

A STUDY ON FACTORS AFFECTING THE ASSIGNMENT COMPLETION OF UNDERGRADUATES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract: This study was aimed at analyzing the relationship between various factors (Task orientation, Time management, Instructor feedback and cooperation) and assignment completion. With the current pandemic situation, the demand for e-learning is growing and hence the exam based grading system is slowly moving towards an assignment based grading system which enhances the importance of this study to research on what factors influences the completing of an assignment efficiently.

The approach taken in designing this study was a deductive approach using a quantitative method. A self administered survey was used on a sample of 500 undergraduates in three local universities. Analysis involved correlation, regression and descriptive analysis.

The results of the study followed the findings of the previous researches done on this regard except for few instances. Task orientation was the main determinant of time spent on assignments and the time management was the main determinant of number of assignments completed. All the factors were inter-related to each other directly or indirectly.

Research limitations involved the limitation of factors analyzed and further research can be done using postgraduate students or school students and undergraduates in foreign universities. Future studies can also involve a qualitative aspect as well to enable the respondents to give a qualitative input.

Keywords: Assignment completion, Task orientation, Time management, Instructor feedback, cooperation

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Assignments in higher education are an integral part of the curriculum, completion of which are graded and would affect the final outcome of the student's performance of the complete academic program. According to Grodner and Nicholas (2013), assessments are a way to improve student learning without increasing education spending. According to the data collected by the World Bank the Sri Lankan government's spending on tertiary education is around 0.44% of the total GDP. To gain the maximum out of the spent money, it is important that academic institutes of the country to search for ways that optimize the students' learning process.

Due to the rising pandemic COVID-19 in the world, many academic organizations have shifted their appraisal method to assignments based ones from the exam based, so that the students can work from their homes and submit the assignments without physically coming to the academic institutions. According to Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), there can still be significant challenges to complete the assignments in spite of the fact that they are aligned with the current popularity of online learning. There are many challenges such as motivational capacity, distractions such as internet and television, time management and the work load, and outside responsibilities such as sports, which are mentioned in the mentioned study.

The study is focused on finding the factors affecting the completion of assignments, to find the challenges faced when completing the assignments to assess the growing reliability on assignments for assessment purposes which is adopted by many educational institutes. There has not been much research on assignment completion in Sri Lanka; therefore it is believed that the study is done on a timely requirement. Given the number of students entering higher education and the number of academic institutes opting out for assignment based assessing methods, the study can become useful for both students and higher academic institutions.

Research Problem and Problem statement

This study is focused on assisting the students and academic institutes to find out about the factors affecting the completion of assignments. Therefore it is important to analyze the inter-relationship between the pre-decided factors and also the relationship between those factors and the amount of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments. The research questions can be derived as follows;

- What is the relationship, if any, between task orientation, instructor feedback, time management and cooperation
- What is the relationship, if any, between task orientation, instructor feedback, time management, cooperation and the amount of time spent on assignment and the number of assignments completed.

As mentioned above, the students are finding it challenging to complete the assignments even with the current online learning. Therefore it should be found out whether the assignments are affected by one of the factors which are studied under previous studies, and if so how it or them can be manipulated in a way that assignments are made more effective for students. This will ultimately improve the effectiveness of the assignments and would help the students out as well. The factors affecting the assignment completion might affect each other. Therefore the inter-relationship of the factors should be identified to eliminate or mitigate adverse impact on assignment completion. The mentioned factors have not been studied simultaneously in a Sri Lankan context before. Therefore it is of timely importance to study the impact of the factors.

Research Objective

The objectives of the study are as follows.

The main objective of this study is to find whether the pre decided factors have an impact on assignment completion for students following higher education in Sri Lanka. The factors mentioned in the research question have been studied in other countries and proven to have an impact on assignment completion. The relationship between these factors and the assignment completion can be used to help students to improve on their assignments.

The study also aims to assist educational institutes to find out whether it is effective to adopt an assignment based appraisal system. If the students are not comfortable in assignments and are struggling, there is a high chance that it is ineffective to assess their knowledge. There is also a high probability for them to cheat in assignments or copy assignments, which will tarnish the objective of the educational institutes and bring down the quality of their product.

As mentioned earlier in the same chapter, enhancing the effectiveness of the assignment based system would optimize the spending on education. As a developing country, very limited amount of funds will be allocated to higher education in Sri Lanka. It is important that educational institutes optimize the amount of funds by raising a quality product through their academic process. For that improving assignment based assessment would help.

