

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF BEI¹ LEARNERS²

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Abstract. This case study analyzes the inherent factors that contribute to the academic performance of BEI learners. Among these factors, the case study points out that in a university context, professors' role, students' motivation and study habits are the most important conditions to foster academic success. The study was carried out with the cooperation of thirty-three students in November, 2009; a questionnaire designed by the researchers was used to gather students' information on these factors. The findings correlate with research studies indicating that both learners need to have certain personality traits, motivation and goals to be able to succeed in their academic work. Likewise, professors' experience, methodologies and support ensure learners' progress, learning and motivation to fulfill the requirements of the courses. The university services, on the other hand, contribute to make their journey even more successful and satisfying. This case study further contributes to a better insight of the factors that influence major students' enhancement of learning skills and the other factors that encourage accomplishment of academic goals.

Key words: academic success, student achievement, motivation, university context

Resumen. En esta investigación se analizan los factores que contribuyen al rendimiento académico de los estudiantes del BEI. Entre estos factores, el estudio indica que el contexto universitario, el papel de los profesores, la motivación en los estudiantes y los hábitos de estudio son las condiciones más importantes para fomentar el éxito académico. El estudio se llevó a cabo con la colaboración de treinta y tres estudiantes en noviembre de 2009. Las investigadoras diseñaron un cuestionario para recolectar la información de los estudiantes. Los resultados reafirman estudios de investigación que indican que los alumnos necesitan tener ciertas características personales, motivación y metas para tener éxito en su trabajo académico. Igualmente, la experiencia, metodología y apoyo de los profesores aseguran el progreso, aprendizaje y motivación de los estudiantes para que cumplan con los requisitos de los cursos. Los servicios de la universidad también contribuyen a que su trayectoria académica sea más exitosa y satisfactoria. Este trabajo de investigación analiza los factores que influyen en el mejoramiento de las destrezas de estudio y todas aquellas que intervienen en el logro de las metas académicas.

Palabras claves: éxito académico, logro estudiantil, motivación, contexto universitario

Introduction

Educators, higher education administrators, and students have always been concerned with emphasizing the factors that contribute to academic success. Worldwide, college learners' pivotal goal is to attain proudly their academic aims and graduate with the competencies required to succeed in life. Therefore, one of the main objectives of higher education is to ensure student success by providing high quality education, including high levels of institutional commitment, satisfaction with faculty, encouragement and guidance.

When students encounter this kind of support, they respond positively in their pursuit of permanence and success in their academic endeavors. The diverse components of a program at a university must focus on helping learners on their journey towards a prosperous career that will

¹ Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés (Bachelor's in English Teaching).

² *Letras* (Heredia, Universidad Nacional, n. 47, 2011) en prensa.

contribute to the development of the country. This university culture makes students involved actively in their own learning, a key element for academic achievement. In this regard, the university needs to ensure the permanence of students by offering the services and orientation that they need to accomplish their main academic goals in their major.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the factors that contribute to academic success for third and fourth level-students of the BEI at UNA. This study was carried out with thirty-three students in November, 2009. Fourteen students were on fourth level and nineteen of them on third level. Likewise, the study aims at finding out what factors students identify paramount to advance in their studies and to accomplish their academic goals. The findings suggest that they accomplish positive results due to factors such as university context, professors' role, their own study habits and motivation for lifelong learning.

This study contributes to the field of education by first notifying university authorities that students need to have all the services they need to satisfy their academic needs and to the professors to ensure that their practices, attitudes and methodology impact positively on the students' learning and academic achievement and to the students who are required to develop study habits and an optimistic attitude for second language acquisition and major advancement. Other authors have researched these factors in different educational contexts, and we intend to demonstrate their relevance in this sample, as being representative of the BEI.

The Context at Universidad Nacional

UNA is characterized by its humanistic curriculum that strengthens inherent factors in the components of different study programs, faculty commitment, student involvement, and facilities to foster students' academic success. Due to the great demand for professionals in the language field, part of the mission of the ELCL³ is to contribute to the development of Costa Rica with the knowledge of areas such as linguistics, literature, second language teaching and translation. With this university commitment in mind, educators and administrators must therefore provide learners with an adequate environment to allow them to succeed in their academic work and professional life.

The Strategic Plan at the ELCL states the need to create a program of university life in order to take advantage of free time and which encourages students to commit to their university studies in order to prevent desertion. Another factor in this regard is professors' influence in students' professional life, and the Pedagogic Module of UNA establishes respect, tolerance and dialogue in the learners' and professors' relationship. These are conditions that efficiently influence students in completing the program satisfactorily.

The BEI is also a major accredited by Sinaes⁴, which certifies quality in the following components: curriculum, faculty, learners, administrative staff, infrastructure and university services. The benefit of this requirement to keep this accreditation is the constant improvement of all the constituents that help create a success-oriented campus culture and learning environment. This demands a great commitment from those involved in the program to guarantee high quality.

