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Investigating the Causes of Depression and its Effect on Student's Performances at Paktia University

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to enhance the understanding of the causes of depression and its relationship with perceived academic success among EFL undergraduate students at Paktia University in Afghanistan. The results elucidate different elements that lead to depression in EFL learners. Students commonly expressed feelings of depression mainly because of unemployment, negative emotions, financial struggles, a feeling of hopelessness regarding an uncertain future, and unfulfilled expectations at Paktia University. The majority of the participants were young learners, a group typically more vulnerable to depression when encountering these kinds of difficulties. The overall findings suggest that these students faced a certain level of depression linked to the factors previously mentioned. This aligns with Smith et al. (2018), who recognized that overwhelming pressure from challenging cognitive tasks, exam anxiety, personal difficulties, academic workload, and financial struggles contribute to student depression. Dapaah and Amoako (2019) similarly identified financial problems, loss of loved ones, and academic duties as major factors leading to depression among university students. Additionally, this study emphasizes the negative effect of depression on students' academic performance. Statistical analysis and feedback from the research tool distinctly indicate that depression, to some degree, leads to a detrimental imbalance in students' academic performance. This presents as a lack of concentration, uncertainty in communicating ideas, lowered self-assurance in achieving goals, and other problems previously mentioned in the results. These findings correlate with Ngin et al. (2018), who found comparable impacts using different terms such as educational dropout, unstable relationships, insufficient work performance, and poor physical and mental health among college students. Likewise, Muhammad (2018) established a connection between depression and diminished academic success in university students, highlighting a relationship where increased depression levels correspond with decreased academic performance.

KEYWORDS

EFL students; depression; factors; negative effects; Paktia University

INTRODUCTION

Depression is a serious mental illness that affects millions of people worldwide, including college students. It has significant psychological repercussions, such as low academic achievement, difficulty with daily tasks, lack of interest in learning, and sleep disorders (Shah et al., 2010).

Numerous studies have discovered that issues related to depression in university students are rising significantly (Verger et al., 2010). Significantly, depression is listed as the third leading cause of disability and early mortality globally, following cardiac and respiratory disorders (Ibrahim et al., 2012). Awadalla, S., Davies, E. B., & Glazebrook, C. (2024) stated that many students encounter their initial signs of depression, like feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, while in college, which in turn impacts their capacity to engage in academic tasks.At the university level, students often face various pressures, including academic demands, social difficulties, and personal problems, all of which can contribute to the onset of depression. This condition affects not only their emotional health but also their academic success by reducing motivation, impairing concentration, and leading to lower grades.

The research indicated that due to the different difficulties depression introduces into their lives, depressed students often tend to become disinterested in participating in activities, particularly those connected to their education.According to Hysenbegasi et al. (2005), depressed students also frequently struggle with a variety of issues, including low energy, strange sleeping patterns, irritability, and, lastly, mental pressure that prevents them from being an active student who can successfully complete their academic performances. This can even cause them to become somewhat aloof from society and divert their focus from their studies.

This research is driven by the rising occurrence of depression in university students worldwide, especially the limited studies examining the effects of depression on students at Paktia University. Depression prevented the EFL learners from applying their strong academic skills and productivity, resulting in poor academic performance as they faced difficulties with their language learning at Paktia University.Grasping this matter is crucial, as neglecting depression can result in higher dropout rates and produce lasting adverse impacts on students' lives and the overall academic reputation of the university. While mental health significantly impacts academic success, there is a lack of in-depth research addressing the specific social, cultural, and environmental aspects that affect depression in this context. Much of the current research is either broad or centered on various areas, resulting in a lack of understanding regarding the unique challenges encountered by students at Paktia University.

This research aims to inform individuals such as teachers, parents, and students about the serious issue of depression, encompassing its reasons and impacts on the scholarlyperformance of students at Paktia University. This study mainly focuses on university administrators, mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and students. The research seeks to identify the root causes and effects of depression in these students to create effective mental health support strategies that enhance academic performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Depression is a widespread mental health condition impacting more than 280 million individuals worldwide (WHO, 2021). For university students, this disorder is often precipitated by factors such as academic demands, financial strain, inadequate social support, and trauma (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008). Studies show a significant occurrence of depressive symptoms in students from South Asian countries such as Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan (Khan et al., 2019).Notably, a study of medical students at Herat University in Afghanistan revealed that 69.6% exhibited signs of depression, largely driven by academic stress and substandard living conditions (Najm, et al., 2023). Despite these concerning statistics, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the psychological well-being of students residing in Paktia province.Considering Afghanistan's history of conflict,

insecurity, poverty, and limited mental health resources, it is essential to examine how these factors influence students' academic engagement and success. This study focuses on two main elements of depression: the elements leading to students' depression and its adverse effects on their academic performance.