The final objective of this study is to assist the students to do better in assignments by managing the above mentioned factors which affect the assignment completion. For that the relationship between the factors, the time spent on assignments and the amount of assignments completed should be analyzed. Students can then identify how to manage each factor better to do well in assignments and achieve better grades.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of the study was to understand the relationship of four factors which are used in previous researches and the time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed. The study was focused on local university students in Sri Lanka. Undergraduates in any year were considered for this study. The scope of this study was limited to the above mentioned four factors. The time span of the study was around six months which is one semester in a local university.

This study was limited to undergraduates who were studying for their first degree. Also it was limited to Western province of Sri Lanka due to the time and financial constraints. The study was also limited to local university undergraduates as the author finds it convenient to gather data from the local universities. The limitations of the study can be overridden by further researches.

The research paper is arranged as follows. As above given, the first chapter has described about the purpose behind the study, background information and the context in which the study was carried out. It has also described the research question, problem statement and the main goals aspired to be achieved by this study. Second chapter has analyzed the historical research regarding this topic. It also compares and contrasts the findings between them. Third chapter has detailed the methodology used, variables and the indicators. It has also mentioned the hypotheses used for this study based on the variables. The population and sample size, the sampling techniques used for this study, methods of data collection and the statistical tests performed are also explained in the same chapter. Analysis chapter has explained the findings of the study. Discussion chapter has compared and contrasted the findings of the current study with the findings of the previous studies. Conclusion and Recommendations has added the concluding remarks and will give recommendations based on the findings of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research done on assignment completion and the factors relating to the completion has been summarized in this section.

The word assignment has been defined by Planchard et al.,2015 as “any academic course related work assigned by the instructor to be carried in non-class hours by the students”. In the study conducted by Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), an assignment was defined as any out of the class tasks, which were assigned by the instructor aimed for a summative or formative assessment purposes. In the study of Collis et al. (2001) the courses are now focusing on engaging students with six to seven assignments as parts of an overall large project via web based system, which will have marks to contribute in the overall grade for that subject. Assignments are mostly out of class activities with the growing e-learning atmosphere as well.

As mentioned in the previous chapter the objective of this study is to understand the relationship between the task orientation, instructor feedback, time management, cooperation and the amount of time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed. The following paragraphs have explained what earlier researchers have found out about the relationship between these factors.

Task orientation is the students giving importance on getting work done, knowledge on the goals, being attentive and knowledge on the amount of work to be completed, as mentioned in the study of Aldridge et al.(2010). In the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), task orientation was found out to be having a direct relationship with the number of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments. However, these were weak positive relationships. Task orientation had moderate positive effects on cooperation, time management and instructor feedback. In the same study it was mentioned that the task orientation was the strongest predictor of time management. According to Valle et al. (2009) task management is related to assignment completion and student engagement. In the same study it was revealed that undergraduates with higher levels of motivational orientation including task orientation were successful in managing time which has been followed by the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019). These findings follow the findings of Seegers,Putten, and Brabander (2002). In that study it was mentioned that task orientation also had an impact on the effort they put in the assignment and the task relevance. Task orientation will infuse a sense of challenge in the assignment completion.

Feedback is defined as information given by an agent regarding one's performance or understanding as explained in the study of Brown et al (2016).Feedback can be either external or internal where as in this study external feedback by the instructor is considered. In the same study it was mentioned that feedback can be either formative which allows improvement and happens in earlier stages of the assignments, or summative where it is restricted to grades or marks at the end of the study. According to Brown's findings, clear teacher feedback is associated with weaker academic performance. Instructor feedback on assignments had an indirect relationship with the amount of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments as found out by Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019).Time management was the intermediary variable, which is explained below. According to the same study, Instructor feedback has a weak positive relationship with time management. This contradicts with the finding of Valle et al. finding (2015) that instructor feedback has an indirect relationship with time management. In the study of Hattie and Timperley (2007), it has been mentioned that the aim of the feedback is to drive students to do more (more assignments) or do better (with less time).However due to the fact that students receiving little feedback and other problems, the effect on feedback on assignment completion and the quality of assignments have been diluted.

