Academic Goal Setting Practices of University Students in Lagos State, Nigeria:

ASIKHIA, Olubusayo Aduke and
ADEBISI Kehinde Funmilola

Abstract

Students' inability to set data-based (specific, measurable, attainable, reliable and time-bound) personal improvement goals threatens their academic success. Hence, the study aimed to investigate year-one students' academic goal-setting practices at Lagos State University of Education, Nigeria. Descriptive survey research was used in carrying out this study. The study population consisted of 3,101 year-one students of the University. A sample size of five hundred and one (501) participants was selected through a proportional and simple random sampling technique. The Formative Goal Setting Questionnaire(FGSQ) developed by Research Collaboration (2015) was adapted and used as an instrument for the study. Two main research questions were answered while two null hypotheses were formulated and tested for the study. The study revealed higher data-based goals for all students than personal improvement goals. Nevertheless, data-based and personal improvement goal-setting for female students was higher than for male students. One sample test statistic and Anova used to analyse data for the two hypotheses also revealed that the mean difference between male and female year one students' data-based and personal improvement goal-setting formation was statistically significant ($p <$

0.05). This means year one students' data-based and personal improvement goals showed significant gender differences. Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended, among others, that therapeutic techniques that can help to change students' faulty thinking and challenge their lack of desire for personal improvement should be sought to treat students who have problems with setting high personal improvement goals. Counsellors also need to advocate continued research into how to increase the goal-setting ability of male students and should focus more on counselling male students' goal-setting ability.

Introduction

The issue of academic goal setting among university students in Nigeria has become needful, especially in today's technological advancement and the influx of social media all over the globe. This assertion is corroborated by the studies of Li and Fan (2022), who found that social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are controlling youths these days and has led to media multitasking (using social media while trying to do an academic or professional activity) which according to them leads to reduction in paying adequate attention to their studies. Also, according to a study conducted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2013, about 97% of undergraduate and graduate students use digital devices during class for non-academic purposes. The study also found that students who use digital devices now get distracted by social media, text messages and Email notifications during class time. No wonder McCoy (2013) submitted that a student's behaviour within a classroom is related to their work ethic outside class. The pertinent question that comes to one's mind is if students are not concentrating in class when a lecturer is teaching them, what will they be doing when they are alone?

Meanwhile, according to the studies of Van Rooij (2017) and Wilcoxon and Marrett (2011), the first year of studying is crucial for degree completion as students often drop out by the end of the first year of their degree program. For instance, the Australian Government (2020), Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2020) and National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported that in the United States of America, 24% of first-year students drop out, while these rates have been estimated at 27% in Germany and 18% in Australia. The Dutch Inspectorate of Education (2021) and Van den Broek (2019) also reported that in Dutch universities, 26% of students drop out in the first year, of which 19% switch to another program and 7% leave higher education altogether. The story is not different in Nigeria as 2021 Vanguard News 2021 reported an 18% dropout rate of year one University students in Nigeria.

Muhammed, Olayiwola-Adedoja and **Iretor-Oscar** (2021) define a goal as a dream with a definite plan and a behaviour or outcome that a person is consciously trying to perform or obtain. This means goals are individually determined and provide the framework for action and direction. Adara (2011) also opined that goals are personally important, within the reach of the individual to achieve and clearly defined with a specific plan setting and achieving goals. In addition, Locke and Latham (1990) asserted that goals motivate individuals to exert extra effort, persist and focus attention on relevant task features. According to Abe, Ilogu and Madueke (2014), goal-setting is necessary to identify what one should be doing, how he should be doing it, how long it should take and the things required for its accomplishment.

Gender differences in goal setting as the second variable of this study is necessary as it is one of the personal factors that have been related to differences found in academic goal setting. For example, Meece and Holt (1993); and Nolen (1988); have found that females have a greater need for setting academic goals;Rusillo and Arias (2004); Anderman and Anderman (1999); Midgley and Urdan (1996) found that males show higher need for academic goal setting. Thus, findings regarding gender differences in achievement goal orientations have

been somewhat inconsistent. Apart from this, the knowledge of significant gender differences in students' academic goal-setting will dictate the particular gender that counsellors, lecturers and other stakeholders need to focus on for increased academic goal-setting.

