

A Comparative Study of Academic Challenges Faced by Rural and Urban Students in their Undergraduate Level



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Date of Submission (Summer, 2022)

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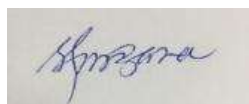
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Syeda', on a light-colored rectangular background.

Date: 27.09.2022

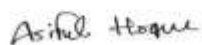
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.



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Dedication

To my dearest parents and all the not-so-toxic people because of whom

I have become who I am today

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the Almighty Allah for His blessing for giving me the strength to finish this thesis paper within the allocated time-frame. Then I would like to thank myself for putting in blood, sweat and tears over the last four years for getting good grades. I would like to thank myself also for not giving up higher education after switching from a public university to a private one. Then I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Syeda Farzana Sultana Hafsa ma'am for being the best guide during my tumultuous journey of thesis writing. It would not be possible for me to sail through this journey without her constant support and advice. She is the one who I drew inspiration from for writing my paper on a topic related to academic challenges. Then I would like to thank all the other amazing and dynamic bunch of teachers who I came in contact with over the last four years. Lastly, I would like to thank my juniors, friends, seniors and family members for staying by my side whenever I need their support and guidance.

-M. M. Asiful Hoque

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Abstract

This study explores the academic roadblocks encountered by rural and urban students in the undergrad level at a private university. The study focuses on the undergrad level students because this level is considered as the key and formative years of one's education. Challenges faced by the students from urban and rural areas at their undergrad level are not the same because rural students face problems such as language barriers, lack of technological skills, transitional issues, lack of communication, adaptation to new environments, low motivation and so on. On the contrary, urban students are better off when it comes to academic challenges at undergrad level; however, they still face challenges including language barriers, transitional issues, study pressure, and not understanding study materials. The purpose of this study is to find out the kind of academic challenges rural and urban students face while studying in an urban private university. I conducted qualitative research to see to what extent rural and urban students face academic challenges and how similarly or differently they cope with those. The systematic analysis and coding of the collected data reveals mainly four emerging themes: language barriers, technological literacy, transitional issues and low motivation that mainly affect their academic performance and achievement in the undergraduate level.

Keywords: Rural-urban disparity, academic challenges, academic performance.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Higher education plays a very vital role in students' lives and "can be seen as a focal point of knowledge and its application" (Khan et al., 2020, p. 2). However, their academic performance varies due to facing various challenges throughout the four years. The gravity of the challenges is not the same for all the students as they come from different backgrounds, and they possess different aptitudes of knowledge and skills.

Background of the study

The existing education system in Bangladesh can broadly be categorized into three different stages namely, primary education (class I-V), secondary education (class VI-XII), and tertiary education (from undergraduate level onwards) (Rafha, 2021). The tertiary education includes graduation, post-graduation, M.Phil and PhD. In every aspect of educational level, students experience different types of academic challenges that affect their academic performance and achievement in some way or another. After 12 years of formal schooling, students start studying in the university which is typically divided into four years consisting of 12 or 8 semesters depending on private or public educational institutions. A large number of students from both the rural and urban areas begin their bachelor's degree in different institutions within and on the outskirts of urban areas. At present, 3.2 million students are studying at tertiary level in Bangladesh which was only 31 thousand back in 1972 (Mannan, 2017). The enrollment rate in higher education has skyrocketed over the past few decades.

In spite of the positive changes in terms of enrollment, our undergraduate level education has some disparity between rural and urban students, as "the rapid acceleration of literacy from the 90s has followed a sharp difference between sexes and between urban and rural areas" (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015b, Campaign for Popular Education, 2014, as cited

in Sumi et al, 2021, p. 197). Even though there are rural students who fight through the challenges and arrives at a desirable place; however, it is not the case for a significant number of rural students who end up performing poorly in the undergraduate level for facing several academic challenges whereas urban students tend to adjust to university comparatively smoothly and perform better than their rural counterparts in later stage of their life (Sumi et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

We know that higher education acts as a transitional bridge between student life and their career. It is imperative to ensure a smooth transition from undergraduate level to the higher level or to the job sector. Almost all 50 public and 100 private universities in Bangladesh are located in or around bigger divisional cities or towns in Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Sultana, 2022). Therefore, it is not possible to avail university education from rural areas, so rural students migrate to bigger cities like Dhaka, Chattogram and other cities for better quality of higher education whereas urban students studying in urban institutions tend to be better off when it comes to academic opportunities and challenges. Urban universities pose challenges to both urban and rural students, but the magnitude of the challenges are different for both groups of students. Rural students are vulnerable due to having low motivation and it affects their academic success (Dağgöl, 2013). Therefore, it cannot be denied that the differences in academic challenges and performance between rural and urban students are rapidly increasing in our country. A number of factors act as a roadblock for students in their academic performance.