Cooperation is another factor which is considered in this study. In the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), cooperation is referred to as the extent to which the students cooperate to complete learning tasks rather than competing with each other. In the same study it was found that Cooperation has a weak positive relationship with time spent on assignments. It only had an indirect relationship with amount of assignments completed where time management acted as an intermediate variable. It has a weak positive relationship with time management as well. However, it showed a moderate positive relationship with instructor feedback and task orientation. In the study done by Johnson and Johnson (2014) it has been mentioned that through cooperative learning students will be able to develop interpersonal skills and through that to reduce stress and conflicts. They will learn to solve problems through communicating with each other. This will help them to complete assignments in course work.

Time Management is defined in the study of Pintrich (2004) as, planning, monitoring and regulating of one's schedules. The study conducted by Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019) has resulted in a finding that time management acts as a mediator variable between task orientation, feedback and cooperation and amount of assignments completed. It was significantly and positively associated with the amount of assignments completed as well. In the study conducted by Planchard et al., 2015, it was found that time commitment affected the assignment completion for undergraduate students, which follows the mentioned finding. The study conducted by Wolters, Won and Hussain (2017), has found that undergraduates who engage in time management strategies are less likely procrastinate and get more assignments done on time. These findings were followed by the findings of the study of Xu and Wu (2013). In this study which was conducted for secondary school level students, it was found that if a student was better at time management more the chance that student will complete more assignments. According to the findings of Nunez et. al (2015), time management for homework, is important not only in completing homework on time, but also for academic achievement. However, neither in the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019) nor in the study of Nunez et. al (2015) it was found that the time management was directly related to the time spent on completing assignments.

In conclusion this chapter explains what previous researches have been done in regard of the chosen topic. These were compared with the findings of the current study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach

A deductive research approach was chosen to conduct this research. A deductive approach is where an already existing hypothesis is tested as mentioned by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007). Hypotheses which were already tested in the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019) were used for this study and tested in a Sri Lankan context. Hence a deductive approach was conducted. As mentioned in the same book by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, a deductive approach will require the concepts to be operationalized in a way that the factors are enabled to be measured quantitatively. The research strategy chosen for this study was the survey method, which is usually associated with the deductive approach. Survey method is used to collect a large amount of data from a sizeable population in an economical way as mentioned by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007). The instrument was a questionnaire which will be explained later in this section. As the previous researches such as Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), has used a survey method, it was decided to adopt the same strategy to conduct the research. A quantitative method was used to analyze the gathered data in line with the chosen approach and the strategy.

Independent Variables and Indicators

An independent variable, as explained by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007), is a variable which will cause changes in the dependent variable. This research is conducted to find out the relationship between the factors that are affecting the assignment completion and the time taken to complete an assignment, the number of assignments completed. The factors which influence the time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed will be considered as the independent variables in this study. Namely they are as follows;

- Task orientation
- Cooperation/teamwork
- Instructor feedback

- Time management

These four independent variables will be measured using the following factors;

Variable	Indicator
Task orientation	Completing what is expected, importance given to completion, understanding, paying attention, understanding the importance, understanding the goals
Cooperation/teamwork	Working with friends, sharing related material, getting involved with team work, working with other students, learning from other students, consulting other students, Other students working with the respondent, working with students with whom the respondent have problems with
Instructor feedback	Checking the assignment, grading the assignment, giving constructive feedback on the assignment
Time management	Prioritizing, following up, reminding of the remained time, motivating to expedite the completion, coming to class without assignments

These independent variables were adopted from the study of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019).The reliability of the factors were checked using the Chronbahe’s Alpha test, which resulted in the following scores;

- Task orientation-0.72
- Cooperation/teamwork-0.84
- Instructor feedback-0.75
- Time management0.86

As mentioned above all the independent variables exceeded the threshold of 0.7, hence tested reliable to check the responses.

Dependent Variable

A dependent variable is a variable which changes in response to changes in other variables as explained by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2007). Two dependent variables were chosen for this study as mentioned below with the indicators which were chosen to measure them.

Variable	Indicator
Time spent on assignments	Time band spent on assignments, and the frequency
Number of assignments completed	Number of assignments completed

The relationship between the independent variables and dependent variables are shown belowThe reliability scores of the dependent variables are as follows

- Time spent on assignments-0.72
- Number of assignments completed-0.7

As mentioned above both the dependent variables exceeded the threshold of 0.7, hence tested reliable to check the responses.

Hypotheses

Based on the above mentioned independent and dependent variables, the following hypotheses were built for this study.