Causes of student's Depression

Many investigations have examined the different elements that lead to depression in college students. This literature review examines the typical triggers recognized during students' educational paths. Research shows that there isn't one definitive cause of depression, as people encounter it for various reasons (Hoagwood et al., 2018); experts usually link its development to a mix of genetic factors and challenging life circumstances. Cope and Garrett (2019) identify key factors leading to depression in university students as the loss of a loved one, financial difficulties, and unfulfilled expectations. Likewise, numerous studies have pointed out that insufficient social support, financial pressures, and everyday life stressors are significant factors in depression (Saeed et al., 2018). Additionally, Morales, Aguilar, and Guzmán (2013) observed that issues like managing social lives with academic duties, financial stress, living independently, disrupted sleep habits, and substance misuse can contribute to depression while students cope with the challenges of college existence.

Dapaah and Amoako (2019) identified the loss of a loved one, economic hardship, and academic pressure as primary contributors to depression among university students. Furthermore, their study indicated that academic performance can be significantly impaired by such mental health struggles. This is supported by Awadalla, Davies, and Glazebrook (2020), who emphasize that depression is not a uniform condition. They describe that it presents itself through a wide range of symptoms, causes, and impacts that differ greatly among people, including sensations of despair, trouble focusing, disinterest in activities, sleep issues, impaired judgment, and ongoing, prolonged sadness.Similarly, Calvete and Connor-Smith (2006) identified several key factors contributing to depression among university students, including unrecognized environmental circumstances, a lack of family cohesion, frequent domestic conflict, weak family relationships, low levels of engagement, academic stress, despair, and sleep or eating disorders.

Studies have identified academic pressure, financial strain, social isolation, substance use, family issues, future uncertainty, and heavy workloads as primary drivers of depression among university students. These challenges adversely affect emotional health and diminish academic motivation (Brata&Susanto, 2025; Niazi et al., 2025). Furthermore, research highlights a strong correlation between anxiety, emotional instability, and academic underperformance. Elevated stress levels frequently lead to impaired concentration, decreased class participation, and lower learning engagement, all of which negatively impact students' grades and overall academic success (Rani, 2025; Sarker et al., 2026).

Negative Effects on Academic Performance

Aydogan and Buyukyilmaz (2017) highlight that depression among university students correlates with diminished academic achievement, increased dropout rates, relationship instability, poor job performance, substance misuse, susceptibility to acute infections, and a general decline in physical and mental well-being. Echoing these concerns, Ngin et al. (2018) observe that contemporary depression impacts academic progress more severely than in previous decades, a trend underscored by disparities between urban and rural populations. In line with this, Roy and Marg (2022) discovered that students in urban districts report higher levels of depression than their rural peers; paradoxically, the lower

depression rates among rural students contribute to their superior academic performance compared to those in urban settings.

According to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health (2015), the symptoms and severity of depression vary significantly between individuals and are heavily influenced by their environmental circumstances. Depression is defined by a combination of persistent low mood, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt, and chronic sadness; these factors are identified as major contributors to poor academic performance among university students (Tahir et al., 2021). In short, the authors categorize the effects of depression into four areas: students often become emotionally and socially weakened, struggle with distractions, and may feel a sense of being lost, whether triggered by specific stressors or random phenomena.

Depression often hinders a student's academic achievement, as the condition frequently drains the courage and energy required to succeed (Sindhu, 2016). Similarly, Bilgel and Bayram (2014) note that students struggling with depression may feel unable to meet their own high standards, leading to chronic disappointment, negative self-perception, and a sense of failure. These factors contribute significantly to academic decline, including poor grades and other performance deficits. Furthermore, O'Callaghan and Cunningham (2015) confirmed that depression is negatively correlated with academic success and noted that its impact on academic performance can vary between male and female students.Furthermore, the researchers noted that, overall, females experience higher rates of depression than males. A study by Khanam and Bukhari (2015) also found that depression is negatively correlated with academic performance, with the levels of both depression and academic achievement differing between male and female students. Factors such as difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, suicidal ideation, feelings of regret, loss of interest, and weight fluctuations are common manifestations of depression that negatively impact students' academic success (Gao, Ping, & Liu, 2020).