The students from urban areas are already adjusted to the urban environment. However, as university education is quite different from traditional school and college education, they also face academic challenges. On the other hand, rural students are often socially disadvantaged, and their academic transitions come out differently due to their academic challenges such as low

motivation, shortcoming of technological knowledge, language barriers and lack of communication skill that directly or indirectly impact their academic performance. It even becomes difficult for them to get a good job at a later stage. As a result, the students cannot make the most out of their potential. Mostly, these graduate students without proper skill sets come out as burdens for the country. The academic roadblocks that students from both urban and rural areas face are the most significant issues to deal with for two reasons. Firstly, their academic challenges directly affect their academic performance. Secondly, they are the ones who turn into human capital and on whom our development process in the educational sector depends to a great extent.

Objectives of the study

In this research, I investigate the difficulties faced by students at the undergraduate level and also the reasons behind facing these challenges. I also explore if there are any differences between the challenges the urban and rural students face. As there are not adequate studies that compare the academic challenges of the two types of students in their tertiary education level, this study is conducted to fill in the research gaps. I strongly believe that the students, teachers and policy makers and other concerned stakeholders will benefit from the findings of this research. The research will help the stakeholders, who are directly or indirectly involved, ponder on the various issues students face and deal with them in an efficient manner. In this paper, I explore the following research questions:

1. What kind of challenges do the rural and urban students face at the university?
2. Why do they face the challenges?
3. To what extent do the academic challenges impact their academic performance?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I review the existing literature on academic challenges the urban and rural students face in Bangladesh.

Opoku-Asare and Siaw (2015) conducted qualitative research in the context of Ghana on 18 participants. They argue that the students' academic performance is directly interconnected with how well they deal with their academic challenges regardless of the adverse factors. In this regard, the students' performance in the examination varies based on their background, intellectual aptitude and unique learning styles. The researchers also argue that the level of resources and the type of background that the rural and urban students have a big role in their academic achievement. When the students experience academic failure, they break down mentally and it has grave impact on the manpower of a country (Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2015).

Rambabu et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative research on 20 participants in the context of India and found that both urban and rural students find it difficult to understand the vocabulary and sentence structure of the target language and even if they understand it separately they become unable to make full meanings out of them, which makes it challenging for them to understand the course contents. They also claim that the tendency to translate words of the target language in the head heightens the students' speaking difficulties (Rambabu et al., 2021, p. 3) and it requires more time to comprehend the teachers' lectures due to the translation in their heads. As they are also aware of their poor speaking skills, they are embarrassed to speak English sentences in front of the class which hinders their communication with the course teachers.

Pheko et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory research on 17 participants in the context of Botswana. They argue that there are a plethora of challenges for

rural students in urban institutions. One of them is when rural students find other students more fluent in speaking, it poses a challenge to them. In their research, they have found that there are instances where the students feel inhibited and refrain themselves from speaking up in class due to their broken English (Pheko et al., 2014) and it prevents them from speaking with the teachers and also with fluent English speaker students in the fear of making mistakes and being judged despite knowing the fact that their grade will suffer for not participating in the class. Their findings of the study show that students with low-proficiency level encounter acculturative stress (Pheko et al., 2014) which in turn affected their academic performance and mental condition.

Wang (2022) showed how the students' lack of literacy skills, especially writing skills negatively impacted their scores in examinations through qualitative research using 15 participants in the context of Ethiopia. He argues that writing skill can determine a student's academic performance (Wang, 2022). It has been a basic requirement for performing well in different internal examinations of the university. He goes on to argue that there is a huge difference between rural and urban students in their writing skill competency (Wang, 2022) which clearly favors the students from urban areas.

Lefoka and Tlali (2021) in their qualitative research in the context of Lesotho claim that the two major challenges frequently encountered in rural to urban migration are difficulty to adjust to new modes of education and technology. The 12 participants in their study opine that their secondary education system is run differently than the undergraduate education system. Therefore, the rural students find it challenging to acculturate to the new pedagogical approach and they sometimes fail to grasp the study material which eventually affects their performance in many courses. Independent learning system at the university level was another challenge that the rural students encountered due to their underpreparedness to meet the university's demands.

Wilson et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative research method in the context of the United States using 20 participants. They argue that the transition in tertiary level can be a challenging time for the students due to facing transitional issues, especially during the freshman year when they tend to be emotionally and mentally vulnerable (Wilson et al., 2016). These transition issues can significantly impact their academic performance regardless of their urban and rural background. However, they found out that the students from rural areas experience greater disruption during their transitional phase. Besides, they suggest that the students need support from their peers, advisers, mentors and teachers are crucial during the transition period in order to avoid any roadblocks.

Maltzan and Margaret (2006) argue that one of the major challenges that the rural students enrolling urban universities face is adapting to the larger classrooms, campuses and the culture of more competition. Besides, the rural students face difficulty in adjusting to the study materials and teaching methods in contrast to their rural high school and college. Due to this spatial challenge and incongruence between the environment of rural and that of urban areas, rural students experience roadblocks while transitioning to larger urban institutions.