The major concern of this study, therefore, stems from the fact that the myriad consequences of students' inability to set meaningful and personal improvement goals are a threat to the attainment of their motivation for learning and academic success and, as such, must be removed from the root otherwise, it attendant causes and implications may pose a greater challenge to the future education, well-being and overall development of learners and the nation at large. Therefore, the question that readily comes to one's mind is how the nation can change the path of undergraduates, especially those just coming into the system who are mostly internet addicted, lazy and careless about their educational pursuits.

Although different researchers have carried out studies on the impact of goal setting on students' motivation and academic performance, none has particularly worked on year one academic goal-setting practices at Lagos State University of Education. For instance, Adegboyega (2018) conducted research on the influence of achievement motivation on Nigerian undergraduates' attitudes towards examination. Abe, Ilogu and Madueke (2014) investigated the effect of goal-setting skills on students' academic performance in the English language in Enugu, Nigeria and found that performance in the English language was enhanced among participants exposed to goal-setting intervention compared to those in the control group.

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to find out practices of meaningful and personal improvement goals set by year one students of Lagos State University of Education using gender as a second variable. It is against this background that the researchers investigated the academic goal-setting practices among year-one students of Lagos State University of Education involving two Colleges of Education (Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education and Michael Otedola College of Primary Education) that have just been transmuted into a University of Education in February 2022. Hence, there isa need to

quickly carry out a study so that it could be a basis for making further policies that would help the pioneer students and also help other institutions in Nigeria and other nations.

Statement of the Problem

The inability of some students to set realistic, measurable, meaningful and attainable academic goals that would motivate and regulate their behaviour to strive for academic success has been a major occurrence in tertiary institutions. This negative attitude has led to the ugly practice of the syndrome of sorting (financial gratification) and sex for marks among Nigerian undergraduates. Moreso, experience has revealed that many students show little or no interest in education as some prefer to engage in internet fraud (popularly called Yahoo business) than pay attention to their schooling and academic responsibilities. Internet addiction and its accompanying multifaceted negative influences on today's youths' academic, career, emotional, social and economic development cannot be overemphasized. Also, despite the importance of counselling in schools in modifying students' maladaptive behaviour, the human and material resources needed to make counselling more effective in helping students set realistic, measurable and meaningful goals are yet to be adequately provided. This makes the focus of this study fundamental.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study is to investigate the practice of goal setting among year one students of Lagos State University of Education and to specifically:

1. Determine the difference in degree of data-based goals set by year one male and female students of Lagos State University of Education
2. Find out the difference in the degree of personal improvement goals set by year-one male and female students of Lagos State University of Education

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What difference exists in the degree of data-based goals set by male and female year one Lagos State University of Education students?
2. What is the difference in the degree of personal improvement goals set by year one male and female Lagos State University of Education students?

Research hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formulated for the study:

1. There is no significant gender difference in the data-based goals set by male and female year one students of Lagos State University of Education
2. There is no significant gender difference in the personal improvement goals set by male and female year one students of Lagos State University of Education.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Definition and Meaning of Academic Goal Setting

Rowe, Mazzotti, Ingram, and Lee (2017) described goal setting as the identification of a specific accomplishment to be made in a specific area with measurable outcomes, such as actions and timelines for achievement. This definition makes goal setting personal, specific and measurable. Dotson (2016), however, submitted that goal setting focuses students on desired academic outcomes and direction in achieving success. This means setting goals. Goal setting is beneficial to individual learners as it propels them to pay more attention and put in more effort to achieve success. It also implies that goals direct behaviour and provide guidelines for how much effort individuals must put into their actions to have expected results. Gaumer, Erickson and Noonan (2018) defined academic goal setting as identifying specific academic objectives, while a wider definition

encompasses specific short- or long-term life or career objectives. This means every student is expected to identify what they hope to achieve in every course within a specified period. However, Brown and Latham (2000) indicated that in conditions where individuals set specific, difficult, but realistic goals, performance is higher than when individuals are just asked to do their best without specific goals.

Types of Academic Goal-Setting

 According to Gaumer, Erickson and Noonan (2018) and McGurn (2022), there are three essential components of goal setting: meaningful goals, personal improvement goals and data-based goals. According to them, meaningful goals bring intrinsic motivation and add exponential value over the years by making individuals more effective at what they do while guiding them to be more authentic with themselves.

Personal development goals are designed to help individuals improve themselves and increase their values. Thus it entails students creating plans and developing goals in their personal lives that will positively impact their academics and overall success.