Students struggling with depression frequently encounter challenges such as memory impairment, diminished self-esteem, chronic fatigue, absenteeism, and difficulty meeting academic deadlines. These issues often result in decreased productivity, lower GPAs, and suboptimal exam performance (Shaikh &Chandio, 2024; Ali et al., 2024). Additionally, research indicates that poor mental health negatively impacts classroom engagement, academic persistence, and general educational attainment. Across diverse student populations and learning environments, depression is reliably linked to poorer academic results (Sarker et al., 2026; Andrade et al., 2026).

RESEARCH METHODS

Design

This research uses a quantitative approach to examine the factors contributing to depression in EFL students at Paktia University and its effects on their academic outcomes. As stated by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2016), the survey approach entails gathering data from a sizable group of participants via questionnaire answers. They also emphasize that quantitative research aims to clarify phenomena through numerical data and intends to generalize results across a broader population. As a result, a quantitative method is deemed the most efficient way to execute and oversee this research.

Site

This study took place at Paktia University, located in Gardez City, Paktia Province, in southeastern Afghanistan. As a prominent public higher education institution, the university provides academic services to students from both Paktia and its surrounding provinces.

Participants

The researched group includes all 220 EFL undergraduate students from the Faculties of Education and Language and Literature at Paktia University. A random selection of 220 students, comprising 64 males, was chosen to fill out the questionnaire. This sample was selected to determine the prevalent causes of depression and its detrimental effects on academic performance, regardless of the students' marital status, socioeconomic status, or academic level. Random sampling was employed to guarantee that each possible respondent had an equal chance of being chosen (Gravetter&Forzano, 2006).

Instrument

The maintoolemployed in this survey study is a questionnaire modified from Verner-Filion and Vallerand (2016) as well as Mikolajczyk et al (2008). surveycomprises three sections:Section One gathers demographic data. Part Two includes 10 items createdbyresearchersthatexplore the common factorscontributingto student depression, assessedusing a 5-point Likert scale. Part Three consists of 10 items derived from Verner-Filion and Vallerand (2016) regarding the adverseimpacts of depression on academic achievement, also evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Procedure

The researcher collected data over a two-week period using a questionnaire designed to identify the factors contributing to depression and its impact on the participants' learning processes. The target population was selected from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Languages and Literatures. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained formal permission from the deans of both faculties. Adhering to ethical standards, the researcher visited the classrooms in person to introduce himself, explain the purpose of the study, and provide details regarding the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained through signed consent forms (see Appendix), and all male participants willingly agreed to take part in the study. Upon completion, the researcher collected all questionnaires from the respondents.

Data Analysis

Following the data collection from the participants, the findings were examined with Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, such as average scores and standard deviations, were employed to analyze the factors and adverse effects of depression, with results displayed in tables for better understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of the Respondents

Table 1. Levels of participants

Level	Number of participants	Percentages
Freshmen	16	25%
Sophomore	16	25%
Junior	16	25%
Senior	16	25%

Table 2. Age of Participants

Age of participants	Number of participants	Percentages
20-25	56	87.5%
25-30	8	12.5%

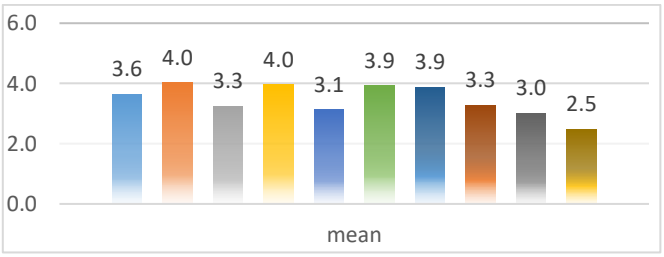
Table 3. Faculties of Participants

Faculty	Number	Percentages
Education Faculty	32	50.0 %
Languages and Literature Faculty	32	50.0 %

The above table 1, 2 and 3 shows that 64 male participants were involved in the study. The distribution by academic level was 16 freshmen (25.0%), 16 sophomores (25.0%), 16 juniors (25.0%), and 16 senior students (25.0%). Age demographics showed 56 participants (87.5%) were between 20-25 years old, and 8 participants (12.5%) were between 25-30 years old. In terms of faculty representation, 32 participants (50.0%) were from the EducationFaculty, and 32 participants (50.0%) were from the Languages and Literature Faculty.

Factors of EFL Learners' Depression

The initial goal of the research was to explore the reasons behind EFL students' depression at Paktia University. Chart 1 below presents the specific findings.