Dağgöl (2013) claims that lack of motivation to study is one of the academic challenges experienced by both urban and rural students through qualitative research using 15 participants in the context of Turkey. He further argues that motivation is of paramount importance as it adds meaningfulness to learning (Dağgöl, 2013). They found out why the students feel demotivated and how they can be motivated towards their academics. According to their research, the reasons such as study pressure, overloading, difficulty in concentration, non-supportive teachers, teachers being negative, and not understanding study materials properly act as a hurdle for the students for performing poorly in the different internal examinations.

Hadiyanto and Nuraini (2016) adopted a qualitative case study to carry out their study using 10 participants in the context of Indonesia. According to their study, the reasons for academic challenges are low motivation, lack of foundation in English language, teacher-student ratio, and failure of the teachers to be mentors in the truest sense. Besides, they show how these challenges gradually cripple and pile up one after another and lead to lower grades and mental frustration as in most cases they do not know how to tackle them in an efficient and effective manner.

Sumi et al. (2021) conducted a study using a quantitative method in Bangladeshi context where 566 participants were selected through multistage proportionate random sampling from different educational institutions. They compare and contrast the academic results in order to find out the factors that contribute to the disparity between students from different backgrounds (Sumi et al, 2021). They also suggest that the concerned authorities must engage all the stakeholders to create and regulate educational policies to ensure good-quality education for everyone regardless of their background (Sumi et al., 2021).

Mauliya et al. (2020) used a descriptive qualitative method for conducting their research using 7 participants in the context Indonesia. They posit that motivation is a significant internal factor that can negatively or positively influence the students' academic performance (Mauliya et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a direct correlation between lack of motivation and academic performance. They opine that we need to know the root cause of low motivation in the first place in order to motivate the students towards the learning process. When the root is identified, we can focus on finding out the ways to motivate them in the right direction. Low motivation also stems from other factors such as family pressure, peer pressure, undue competition among peers and poor study habits.

The studies I have reviewed so far, discussed the academic challenges namely, transitional issues, language barriers, lack of communication skill, lack of basic skills, low motivation of both urban and rural students in urban universities. They pin-pointed the challenges and the possible reasons. Apart from that, some researchers have shown how the academic challenges act as barriers to the students' performance which have far-reaching consequences in their life. In addition to that, they suggest a number of possible ways out to support the students to deal with the academic challenges. I decided to work on this topic in order to discover academic roadblocks of the students and also to show to what extent rural and urban students face the challenges similarly or differently in the same institution due to having different backgrounds. As there was hardly any research comparing and contrasting urban and rural students in terms of academic challenges in the context of Bangladesh, I decided to conduct a research on this. I strongly believe that this study will add some value to the educational research sector of Bangladesh as the stakeholders including teachers, parents and policymakers will ponder the issues encountered by students and support them better to deal with their challenges.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This paper aims at comparing the academic roadblocks experienced by students enrolling from both rural and urban areas at the university in their undergraduate level. This paper concentrates on the existing scenario of academic challenges, the reasons for facing these challenges and how these challenges affect the students' academic results and achievements at the same level. I used a qualitative research method to find out the students' perceptions about the current situation of academic challenges through in-depth interviews, since qualitative research methods "explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 33). Five students participated in my study, three of whom hail from rural areas and the other two students are from urban areas, all of them are currently studying at a private university in Dhaka. The selection of the respondents was not on a random basis. I selected them as I got acquainted with 12 students when I signed up for a course from the General Education Department and did group work together. So I was able to approach all the students and 5 of them gave their consent to participate in my study and the others were not willing to participate. I strongly believe that each of the participants has provided me with authentic information to help me find answers to my research questions.

Research Site

The university where I conducted my research is a private university located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. There are around 10 thousand students studying in the selected university at the undergraduate level. The university offers both bachelor and master programs. I selected five students only from the undergraduate level. There are students from diverse backgrounds, from rural to urban, from Bangla medium to English medium, and from lower class to higher class. The students who perform poorly in the writing section of the admission test in the university are

offered remedial English classes to help them overcome their language barriers. For all the students, there are facilities for advising, counseling, mental check-up, peer-tutoring and mentoring to perform well in academics, and also to smoothen their academic life.

Participants

Last semester I did a course from the General Education Department where I met 12 students from different semesters of the English department. I also did fieldwork as a part of the course. So I grew a personal connection with them and had access to them. Therefore, I approached all of them for the interview. Out of them, 4 students were not comfortable with sharing their experiences and challenges as it was sensitive to them even though I assured them of their anonymity. 3 students were unwilling to sit for the interview. The other 5 students were eager to sit for the interview as they wanted their voices to be heard and their challenges to be addressed by the teachers and policymakers. Hence, I included the 5 students as the participants in my study.

The names (pseudonyms) of the rural students are Jakia Sultana who is in the last term and not doing academically well; Nur Nafisa who is from 9th term and is also not doing well in her studies; Nishat Tabassum who is from 11th term and has not been able to perform well in university so far. There are two urban students also from the same university and department. Their names are Faria Hasan who is studying in her 11th term and has performed fairly well in her studies; Sadia Nawrin is from 9th term and also has good academic performance.

For the interview, I selected the 5 students who were ready to share their experiences and challenges without any hesitation and agreed to sit for the interview when I approached them.