Data-based goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound (SMART) goals that are based on data analysis and insights. According to Muhammed, Olayiwola-Adedoja and **Iretor-Oscar** (2021), this type of goal-setting orientation helps students align their actions with their desired outcomes and track their progress and performance. Students need to set SMART goals where S stands for specific, M – measurable, A – attainable, R – reliable and T – timely. In addition, such skills and possession of special abilities as determination, interest, self-motivation, hard work, persistence and focus, all of which are intrinsic to goal setting are likely to be developed, thus leading to improved academic performance. It helps to initiate students' self-appraisals as learners monitor their progress towards meeting clear endpoints of their efforts in their academic performance.

According to goal orientation theories, there are two identifiable achievement goal orientations: mastery (learning or task) and

performance (ego-involved) goal orientation (Moreno, Cervello & Gonzalez-Cutre, 2008; Pintrich & Schunk, 2003). A mastery goal orientation focuses on learning and mastering the task, developing new skills and enhancing understanding (Ames, 1992). However, a performance goal orientation represents a focus on demonstrating competence or ability and how ability will be judged relative to others (Ames, 1992; Ames & Archer, 1988). In addition, Elliot and Church (1997) made a distinction between two different types of performance goals: Performance-approach goals, in which students emphasize besting others, attaining competence relative to others and demonstrating superior ability and performance-avoidance goals, whereby students are negatively motivated to avoid negative judgments of their competence. Because students' goal orientations link to various motivational, affective, cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) investigating variables related to goal orientations is important.

Theoretical Framework of Academic Goal Setting by Locke and Latham (1990)

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored on the goal-setting theory of Locke and Latham (1990). This theory provides one of the most influential and practical accounts of motivation in managerial and academic contexts as its postulations affirm that the process of setting goals and targets makes individuals to be focused on providing a sense of direction to achieve their aims without any form of distraction. It also builds self-confidence and improves performance as one recognizes the ability and competence to achieve set goals. Thus, the context of the goal-setting theory of Locke and Latham (1990) emphasizes the need for year-one students of Lagos State University of Education students need to be focused and set attainable goals to have a direction, which will guide them to achieve these goals.

Empirical Framework

Academic goal setting among university students

The study of Rowe, Mazzotti, Ingram and Lee (2017) revealed a positive relationship between goal-setting and student engagement. The results support previous research which concluded that goal-setting instruction effectively benefits academic engagement, motivation andperformance. Hall (1990) also found that college students in remedial writing classes increased the amount of journal writing when a goal was set for the number of lines to be written each day.

Latham and Brown (2006) also demonstrated that goal setting enhanced the academic performance of MBA students who set their own proximal and distal learning goals (compared with students who merely set distal goals, or were urged to do their best). Kruglanski (2002) also found that students who have set clear goals can better withstand the temptation to procrastinate or distract themselves with other activities (for example, watching television).

Academic Goal Setting and Gender Differences among University Students

Gender is one of the personal factors that have been related to differences found in academic goal-setting and motivational studies. However, while some studies have shown significant gender differences, some have not. For instance, Chan, Leung and Lai (2004) found that females tended to be more performance goal-oriented than male students, the studies of Phan (2008); Abrahamsen et al (2007); Smith and Sinclair (2005) reported no significant gender differences on task, performance-approach, or performance-avoidance goal orientations. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) also adduced that some researchers (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997) have not found any significant differences in the type of goal pursued as a function of gender. In addition, the study of Fouladchang, Marzooghi and Shemshiri (2009) found that the effect of gender differences on goal orientation indicated significant differences between males and females. Specifically, the results indicate that male students have a greater

performance approach orientation. Thus, the inconclusiveness of academic goal setting and gender differences suggests the need to explore gender differences in goal orientation. Conclusively, there is a paucity of relevant research on academic goal-setting practices of Lagos State University of Education students. Therefore, to fill this gap, this study investigated goal setting as a predictor of the academic performance of university undergraduate students in Lagos state, Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

The study made use of a descriptive survey design to seek descriptive and self-reported information from year one students of Lagos State University of Education (LASUED). A quantitative approach which is grounded on a positivist paradigm was employed through descriptive statistics. This approach and design were the best, most suitable means to better investigate students' data-based and personal improvement goal setting in (LASUED).