Graph 1. Highlights the reasons behind depression in EFL learners

The chart displays the average ratings of participants' views on the primary factors contributing to depression in students at Paktia University. The results show that financial issues and unemployment were the top-rated factors contributing to depression, both having an average score of 4.0. This indicates that the majority of respondents concurred that financial issues and unemployment are the key factors leading to their depression. The elevated average values indicate that students face significant stress stemming from their financial situations and uncertainty regarding job prospects.

The second-highest mean score was 3.9, reported for both home conflicts and hopelessness about an unknown future. These findings indicate that family problems and worries about future life also play an important role in causing depression among students. Most participants agreed that conflicts within the family and uncertainty about their future negatively affect their mental well-being.

The statement "I usually suffer from depression because of negative feelings" obtained a mean score of 3.6, indicating that many respondents agreed that negative emotions, such as sadness, loneliness, and anxiety, contribute to their depression. Although the agreement was slightly lower than the previous factors, it still represents an important cause of depression.

The statements "I usually suffer from depression because of the strict behaviors and pressure of hard workloads of my university teachers" and "I usually suffer from depression because of my unmet expectations" both received a mean score of 3.3. These results suggest that respondents moderately agreed that academic pressure, strict teaching practices, and unfulfilled personal expectations contribute to their depressive feelings. These factors have a noticeable influence but are less significant than financial and family-related issues.

The statement "I usually suffer from depression because of the propagandas of social media" had a mean score of 3.1, showing that respondents were only slightly in agreement that social media influences their depression. Although social media may affect students emotionally, it was not considered one of the major causes.

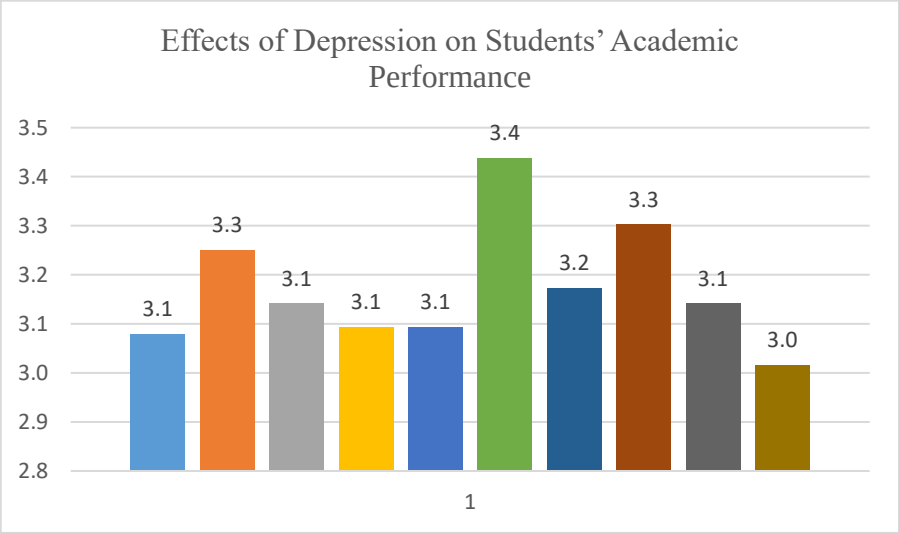
Similarly, love-related problems received a mean score of 3.0, indicating a neutral to moderate level of agreement among the participants. This suggests that romantic relationships are not a major source of depression for most students in this study.

Finally, addiction received the lowest mean score of 2.5, indicating that respondents generally disagreed that addiction is a common cause of their depression. Compared with all other factors, addiction was considered the least influential cause of depression among the participants.

Overall, the findings reveal that economic problems and joblessness are the leading causes of depression, followed by home conflicts and uncertainty about the future. In contrast, social media, love, and addiction were reported as less significant factors. These results suggest that students' depression is mainly associated with financial, family, and future-related challenges rather than personal or social issues.

Negative effects of Depression on Students' Academic Performances

The study's second objective was to examine the adverse impacts of depression on students' academic performance at Paktia University. The detailed results are shown in the chart below.



Graph 2. Highlights adverse impacts of depression on the academic outcomes of EFL students.

The Chart displays the average scores of respondents' views on how depression impacts the academic performance of students at Paktia University. The results show that considering various factors that cause sadness and divert students from learning received the highest rating, achieving an average score of 3.4. This indicates that the majority of participants concurred that depression leads them to excessively ruminate on personal

issues, which diverts their attention from their studies and diminishes their capacity to concentrate on educational tasks.