Jakia is from a rural area and studied in the science stream. She is from a Bangla medium background. She has obtained outstanding results in SSC and HSC level. She also has obtained a board scholarship. She never faced any academic problem back in her school or college. She is currently in her last term studying at the English department. Her minor is Sustainable development. She is from a less-privileged family but receives the opportunity to study at an urban institution as one of her uncles helps her with.

Nur is also from a rural area and studied in Humanities. She is also from a Bangla medium background. She is currently in 9th term studying at the English department. Her minor is Media studies and Journalism. She is from a rural area where mobile network connection and Wi-Fi connection is not properly available. She comes from a under-privileged background. She was awarded full-free studentship during her admission at the university based on her previous academic records. She has secured an excellent GPA in SSC and HSC and rarely faced any major academic challenges in school or college.

Nishat hails from a rural area and studied in a Bangla medium background. She studied in the Science group in SSC but switched to Humanities in college due to not being able to afford the cost of private tuition or coaching. She never had any access to technology and any English resources. She is in 11th semester at the English department. She was always a topper in her school or college and had good results in SSC and HSC but experienced few issues during her transition to college. Faria comes from an urban area. He has secured good results in SSC and HSC level and received forty percent waiver during her admission at the university. She is in her 11th semester at the English department. She initially got admitted into MSJ department according to her parents' wish but switched to English for her burning passion in literature. Her minor is BBA. She was a part of a debating and English spoken club in her school and college

which helped her fluency in English. The challenges she faced while transitioning from school to college, she faced the same challenges while transitioning from college to university. She says, "I mainly faced transitional issues, low motivation, undue pressure of competition with peers, and also language barriers to some extent" (Interview-1, L-9-10). She has outstanding academic records so far at undergraduate level.

Sadia is an urban student who achieved excellent results in her SSC and HSC level. She studied in co-ed Bangla medium school. She received a full free scholarship during her admission at the university. Her minor is Media Studies and Journalism. She studied in Bangla medium school and college. Currently she is studying in the 9th semester at the English department. She has had glossophobia since her childhood. She has a privileged family background and therefore she has access to technology from a very early age. She used her exposure to technology to expand her exposure to English. She has done so far good academically at the university.

Data Collection Procedures

Hadiyanto and Nuraini (2016) posit that "interview is the best way to collect the data because we as a researcher interview the participant to find out from them all the things that we cannot directly observe" (p. 5). Therefore, in this qualitative research, I collected the data by interviewing my participants with their consent. About thirty-minute long semi-structured interviews helped me to learn about the perspectives, opinions and experiences of the participants in a detailed manner. The interviewees were also asked some supplementary and relevant questions regarding their backgrounds which yielded crucial findings for the study. The interviews were audio-recorded, after taking permission from the participants, in order to maintain accuracy. Haryanto et al. (2018) argues that "recording was due to support the data in

the interview section so that the results could be later transcribed" (p. 5). Keeping this in mind, all the data were first transcribed and then analyzed in order to find out the themes for thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, qualitative coding was used. Haryanto et. al (2018) argue that "Qualitative coding is related to assign some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of data and is also useful to get back or retrieve specific data" (p. 5). The data received from the selected interviewees was scanned and scrutinized keeping the research questions in mind in order to find similarities and differences in academic challenges between rural and urban students. After identifying the preliminary codes, categories were used to narrow down and identify the recurrent patterns, and to get from the preliminary codes to the themes. In order to avoid any bias and discrepancies and also to check on the validation of the findings, the data was shared with the interviewees for validation.

Besides qualitative coding, thematic analysis is used in the research for analyzing the data. As part of thematic analysis, a number of themes have been identified from the transcribed interview. The themes of language barrier, lack of technological skills, lack of communication skills, transitional issues and low motivation have been detected based on the frequency of the uttered words, phrases and sentences of the participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of the research that I conducted.

English Language Fluency of the Students

Jakia became emotional while sharing her experience related to English language speaking as she says, "The biggest challenge for me is that it's been almost four years and even now I cannot speak in English with my teachers and peers" (Interview-1, L-11-12). Apart from speaking, she also faces problems in three other English skills, i.e. reading, writing and listening. Due to little or no exposure to English resources, her speaking and listening skills also did not develop during her school or college level. From understanding course materials to writing assignments in English takes a heavy toll on her. Makeleni argues, "Where proficiency in English is lacking in any academic setting, it will lower the academic performance of such learners" (2021, p. 5).

Nur speaks in Bangla about her academic challenges during the whole interview even though I was asking questions in English. She says, "My own friends used to bully, mock and judge me in class for my mispronunciation and broken English" (Interview-1, L-13-14). Even when she does not understand something, she cannot let the teacher know due to her shyness and fear of being laughed at for her broken English. As most of the teachers and classmates speak in English during the full class time, she feels inhibited and struggles to understand the class lectures. As she is unable to explain things properly in English for not having the right words and expressions to put them into words, her academic performance suffers. However, she can explain the same thing in Bangla well.