Population of the Study

The population of the study was all the 3,101 male and female first-year students of Lagos State University of Education.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of four Colleges (College of Management and Social Sciences Education, College of Language and Communication Arts Education, College of Specialised and Professional Education and College of Vocational Education in LASUED was selected from the population. The sample size of this study was 500 year-one students'. Proportional sampling and simple random sampling techniques were used to select the respondents for the study. The proportional sampling technique was used to pick representatives based on the population of each College, while a simple random sampling technique was later used to select the proportioned number in each College randomly. Below is the distribution of participants' biodata:

Table 1: Descriptivve Analysis of Participants' Bio-Data

S/N	College	Gender	
		Male	Female
1	College of Management and Social Science Education	32	93
2	College of Language and Communication Arts Education	30	96
3	College of Specialised and Professional Education	50	75
4	College of Vocational Education	39	86
	Total	**151**	**350**

Source: Researcher's Field Survey Result (2023)

Research Instruments

The main instruments used for this study were adopted from the Formative Goal Setting Questionnaire titled 'FGSQ. This questionnaire was initially developed in 2015 by Research Collaboration. It measures students' proficiency in the three essential components of goal setting: meaningful goals, personal improvement goals and data-based goals. The items are completed by self-rating on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not very like me) to 5 (very like me). To ease interpretation, results are displayed on a 100-point scale, which can be interpreted similarly to grades (e.g., 70–79 is a C).

The researchers made use of FGSQ because Research Collaboration (2015) found that the scale has sound psychometric properties. The relevance of the scale is further justified by other researchers (Gaumer & Noonan, 2018 McGurn, 2022), among others. The questionnaire was tested for reliability using Cronbach's coefficient alpha with 3,486 students in fourth grade through post–high school. When converted to a 100-point scale, the bottom quartile ranged from 22 to 71, and the top quartile ranged from 88 to 100.

Data Collection

The researchers used two research assistants to administer and retrieve the instruments from the respondents in the four Colleges selected for the study. These assistants were thoroughly trained on how respondents ought to respond to the instrument to ensure the research's effectiveness. Three days were used for the distribution and analysis of the data and five hundred and ten (510) copies of the questionnaire were distributed, out of which ten copies were invalid and five hundred (501) were valid.

Data Analysis

The data were collected and analysed through descriptive paired sample statistics and inferential statistics of ANOVA, while the hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance. These data analysis methods were suitable because of the need to evaluate the mean, a descriptive statistic, and the relevance of estimating the relative effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

Results

Research Question 1: What is the degree of data-based goals set by male and female year one students of Lagos State University of Education?

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of data-based goals for year one maleand female University students.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Goals that are Data Based Male	151	0	35	24.05	7.893
Goals that are Data Based Female	348	0	37	25.22	8.286
Valid N (listwise)	150				

Source: Researcher's Field Survey Result (2023).

Results in Table 2 above show that the data-based goals set by female year-one students are higher than those set by male students, with 25.22>24.05. This means the degree of data-based goals set by female students is higher than that of male students.

Research Question 2: What is the degree of personal improvement goals set by male and female year one students of Lagos State University of Education?

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Personal Improvement goals set by Year One Male and Female University students in LASUED.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Goals on Personal Improvement Male	151	0	25	16.66	6.095
Goals on Personal Improvement Female	350	0	25	17.55	6.290
Valid N (list-wise)	151				

Source: Researcher's Field Survey Result (2023)

Results in Table 3 above show that personal improvement goals set by female year one students are higher than those of male students, with 17.55>16.66. This means the degree of personal improvement goals set by female students is higher than that of male students.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant gender difference in the data-based goals set by male and female year one students of Lagos State University of Education

Table 4: One-Sample Test of Data-based Goals set by Year One Male and Female University students in LASUED.

Data-Based goal Setting Formation by Gender	Test Value = 0				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Data-Based Goal Setting of Male Students	37.446	150	.000	24.053	22.78	25.32
Data-Based Goal Setting of Female Students	56.786	347	.000	25.224	24.35	26.10

Source: Researcher's Field Survey Result (2023)

In Table 4 above, the difference in the male and female students' data-based goal-setting formation is statistically significant (*p=* 0.000*)* as the result showed a higher mean difference of 56.786>37.446. This implies that female students in LASUED can set higher data-based goals than male students. This mean difference is, however, significant enough for goal-setting formation implications.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the Personal improvement goals set by year one male and female University students in LASUED.

