academic performance

Results revealed that students used more internal attributions ($M = 116.6$; $SD = 15.9$) compared to external attributions ($M = 91.5$; $SD = 14.4$) when describing their academic performance. Internal Attribution was used to describe academic success while external attribution was used to describe academic failure. There was a significant difference between the different years of study and internal attribution ($t(161) = 2.455$; $p = 0.015$). The first years had a higher mean ($M = 119.58$; $SD = 16.38$) contrast to the second year students ($M = 113.56$; $SD = 14.84$). The first year students used more internal attributions when explaining academic performance than second year students. Exact CGPA/GPA was positively related to internal attribution ($r = .180$; $p = 0.022$) and negatively related to external attribution ($r = -.272$; $p < .001$).

D. Hope, Pathways, Agency Scores of University Students and Predictors of Students Hope to Complete Studies

The students in both years had higher levels of pathways thinking ($M = 26.48$; $SD = 4.26$) compared to agency thinking ($M = 23.93$; $SD = 4.70$). The students knew the routes towards desired goal of completing university education (pathways), while they had little determination and “energy” (agency) necessary to begin and sustain the movement towards the completion of university education. Further to this, students in both years had relatively higher hope levels ($M = 50.41$, $SD = 7.66$) with second year students having significantly higher hopes to complete their studies compared to first year students. Internal attribution was positively related to hope ($r = 0.347$; $p < .001$), pathways ($r = 0.266$; $p = 0.001$) and agency ($r = 0.325$; $p < .001$). On the contrary, external attribution was negatively correlated to hope ($r = -0.213$; $p = 0.006$) and agency ($r = -.275$; $p < .001$).

Multiple regression was used to determine which variables considerably contributed to hope to complete university education among MUST BSc. Ed. Students. The predictor variables in the regression equation including CGPA/GPA, age, sponsorship, residence, religion, internal attribution and external attribution were entered simultaneously. The results showed that internal attribution significantly predicted hope to complete studies ($\beta = 0.33$; $t(162) = 3.70$; $p < .001$). Internal attribution also explained a significant proportion of variance in the hope to complete university among university students ($R^2 = .11$; $F(3.162) = 7.38$; $p < .001$).

IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Academic Performance of undergraduate students

The findings generally indicated that second year students performed better than first year students offering the same three-year program (BSc. Education). Several studies (e.g., [6], [3]) have shown that performance of undergraduate students in year one is generally poor compared to that of other continuing students of the same program. A plausible explanation for this poor performance could be the inability to cope with the new social and academic environments in the university [7]. The transition from high school to university life comes with many positive or negative challenges which may lead to successful adjustment to university life, disappointment, failure and/or discontinuation of studies.

In fact, the transition from high school to college invariably shifts the responsibility for academic success from the collective responsibility of parents and teachers to the individual student [33]. Homework, assignments, essays and oral presentation become more clearly the responsibility of the individual rather than the joint efforts of parents, teachers and peers. In one of the interview sessions, one of the students stated, “Assignments and oral presentations posed a great challenge for me in my first year, I did not have experience on how to search for information from the library and the internet very well. Nobody was there for me like in secondary school where teachers and fellow classmates would be by your side to help you. In a week, I could have more than four individual assignments and I think this was too much for me by then...., no wonder, I performed poorly in many course units in first year.” Owing to the inability to adjust to the increased demands of self-initiative and independence, a paradox of failure can emerge during this period, in which some bright, enthusiastic high school students fail to perform better [32]. During the interview sessions with the second years about the causes of poor performance in their first year, it clearly became evident that inability to adapt to the new university environment and poor attitudes were the prominent causes of poor performance. One of the students had to say,

When I joined the university, I completely found a new academic environment. Lecturers came to the classroom with machines (meaning projectors and laptops) which I was not used to. They could just project their presentations on the screens and just give brief explanations. It was exciting though in the beginning because I was seeing this for the first time but in a long run I realized that I could not understand what the lecturers were teaching us. Lecturers were leaving behind handouts with “skeleton-like” notes

(meaning that the notes were not detailed). I found this challenging because I did not know how to search for information in the library and the internet. Further to this, I had poor attitudes towards my course (BSc. Ed.). I had never dreamt of becoming a teacher, and I did not want to be one..., but fate had brought it like this. The poor attitudes towards the course affected my performance too much in my first year until I came into contact with reality in second year. My performance has now improved drastically because I think I have fully adapted to the university environment and my attitudes have now changed.

We also realized that students had wrong perceptions about university life. One student claimed, "I knew university was all about relaxing, partying, visiting friends and doing some little reading..., but I was surprised to find around 12 course units in the first semester, I had no breathing space..." With this wrong perception, some students did not engage more in academic work which affected their performances.

Regarding residential status, findings indicated that residents performed better than non-residents with 24 residents (96%) scoring between 4.00 and 2.80 contrast to 102 non-residents (73.9%) who scored CGPA points in the above range although the differences in performances were not significant. The relationship between residence and academic performance is not very obvious. Studies (e.g., [34]) have shown the non-resident students are more likely to miss lectures due to delays in transport from their hostels to their institutions of learning or some other inconveniences. As a result of such absenteeism, their CGPA scores are drastically reduced.