Nishat suffers more for her lack of reading and writing skill in academic performance "they are not as intimidating as spoken English due to my fear of making mistakes and being

judged by others" (Interview-1, L-13-15). Some classmates help her by fixing writing or speaking related errors while others make her feel like she does not match their level. She argues, "My urban classmates, especially those from the English medium, get more advantages, as they have good command over English" (Interview-1, L-62-63).

Faria says, "Even though I hail from an urban area, I still face problems understanding textbooks written in advanced and archaic English" (Interview-1, L-15-16). However, internet resources, discussion with friends and consultation with teachers have tremendously helped her to overcome her language challenges. In speaking and listening, she initially used to feel inhibited in class as she was not used to English as a medium of instruction. Practicing spoken English with her peers helps her improve her English.

Sadia says, "Even though I'm not that good at speaking, I can communicate" (Interview-1, L-23). Her exposure to technology makes it easier for her to improve her English by watching English movies, tv series etc. However, she points out, "Some texts are way too difficult and so complex to get any meaning out of them" (Interview-1, L-11-12). However, she reaches out to the teachers, friends and TAs for better understanding. She believes that students from English medium are more advantaged than her as far as English language is concerned.

Technological Skills of the Students

The rural students do not have any proper orientation with technology. They had to learn even practical things by reading ICT textbooks in school or college. Jakia says, "Lack of technological skills came out as a big barrier in my university life" (Interview-1, L-33). During online classes, this problem becomes even worse due to her slow typing speed. Nur faces extreme challenges in examinations and assignments. So she was bound to drop two consecutive semesters. It affects her mental condition and also academic performance. Nishat says, "It was

excruciatingly painful for me in online examinations as my typing speed is not good at all" (Interview-1 , L-26-27). Even though the teachers allocate extra time initially considering her case, a few of them refuse to do so later on which affects her grades. She also faces problems in using basic softwares such as MS Word and MS PowerPoint.

Faria does not face any technological barriers. When her university switched to online classes during Covid-19, her transition was pretty smoother compared to her rural classmates as she lives in an urban area where good Wi-Fi connection is available and she is well acquainted with technology.

Sadia also does not experience any technological issues in undergraduate level as her college used to conduct practical classes in ICT lab where she was introduced with basic technological skills such as typing, making slides and creating spreadsheets. Besides, as she is from a privileged background, she starts using computers from grade 6. Consequently, she can navigate through technology with ease during online and in-person classes.

Transition from College to Undergraduate Level

Jakia had no idea about how different or similar the university curriculum would be from college level. As colleges follow a different curriculum and evaluation criteria which is mostly dependent on rote memorization, it is a big challenge for her to cope up with university where creative writing is a must. She also mentions that she could take help from private tutors which is not available at university and it is "a big shock and major challenge for me to understand the study materials" (Interview-1, L-26).

Nur says, "As I am from a rural area, the urban educational environment was completely different from ours" (Interview-1, L-22-23). In college, everything is within a set boundary and memorization based. There are also fixed textbooks, syllabus and course

curriculum which is not the case at university. She sees herself as a completely different person from what she was in college due to transitional issues. There is a major shift in her personality from being an extrovert to an introvert. She added, "Now I think twice even before striking up a conversation with anyone" (Interview-1, L-28-29).

Nishat thinks that different course curriculum, comparatively more competition, different teaching styles, independent learning, new assessment criteria and requirements of skill sets such as technological skills, research skill and creative writing skill affect her academic performance at the university.

Faria faces transitional issues when she experiences things that were not taught in school. For the most part, she chooses undergraduate courses without prior-knowledge about them which leads her to drop courses sometimes. It is not the case in her school or colleges as there are a fixed set of subjects, textbooks and the whole system are within a set boundary unlike the university level.

Even having been hailed from an urban area, Sadia also faces transitional issues as "The study pressure is way too much, especially after the mid-term" (Interview-1, L-36-37). Even though schools or colleges deal with more subjects and the time duration of an academic year is 1 year which is only about 4 months in university. Besides, previously she had no experience of presentation and viva. It is difficult for her to attend these due to her glossophobia. It therefore negatively impacts her grades to some extent even though she covers it up with other written examinations.

State of Communication Skills of the Students

Jakia hesitates to approach her teachers fearing the consequences of not being able to ask questions and communicate properly during class or consultation hour. She says "What if the

teachers get disturbed by my questions?" (Interview-1, L-38-39). She thinks that her broken English, fear of public speaking, fear of being judged by others and coming to new atmosphere act as barriers in terms of her communication skills whereas "two-way communication in the classroom is essential in assuring that effective teaching and learning can take place" (Ismail & Idris, 2009, p. 6).

Nur says, "I can understand if the teacher uses simple English, but as soon as they start speaking using advanced words and expressions, I find it difficult to understand" (Interview-1, L-43-45). She stops participating in class discussion due being bullied and mocked by her peers. It affects her participation marks and so she feels demotivated and goes through "a communication trauma" (Interview-1, L-61).