H_{T1}- Task orientation has a significant positive relationship with the time spent on assignments.
H_{T2}- Task orientation has a significant positive relationship with the number of assignments completed.

H_{C1}- Team Work has a significant positive relationship with the time spent on assignments.
H_{C2}- Team Work has a significant positive relationship with the number of assignments completed.

H_{F1}- Instructor's feedback has a significant positive relationship with the time spent on assignments.
H_{F2}- Instructor's feedback has a significant positive relationship with the number of assignments completed.

H_{M1}- Time Management has a significant positive relationship with the time spent on assignments.
H_{M2}- Time Management has a significant positive relationship with the number of assignments completed.

These hypotheses were tested in the study and the results were compared with the findings of the previous studies.

Population and sample

The population of this study could be identified as, the students who are following the tertiary education in Sri Lankan educational Institute. This included undergraduate and postgraduate students. A sample was taken from the population to gather data for this study as collecting data from the entire sample was costly and time consuming.

To select a sample, a probability sampling method was chosen to ensure that the bias was minimized. The population was categorized to several clusters, from which the undergraduate cluster was chosen as the first cluster. As the final sample 500 undergraduates from five different government universities were chosen as the sample. Therefore a cluster sampling method was used to arrive at the final sample. To ensure the generalization of the findings these 500 students were chosen from different government universities in three geographical locations; Colombo, Galle and Peradeniya. The units in the sample were chosen randomly without restricting to a field of study or gender.

Data collection and the Instrument

As mentioned earlier a questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. The research was done on primary data collected through the instrument. The questionnaire was a self administered one and was in English language to eliminate language bias. Participation in the research was completely voluntary and the confidentiality was secured.

The questionnaire was consisted of three parts. The respondent's demographics were captured from the first part. The second part of the questionnaire captured the responses about the independent variables. A 5 point Likert scale was used to capture these data, 1 being "almost always" and 5 being "Almost never". Third part of the questionnaire captured the responses about the dependent data, where again another 5 point Likert scale was used. For the responses to capture the amount of time spent on an assignment on average on a day 1 was "one day" and 5 was "10-15 days". The number of assignments completed in the past six months was captured in a 5 point Likert scale where 1 was "6-10 assignments" and 5 was "1 or none".

Each indicator was a question that required answering. The survey was conducted online, by emailing the questionnaire to respondents. Reminders were sent to motivate the participation in this survey. To get 500 responses, 850 questionnaires were distributed.

The questions and the type of questions were aligned with the study conducted by Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019).

Tests performed

Gathered data was fed into an excel sheet for easy uploading to the analysis tool SPSS, which allows the quantitative analysis which was explained earlier in this section. Before analyzing, gathered data was cleaned of any errors and omissions.

The validity and the reliability were tested as mentioned in a previous section of the same paragraph, to ensure that the questions were valid to achieve the purpose of the study. For this, Cronbach's alpha test was used. A G* test was used to determine the adequacy of the sample. The normality of the collected data was tested using histograms and Q-Q plots and the outliers were removed.

A pilot test was done with 100 responses before the analysis of the main study.

For the descriptive statistics, a frequency analysis was done to understand the sample. Tests for mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were checked. The responses on independent and dependent variables were analyzed using Pearson's correlation test and regression analysis.

ANALYSIS

The quantitative analysis was done as mentioned earlier using SPSS v 16. The gathered data was cleaned and any outliers were removed to ensure the generalization ability of the findings. Skewness and kurtosis tests were performed to ensure the normal distribution of data.

A descriptive statistics test was carried out to gain an idea about the sample. 61% of the sample was female and the majority was in the age of 21-23 age groups. Majority was residing in Western Province hence; the facilities available for them to complete assignments were satisfactory. 54% of them have completed 6-10 assignments during the past six months. The mean time spent on an assignment is 4-7 days.

All factors had positive correlation with each other. However, all of them showed weak or moderate relationships. Task Orientation had positive and weak/moderate relationships with all the other factors. However, the main correlation was with time management which was 0.45 ($P < 0.05$). The least related factor with task orientation was the cooperation which was 0.27. Cooperation had positive direct relationships with all the factors except for the number of assignments completed. The highest correlation was with time management which was 0.36, and the lowest was with time spent on assignments which was 0.12. Instructor feedback also had direct positive relationships with all the factors except for the two dependent variables; time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed. The highest was with task orientation 0.30 and the lowest was with time management 0.26. Time management acted as a mediating variable for both cooperation and instructor feedback for number of assignments completed. The highest correlation was with number of assignments completed which was 0.47 and the lowest was with instructor feedback which was 0.26. The two dependent variables had the highest correlation with task orientation and time management.