During the interviews, we realized that non-resident students are faced with many social problems which later lower their academic performance. In line with this, one student stated,

I have found many challenges with residing outside the university. Some of us live as far as Ruharo (a village located about 5 km from the university) and we have to travel such long distances to come to the university and attend lectures. At times, you don't have transport in the morning or it rains heavily in the morning such that you end up missing lectures. Our landlords keep on increasing rent every other day...it's really stressing out there. You even fear going back home late because of thugs on the way..., hence you can't have more time reading in the library as compared to the resident students.

Additionally, some of these non-resident students were on private sponsorship. They reported having problems in completing their functional and tuition fees in time. Some even miss examinations due to failure to pay tuition fees on time and this affected their performance.

In conclusion, university administrators and lecturers should help first year student's adapt easily to university life through counseling them. Other techniques may include fostering small peer study groups, which students can use to encourage one another in their learning, and use as a social support network. Transitions/orientation workshops should be conducted for all new undergraduate students in their

respective faculties to avail them with information regarding university life and other necessary skills required to perform well. Regarding hope, undergraduate students had high hopes of completing their course and were very much aware of strategies of attaining this desire hence the administration and lecturers should provide a convenient learning environment for these students to achieve their goal.

B. Causal attributions towards academic performance

The findings indicated that year one and year two students attributed their academic performance more internally than externally. The findings also revealed that in situations of success, students in both years used internal attributions and during failure they used external attributions.

From the interview sessions, students advanced that in courses where they had succeeded, it was mainly due to their ability, efforts and determination. On the other hand, some students also commended lecturers, other students and a good reading environment as other factors that could have led to their success. In situations of failure, students mainly blamed external factors such as setting of difficult examination papers by the lecturers, bias when marking examinations, failure of lecturers to teach and complete their courses in time, use of teacher-centered methods of teaching mainly lecturing which did not actively engage students in the lessons, and lack of enough knowledge in some of the course units offered.

To a less extent, students also blamed themselves for their poor performances. One student claimed, "For some failed courses, I blame myself. I did not read intensively and even didn't do enough research. I was ever late handing in my assignments and didn't consult others when I got academic challenges."

Several studies investigating causal attribution toward academic performance have also revealed that success is internally attributed while failure is externally attributed (e.g., [16], [34]).

On the other hand, other studies have yielded contradicting results. In one of such studies, entitled "on the causal attribution of academic achievement in college students", 1314 students ranging from freshmen to seniors were sampled from two universities in Yantai, Shandong Province. The sample included; 349 freshmen, 336 sophomores, 336 juniors and 293 seniors. Students in the same grade were similar in the ages and academic proficiency on the whole. The findings of this study indicated that in successful situation; students attributed results to external factors, while in failure situations; they tend to attribute the results to internal factors [29].

In another study, it was found out that students with higher grades during their freshmen year explained bad academic events with external, unstable and specific causes while students with lower grades used internal, stable and global explanations [2]. In another related study, law school students with pessimistic attributional styles had higher levels of academic achievement (as shown by their CGPA scores) than did students with optimistic attribution styles [35].

The above findings generally indicate that the relationship between causal attributions and academic performance is

inconclusive. However, attributional retraining should be emphasized by the lecturers and counseling centers so that students attribute failure/academic difficulties to more unstable causes than stable or permanent causes. Studies have shown that helping students to attribute more to temporally causes succeeded in improving their performance [36].

C. Hope to complete university studies

The findings indicated that students in both years of study had high hopes of finishing their studies and knew what was supposed to be done in order to complete their studies. There was a positive relationship between internal attribution and hope to finish the university. The above results agree Weiner's views of the Attribution theory [15], [38]. The basic principle of the attribution theory as it applies to motivation is that a person's attributions of success or failure determine the amount of effort the person will expend on the activity in future and hence the learners attributions will influence future efforts he/she will invest in a given academic task. The theory suggest that a learner will not be persistent at academic tasks if they attribute their academic successes to internal, unstable factors over which they have control (e.g. effort) and if they attribute failures to internal, unstable factors over which they have control. Similarly attributing achievements to controllable factors such as effort which are also internal can enable the person satisfy his goals through his own effort, and such attributions are beneficial in promoting expectations that the goals will be reached [38].

In conclusion therefore, the general performance of undergraduate students of BSc. Ed, MUST was poor for most first year students. As already noted, first year students face challenges in adapting to the new academic and social life they encounter at the university yet first year appears to the most important year in overall degree progression. The university administrators and lecturers should help these student's adapt easily to university life through counseling them. Other techniques may include fostering small peer study groups, which students can use to encourage one another in their learning, and use as a social support network. Research has shown that peer groups appear to 'buffer' the stress of the transition process during first year. However, when counseling first and second years regarding their academic performance, demographic characteristics such as sex, age, year of study and sponsorship should be taken into consideration since they have a significant relationship with their academic performance. The university counselors should develop interest in the general welfare of students and several counseling centers should be opened to handle varying academic problems among students. Transitions/ orientation workshops should be conducted for all new undergraduate students in their respective faculties to avail them with information regarding university life and other necessary skills required to perform well at the university.

Lecturers should use student-centered methods of teaching, teach and finish up their course in time, constantly evaluate these students so that they don't lose hope / become hopeless as they progress during their studies.

Regarding attribution, attributional retraining should be emphasized by the lecturers and counseling centers so that

students attribute failure/academic difficulties to more unstable causes than stable or permanent causes.

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