Nishat feels hesitant to communicate with her teachers and peers. This hesitation mostly stems from her lack of communication skill and language barrier as some teachers insist the students to speak in English. Therefore, she refrains herself from asking any questions. She refrains from joining different clubs and attending cultural programs due to the fear of not having the appropriate communication skill to approach the concerned people despite having intense passion and interest for extra-curricular activities.

Faria does not face any problem in communicating with teachers, peers and friends. Whenever she faces any problem, she consults course teachers and friends which "helps me to understand the study materials and class lectures better" (Interview-1, L-34). The extracurricular activities, different workshops and seminars help her to overcome her fear of communication.

Sadia has a mixture of both negative and positive experience regarding communication skills. She has a fear of public speaking. However, she does not face any problem

communicating with her teachers, classmates and friends. Whenever she faces any problem, she consults course teachers, peer mentors, TAs and friends without any hesitation.

Understanding of the Study Materials

All the interviewed students face challenges understanding the study materials even though the gravity of their challenges is different. All of them agree that their English proficiency has a big role when it comes to understanding the course materials such as textbooks and lecture slides. With time, the two urban students' capability to understand the study materials improves to some extent. Faria says, "The peer mentors and TAs help me a lot in this regard, they are really co-operative and compassionate " (Interview-1, L-84).

How Motivated the Students Are

Jakia broke down mentally due to the mismatch of expectation and reality. Everything from not having fluency in English, English as a medium of instruction instead of Bangla, lack of technological skill, lack of communication skills and adjusting to new curriculum act as reasons for her to lose motivation even to attend classes and study while "Motivation positively affects academic performance through deep strategy towards study and higher study effort (Kusurkar et al., 2012, p. 67).

Nur says, "I lost my motivation for studies and could not concentrate on my studies due to financial burden and in turn my results went even down" (Interview-1, L-51-52). Moreover, her lack of proper writing and speaking skills, lack of communication skills, bullying from peers or friends and inability to adjust to the new atmosphere results in her low motivation. It made her think about changing university and even committing suicide multiple times.

Nishat cannot pay course registration fees on time due to her family's financial instability especially during Covid-19, it leads her to have less motivation for studies. The fact

that she is from the English department but not fluent in English makes her even more depressed about her situation thinking that "I have no future" (Interview-1, L-46).

Faria also experiences a phase of low motivation whenever she sees her classmates outperform her. She sometimes becomes depressed and disappointed when compared to her other classmates. This peer pressure of competition comes out as an academic challenge for her as "It sometimes feels like my satisfaction does not depend on my performance, rather it depends on whether my other classmates are performing better than me or not" (Interview-1, L-41-43). It does not affect her academic performance but it impacts her mental health to some extent.

Sadia mainly faces low motivation when it comes to meeting deadlines of presentation, viva, assignments and quizzes of different courses all together, especially after the midterms. She thinks that it will be better if the study pressure is equally distributed before and after the midterm. Over all, the fear of meeting deadlines, stage fright and the fear of uncertainty of studying a major which does not appear to have any practical application.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I will critically interpret and discuss the responses of the interviewed students thematically. Aside from this, I will summarize the significant findings with regards to my research questions.

Language Barriers

From the responses of the rural students, it is observed that the biggest academic challenge that they face is the language barrier, especially lack of speaking, writing and listening skills. As all the examinations are held in English, students are required to be good at English writing skills that the rural students lack to a great extent. They lack creative writing skill due to relying on rote memorization during their school or college level. Besides, they do not usually have any access to multimedia classroom, internet and YouTube from where they can learn English speaking or writing. Due to low proficiency in speaking skill, they have an instilled fear of being judged and being laughed at by their teachers and peers. Therefore, they rarely participate in the class discussion. It hampers their exam performance along with their participation marks. Eventually they underperform at the undergraduate level. It mainly happens due to the incongruence between the English taught in school or college level and that of university level.

On the contrary, the urban students are relatively fluent in written and spoken English if not fully fluent. They acquire the language by watching English movies, tv series, vlogs and listening to English songs, podcasts and reading English comics and books. Their English skills improve because of having exposure to English resources. Hence the urban students perform better than their rural counterparts for being good at written and oral language. As "there is a strong relationship between exposure to English language and developing the four language

skills" (Samer & Zoubi, 2018, p. 160), the rural students' low exposure to English language affects their learning and academic performance. Two persons with the same level of intelligence can end up performing differently in exams based on their English proficiency level.

English as a Medium of Instruction

All the three Rural students experience serious challenges to understand teachers' lectures and teaching materials, as well as to communicate with the teachers and classmates. This fact also becomes evident when they struggle to talk in English during the interview and constantly switch code from L2 to L1. All of them are unable to structure basic sentences, make errors in phrases, collocations and pronunciation. Their broken English and various mistakes clearly show that the students are not comfortable with English as a Medium of Instruction (MOI) and can understand study materials well only when the teachers use code-switching.

On the contrary, the urban students argue that they are not as fluent as their English Medium counterparts. However, they are fluent enough to communicate with the teachers regarding their issues with course materials. Sometimes they also face some issues with understanding the teachers' lectures but it does not matter much. The two urban students give the whole 30-minute long interview in English without making any major errors which is also a testament to their good proficiency in English language.