The regression analysis resulted in the following results. Task orientation will be mostly affected by the variances in time management.(52%) Cooperation will be mostly affected by the variances in time management as well (56%). The variances in instructor feedback would be mostly caused by task orientation and the variances in the time management will be caused mainly by task orientation. The variances in the amount of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments would be mainly caused by task orientation and time management.

The two dependent variables did not have significant differences with the gender or the age category. It did not have significant differences based on the university in which the undergraduate studied in. The two dependent variables, the amount of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments had been affected mainly by the independent variables but not with the demographic differences.

DISCUSSION

In the previous studies done on this regard such as Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), it was found that all the factors had positive relationships with each other which were followed by the findings of this study.

Task Orientation was mainly affected by time management as per the findings of this study. It had only affected time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed by a minimal way, but positively. This finding

closely follows the findings of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), where task orientation had a weak effect on all the other factors but time management. The finding is also in line with the findings of other previous researches such as Seegers, Putten, and Brabander (2002). The current study only found a weak relationship with assignment completion and task orientation which partially follow the finding of Valle et al. (2009).

Cooperation was affected mainly by time management. Its relationships with all other factors were positive. This contradicted with the findings of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019), where it was found that cooperation only had a weak positive relationship with time management. However, in both the current study and Suamuang's study, the moderating variable between the number of assignments completed and the cooperation was time management. Cooperation had a weak relationship with time spent on assignments. The finding of Johnson and Johnson (2014), is not directly followed by the findings of this assignment, but indirectly it is proven that students can better manage time when cooperated with each other rather than competing.

Instructor feedback did not have direct relationships with the two dependent variables. However, it had an indirect relationship with the number of assignments completed through time management. This finding closely followed the findings of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019). It had a weak positive relationship with task orientation; however it was the main determinant of instructor feedback as well. Both these studies contradict with the findings of Valley et. al. (2015) where they found an indirect relationship between instructor feedback and time management. It partially follows the finding of Hattie and Timperley (2007), that feedback will drive students to do more assignments.

Time management was the main determinant of number of assignments completed while task orientation was main determinant of time spent on assignments. It acts as mediating variable between number of assignments completed with feedback and cooperation. This again follows the findings of Suamuang, Suksakulchai and Murphy (2019). It also follows the findings of the study conducted by Xu and Wu (2013), where people with better time management abilities were able to complete more assignments. It also indirectly approves of the findings of Nunez et. al.(2015) where time management leads to better academic achievement as assignments adds up to the final grade of a subject.

Even though time spent on assignments and the number of assignments completed had weak or moderate relationships with the independent variables of this study, the main determinant of time spent on assignments was the task orientation. The main determinant of the number of assignments completed was the time management.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The concluding remarks and recommendations for further researches are as follows.

It was found that gender differences or the difference in universities will not affect the time taken to complete assignments or the number of assignments that are completed.

The main finding of this study is that all these factors are directly or indirectly interrelated therefore; influencing one would finally have an impact on the number of assignments completed or the time spent on assignments. Influencing and motivating the students' task orientation would affect the time spent on assignments. To use time effectively, the education institutes can influence students' task orientation positively. The number of assignments completed was mainly influenced by time management. To get more assignments done on time, the education institutes can train students to use effective time management strategies. As task orientation have influence over time management, influencing a student's task orientation will also impact time management. Universities can encourage cooperation by giving group assignments, so that students' time management will enhance. Instructor feedback on how to enhance task orientation and time management will ultimately impact the number of assignments completed and the time spent on assignments.

Even though this study achieved its goal of finding out the relationship between the factors influencing the assignment completion, the main factor influencing the assignment completion has not been discovered, as all the factors had weak or moderate relationships with the dependent variables. It can be an avenue for further research.

This study was limited to Western Province as mentioned before. Further research can be carried out to find whether the same findings can be applied for students in other provinces as well. This study is limited to

undergraduates in local universities who are aiming to achieve their first degree. However, further researches can be done to foreign universities and post graduate students as well to whether the results change.

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