The phrases "I am unable to focus on my studies" and "I am not able to adequately prepare for exams" both received an average score of 3.3. The results indicate that participants somewhat concurred that depression adversely impacts their focus and their capacity to study efficiently for tests. Struggling to focus and insufficient exam readiness can result in unsatisfactory academic results.

The assertion "I cannot take proper notes in class" had an average rating of 3.2. This suggests that a significant number of students concurred that depression impacts their focus during lectures, hindering their ability to take effective notes and grasp classroom discussions.

Four statements garnered an average score of 3.1. These encompass "I am unable to convey my thoughts and understanding in the classroom," "I cannot organize a daily agenda of tasks," "I cannot engage in events like seminars, lectures, and other relevant activities offered by the university," "I cannot fulfill the assigned responsibilities properly," and "I cannot manage my time efficiently." These results indicate that participants somewhat concurred that depression hinders their classroom engagement, restricts their capacity to manage daily tasks, diminishes their participation in scholarly activities, impacts the fulfillment of assigned responsibilities, and impairs their time management abilities. Combined, these issues can diminish students' academic performance and overall educational success.

The phrase "I am unable to reach the goals I have established for myself" obtained the lowest average score of 3.0. Even though this represents the lowest score in the table, it still reflects a moderate degree of consensus among the respondents. This result indicates that depression hinders students in achieving their academic and personal objectives, even though this impact was marginally less pronounced than the other academic difficulties highlighted in the research.

The results indicate that depression exerts a moderate adverse impact on students' academic performance. The most frequent impact is feeling sad and having trouble focusing on learning, accompanied by challenges in concentrating on studies, getting ready for tests, and taking useful class notes. Depression impacts students' engagement in class, organization, fulfilment of academic duties, time organization, and attainment of personal objectives. These findings suggest that depression may impair students' learning capacity, academic involvement, and overall academic performance at Paktia University.

The primary goal of this study was to enhance the comprehension of the elements that influence depression and its connection with perceived academic achievement among EFL university students at Paktia University in Afghanistan. The results of this research indicate several factors that lead to depression among EFL students. In general, students indicated facing depression considerably due to issues like unemployment, adverse feelings, financial struggles, a lack of hope about an uncertain future, and unfulfilled expectations at Paktia University. The participants in the study were primarily young learners, who tend to be more vulnerable to depression compared to other age groups, as this demographic often faces such challenges.

Consequently, the results of this researchindicate that these students have experienced depression to differentdegreesdue to the previouslymentioned factors. This resultaligns with Smith et al. (2018), who found that elementscontributing to students' depression includeexcessive demands from challenging cognitive tasks, anxiety aboutexams, personal issues, academic stress, and financial troubles. Likewise, Dapaah and Amoako (2019) discovered that financial issues, loss of loved ones, and academic responsibilities significantly contribute to depression in university students.

Furthermore, this study reveals the detrimental effects of depression on students' academic achievements. The statistics and feedback from the developed tool indicate that depression significantly disrupts students' academic performance to some degree. For example, lowered focus, uncertainty in expressing thoughts, decreased confidence in reaching their objectives, and to some extent, other issues previously highlighted in the results of this research. The results of this study align somewhat with those of Ngin et al. (2018), who identified these effects using different terms such as drop-out, unclear relationships, underperforming work results, and even inadequate physical and mental well-being among college students. Similarly, Muhammad (2018) showed that depression in university students results solely in negative academic results and noted that increased depression correlates with decreased performance in students.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to determine the factors that lead to depression among EFL students and its adverse effects on their academic performance. The issue was the poor academic performance of EFL students caused by depression. Based on the prior literature, the study indicated that various factors contributing to depression adversely impacted the academic performances of EFL undergraduate students. For instance, unemployment, poor mood, financial hardships, anxiety about the uncertain future post-graduation, stress from university, family interactions, and unfulfilled expectations. In the meantime, social broadcasting propagandas, addiction, and love were recognized as somewhat minor contributors to depression that ultimately negatively impacts students' academic performance. This study's findings revealed that losing concentration, a lack of trust in sharing ideas, reduced self-confidence in reaching objectives, and other related problems are detrimental negative impacts of depression among EFL undergraduate students. Furthermore, the study was conducted quantitatively through the distribution of a questionnaire using random sampling. Likewise, the data was analyzed with Microsoft Excel in relation to mean and standard deviation. In conclusion, the ongoing study recognized seven key elements, as mentioned earlier, that negatively affected the academic success of EFL students.

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