Lack of Technological Skills

The rural students lack a proper orientation with basic technological skills as they do not have any access to technology due to their less privileged background. Even though their schools and colleges have some technological facilities, they are unable to take the full advantage of it due to focusing more on the grades instead of learning in ICT lab classes. As a result, the rural students face technological issues, especially during online classes and

examinations, which hugely affects their academic performance. The two urban students do not face any issues in this regard because of their prior orientation with technology in school or college and also at home.

Lack of Communication Skills

The interview responses of the rural students show that they are not confident to talk in formal settings, such as classrooms and teachers' rooms. To be more specific, they feel uneasy to speak in English and remain silent to avoid any potential mistakes. In a classroom, two-way communication is of immense importance as it helps the students to facilitate their learning and also helps the teachers to understand whether their students are on the same page as the teachers' role is not just to teach but also to "recognize how threatening a new learning situation can be for adult learners, so he skillfully understands and supports his students" (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p.127). The two urban students are better off in terms of communicating with teachers and classmates because of their good communication skills and outgoing personality.

Students' Academic Challenges and Their Socio-economic Background

From the students' responses, it is observed that their socio-economic background plays a big role in their academic life. The three rural students are from socially underprivileged backgrounds. None of them has any exposure to English language, modern technology, large campus, big classrooms and extreme competition culture. As a result, the rural students face problems to meet the demands of undergraduate level since they enroll in university under-prepared. In contrast, the urban students are from a privileged background and have access to modern technology such as computers, laptops and mobile phones from an early age. It helps them to be good simultaneously at technology and English language. Based upon their access to

learning resources and socio-economic background, there is a difference between urban and rural students' technological and language skills.

Low Motivation due to Various Academic Challenges

The students regardless of background have low motivation at some point of their undergraduate level. Due to facing language barriers, transitional issues, lack of communication skill, study pressure, peer pressure of competition and lack of technological skill, they cannot perform satisfactorily. Nur faces various academic challenges and cannot meet the threshold of minimum CGPA needed to retain full free studentship. Therefore, she loses her motivation for studies. The responses provided by Nur clearly illustrate that someone's lack of communication skills or communication trauma can affect his/her mental health (which is also as important as physical health). Therefore, they can feel demotivated. It can lead to other consequences like lagging behind classmates in course work, withdrawing from courses and even dropping a semester. It shows to what extent feeling motivated is of paramount importance.

The urban student Faria also faced low motivation even though the reasons are different from rural students. She experiences peer pressure despite having good academic records. Peer pressure happens mainly due to competition among classmates, which results in low motivation. It illustrates that when someone's academic performance is compared with the students who perform better, it can be very problematic and demotivating for the students performing relatively less.

The Role of University in Supporting the Students

All the students argue that the challenges can be dealt better with more support from the university. In order to help the students to cope up with these challenges, all the stakeholders including the teachers, advisers, mentors, administration and policy makers have a big role to

play. Whenever a student performs poorly or comes under the probation list, the concerned people should find out the root causes instead of just focusing on superficial factors. The students think that the university should introduce English speaking and listening courses apart from reading and writing based ones. Teacher-student relationship and teacher-students ratio also play a big role in a teaching-learning situation. If the teacher shows a more welcoming attitude, the students will be interested to consult them about their academic issues with more ease. Moreover, if the teacher-student ratio is kept within a manageable limit, it will also facilitate the students' learning.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this research, I investigated the academic roadblocks encountered by students from rural and urban backgrounds. I found out that the major challenges students face are linguistics barriers, shortcoming of technological literacy, transitional issues and low motivation. These challenges are directly or indirectly related to the medium of instruction, the socio-economic background of the students, the role of university and the exposure to English language and technology. Even though there is disparity between the two groups of students in terms of the first two challenges, both groups have common ground when it comes to the second two challenges. The urban students outperform the rural students for having better exposure to language and technology.

Recommendations

I would like to offer some recommendations based on the findings and discussion of the study. In one way, these will help the students overcome their academic challenges and in other way, these will help the related bodies to help students overcome their academic challenges.

- English speaking and listening courses should be offered
- Courses like study skills and life skills should be included in course curriculum
- Code-switching from English to Bangla should be allowed in class
- Students should help each other to build themselves
- More academic support should be provided to smoothen the transition of both urban and rural students, but especially to the rural students

Limitations of the Study

Even though the study was conducted through an in-depth interview, there is a limitation in terms of the number of participants. A bigger group of participants from different mediums and backgrounds such as Bangla medium, English medium and Madrasha medium might reveal a different picture about the academic challenges of the students. Even though I am well acquainted with the participants, they were reluctant to talk about their academic performance on record in the first place lest I judge them. Besides, some participants were concerned about the fact that their identity and information would be revealed despite assuring them of their anonymity. Aside from this, some participants were mindless and seemed a little distracted during the interview. Overall, every student has a unique family background, issues, struggles, capabilities and skills, so coding their challenges into certain themes can never do full justice to them. However, I tried to conduct the interview to receive accurate and authentic answers to the best of my ability.