Table 5: One-Sample Test of Personal Improvement Goals of male and female Year one students in LASUED

| | Test Value = 0 | | | | | |
| | | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
Goals on Personal Improvement Male	33.580	150	.000	16.656	15.68	17.64
Goals on Personal Improvement Female	52.202	349	.000	17.551	16.89	18.21

Source: Researcher's Field Survey Result, 2023

In Table 5 above, the difference in the male and female students' personal improvement goal-setting formation is statistically significant, as shown in Table 5, which showed a higher mean difference of 52.202>33.580. This implies that females can set higher data-based goals than male students.

Discussion of Findings

This study aimed to investigate the data-based and personal improvement goal settings of Lagos State University of Education year one students. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the study, and findings were based on the results of the descriptive statistics, mean ratings and ANOVA analyses as presented in the previous section. The results of the two research questions showed that female students had higher data-based and personal improvement goal settings than male students. It also showed that year one students of Lagos State University of Education had higher data-based goals than personal improvement goals. Although both types of goals are important, students' ability to set higher data-based goals means they can set specific, measurable, attainable, reliable and time-bound (SMART) based on insights. According to Muhammed, Olayiwola-Adeoja and Iretor-Oscar

(2021), such goals help students align their actions with their desired outcomes and track their progress and performance apart from enhancing their ability to develop skills like determination, interest, self-motivation, hard work and persistence which eventually leads to improved academic performance.

The results of the two hypotheses found significant gender differences in both data-based and personal improvement goal-setting formation of year one students and that the female students had higher data-based and personal improvement goal-setting formation than their male counterparts. These findings are similar to those of Fouladchang, Marzooghi and Shemshiri (2009),Phan (2008), Abrahamsen, Robert and Pensgaard (2007) and Smith and Sinclair (2005) who found significant gender differences in goal orientation of male and female students. Furthermore, while studies like those of (Meece & Holt, 1993; Nolen, 1988) have found that females have a greater need for setting academic goals, others like Rusillo & Arias, 2004; Anderman & Anderman, 1999; Midgley and Urdan, 1996) found that males show higher need for academic goal setting

The obvious reason for this finding, as suggested by most researchers (Gaumer, Erickson & Noonan, 2018; McGurn, 2022; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997) is that males are more competitive than females, males might be more likely to adopt goals of trying to be better than others and trying to achieve the highest grades in contrast to goals that are data-based and of personal improvement. However, the studies (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997) have not found any significant differences in this type of goal pursued as a function of gender.

Conclusions

Results of the present study showed that year one students of Lagos State University of Education have high academic goal setting as their data-based (specific, measurable, attainable, reliable and time-bound) and personal improvement goals are high (even though those of the female students were higher than their male counterparts).

Nevertheless, the fact that the personal improvement goal setting of respondents of this study is lower than their data-based goal setting speaks volumes of the need to increase the human, material and financial resources needed to improve the counselling activities and programmes provided for the institution's students. This is a typical need in higher institutions, as counselling has not been accorded its rightful place. The time has come when counselling must be taken seriously and linked with sustainability in Nigeria and other nations to guarantee students' future academic success. Thus, effective counselling must be a central feature of the Nigerian educational programme if this must happen. One can conclude that academic goal setting and effective counselling emancipation are essential. This study, therefore, concludes with the following implications for counselling:

Implication for Counselling

i. Therapeutic techniques that can help to change adolescents' faulty thinking and challenge their lack of desire for personal improvement should be sought to treat students who have problems with setting high personal improvement goals.

ii. Counsellors need to advocate continued research into how to increase the goal-setting ability of male students.

iii. Counsellors should make students (male) aware of the significance of setting higher academic goals that are specific, measurable and focused on personal improvement as opposed to outperforming others.

iv. Counsellors should continue to increase their level of awareness about the most recent data on the influence of students' academic goal-setting and success.

v. Relevant questionnaires could be developed to identify students with lower academic goal setting (and the like) to enhance discussion with students.

vi. Create more awareness and opportunities to talk to parent groups, school boards and other organisations about the importance of high academic goal-setting for students.

vii. This research should complement the various efforts of those in the helping professions in gathering numerous remediation techniques for assisting students in developing higher academic goals.

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