Possible Future Research

While looking for literature on this particular topic, I realize that there is not adequate research done specially on the academic challenges encountered by students from rural and urban areas in urban institutions. Hence, my attempt is to fill the research gap by conducting research on this topic. I strongly believe that the first step to help students overcome their academic roadblocks is to identify the challenges first and then find out the reasons for facing those challenges. Therefore, more research should be conducted in order to know about the genuine challenges and the reasons. It will also be helpful to bridge the gap between rural and urban students in university.

Apart from that, it will help the students to transition smoothly from college to university, and from rural to urban institutions for pursuing higher education.

According to me, some of the possible future research areas regarding this topic could be the following:

1. There can be research to what extent advising, mentoring and peer tutoring are effective for the students in overcoming academic challenges.
2. The role of university and other related stockholders in coping up with academic challenges can be another interesting research area.
3. Research can be done on how much the remedial English courses and other English language courses are helpful to overcome students' language barriers in university.
4. There can be research on to what extent any medium of instruction other than the students' native language can affect their academic performance.

I conducted this research as I believe that the existing provisions and academic support received by the students at their undergraduate level is significantly inadequate and not streamed according to the level of the students from all backgrounds. Therefore, I tried to investigate the actual scenario and find out the challenges the urban and rural students face while navigating the academia as well as the reasons why they face the challenges and the way they try to cope with the challenges. I think if the recommendations are put into effect, the students from both backgrounds can be better supported. I strongly believe that the findings of my study will benefit the teachers, parents, policymakers as well as the students by helping them to understand and cope with academic challenges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form for Interview

A Comparative Study of Academic Challenges faced by Rural and Urban Students in their

Undergrad Level

-M. M. Asiful Hoque

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB)

This consent form is designed for carrying out a comparative study by M. M. Asiful Hoque, a student from Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The purpose of this study is to identify the academic challenges that rural and urban students experience while getting admitted into a university in an urban area. It also aims to show how the academic challenges impact their academic performance and achievements. Students' background has a direct connection with how well or how poorly they perform in their academics. Therefore, it is imperative to know to what extent their academics are affected by the academic challenges that they encounter in the university. This comparative study will identify the academic challenges, the reasons for encountering such challenges and also to what extent their rural-urban background impacts the students' academic performance. Interviews will be taken as a part of the research work. If you give your consent to participate in this research work, you will have to sit for a semi-structured interview which is approximately 25 to 30 minutes in length. During the interview session, you need to share your academic challenges (if any), the reasons for facing those roadblocks and also your academic performance. The whole interview session will be recorded on a mobile phone using a voice recorder. Written notes will also be taken during the interview. Five participants will participate in this research

work. If you participate in this research, it will continue until the submission of the researcher's undergraduate thesis, approximately up to October 6, 2022.

Some of the questions of this interview might make you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed to answer; however, you have the right to skip any question. You also have the right to decline any question if you do not wish to answer. You can also end the interview at any stage if you do not wish to continue. You will not be required to explain or show any reason to end the interview. There is no other chance of breaching your confidentiality because of taking part in this interview. The access to all the data collected from you will only be limited to the researcher. The data will not be shared in any format (voice tape, transcriptions, notes) with anyone other than the supervisor. The data will also be transcribed by the researcher himself. In this regard, you will not be identified by your real name and precaution will be taken to keep your data completely private, safe and secure. The data will be published using pseudonymized quotes to maintain confidentiality. The shared data will be collected, analyzed and explored further keeping your confidentiality intact. Once this study is finished, your real name or any other information that helps people identify you easily will not be shared in public when the findings are shared in any conference or in any publication.

Your taking part in this interview is voluntary. You will not get paid, nor will you receive any direct benefits from this interview. You are under no obligation to participate in this interview and you can withdraw from this interview or discontinue at any point for any reason without any penalty or consequences. The recordings, notes and transcriptions will be given to you for review and factual correction, once the interview session is over. For additional information about this research work, you can contact me through phone call- 01535510490 or shoot me an email at- asiful.hoque.deh@ulab.edu.bd

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your academic background. Which semester are you currently in at the university? What kind of experience have you had so far?
2. What kind of academic challenges did you face at your undergraduate level? Apart from those academic challenges, are there any other challenges that you have faced?
3. How did those challenges affect your academic performances?
4. Why do you think you have experienced those academic roadblocks at the university?
5. Do you think that your socio-economic background has any impact on your academic challenges? If so, do you think your urban/rural classmates are less/more advantaged/disadvantaged than you?
6. Do you see any difference in your academic performance at the university level from school or college level? If yes, what are the differences?
7. How did you cope up with your academic challenges?
8. Have you asked for help from anyone for overcoming those challenges? If yes, to whom?
9. Do you think you lack any study-related skills? Why do you think you lack those skills?
10. How did the university support you to cope with the challenges that you experienced?
11. How do you think the various stakeholders could support you better?
12. Do you have any recommendations for coping with the academic challenges you faced?



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