UNA's humanistic curriculum concentrates on the development of the students as creators of their own learning. In a humanistic approach to teaching, learning is student-centered and personalized where affective and cognitive needs are met in order to educate competitive students in a cooperative and supportive environment. In addition, it promotes a setting where learners have the opportunity to reinvent, participate freely and work on problem-solving and decision-making tasks. Besides discovery learning, respect for feelings and aspirations, and the right to have self-determination are aspects that lead students to become active and determined individuals who treasure the opportunity for self-actualization.

³ Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje.

⁴ Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior.

In order to assure the students' transformation into creative and critical individuals, the educators' role includes the responsibility to commit to their students. The quality of the education a learner receives pivots on the excellence of professors. Teaching demands broad knowledge of the subject matter, ethics and standards, enthusiasm, a caring attitude and a love for learning, knowledge of discipline and classroom management techniques, full-time life commitment and a desire to make a difference in the lives of learners. Great teachers⁵ must:

- Set high expectations for all students
- Have clear, written-out objectives
- Be prepared and organized
- Engage students and get them to look at issues in a variety of ways
- Form strong relationships with their students and show that they care about them as people
- Be masters of their subject matter
- Give constant praise

Educators' teaching styles make an impact on students' achievement since they are the ones who inspire and engage students in university life and its challenges. The well-known educator Freire points out, «It is a task that requires that those who commit themselves to teaching develop a certain love not only of others but also of the very process implied in teaching. It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up»⁶.

In this concern, Gardner⁷ claims that in order to prepare students for the future, educators need to cultivate both academic skills and character. In his new book, *Five Minds for the Future*, he describes five kinds of minds, or ways of thinking and acting. As the world continues to change, educators must frequently reevaluate the goals of education, and the type of "minds" individuals need to cultivate. Gardner points out that the future will demand workers and citizens who demonstrate "out-of-the box" and non-linear thinking to solve increasingly complex challenges.

Likewise, another factor that helps students in their pursuit of accomplishment is university services that go from freshman seminars to university life, financial aid, health services, psychology treatments, career orientation, student organizations, use of resources and cultural and recreational activities, among others⁸. These standards help students find the path in their future journey with the proper knowledge and skills. At the same time, students acknowledge their importance and benefits in a constant drive towards their graduation, job or professional development expectations.

UNA has a program called *Éxito académico*, directed by Vicerrectoría Académica, whose objective is to offer academic and personal support to the students through strategies that strengthen integral development and competencies to ensure academic success. Students are offered tutorials in Mathematics, English and other subjects, writing workshops, study habit workshops, freshman orientation and leisure activities, among others. This kind of program definitely represents a gain in holding up students' needs and inquiries for better adjustment to the university demands.

⁵ "Great Schools, What makes a great teacher?" (2006, retrieved from the web on January 15th, 2010, www.greatschools.org/improvement/quality-teaching/what-makes-a-great-teacher.gs?content=79).

⁶ Paulo Freire, *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2005) 5.

⁷ Howard Gardner, "Five minds for the future" (presented at the Opening Plenary in "Re-imagining Tesol", 44th Annual Convention and Exhibit. Boston, Massachusetts, USA. March 24th, 2010)

⁸ Stevens, Tom, "Maximizing Counseling Center Impact" (2004, retrieved from the web on January 30th, 2010) <http://www.csulb.edu/~tstevens/maximizingCounselingCenterImpact.htm>.

Clear Pathways to Student Academic Success

Research shows that students attribute academic success to study habits such as reading skills, examination techniques, time, note-taking skills, organization of work and revision, lecture-content, interest, motivation, ability, peers and financial security, among others⁹. Also, traits such as self-motivation, self-management, self-responsibility, self-awareness, interdependence, long-life learning and self-esteem are paramount to attain outstanding achievement in higher-level academic settings¹⁰.

Moreover, according to Loots¹¹, academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments constitute the five clusters of effective educational practices. This academic setting supports students in their endeavors, enhances their motivation and builds a positive attitude towards satisfaction and commitment to their studies. Besides, Frost¹² claims that research on college students proposes that activities like advising could increase students' involvement in their college experiences. She recommends that universities use strategic planning to design advisory programs based on relationships of shared responsibility and focused on students' success. Perceptive advisers share responsibility for counseling students about educational and career planning; they also inspire them to focus on exploring life, career and educational goals. Success in any field creates positive feedback that increases motivation and performance, thus encouraging more success.

The Case Study

Vital information about the factors influencing academic success in students at the BEI program was gathered through a survey¹³ designed by the researchers and was conducted in November, 2009. The questions were grouped into three main criteria: 1) Personal factors (8 questions); 2) University context (3 questions) and 3) Professors' role (5 questions). The sample includes the opinion of 33 learners, 19 students from the third year and 14 from the fourth year. From the total, 20 are female and 13 male, and the age range of the majority of them is from 21 to 24 years old: 21% are younger than 20, 52% between 21 and 24 and 27% are older than 25. 58% of the students are from the city and 70% currently live in Heredia.

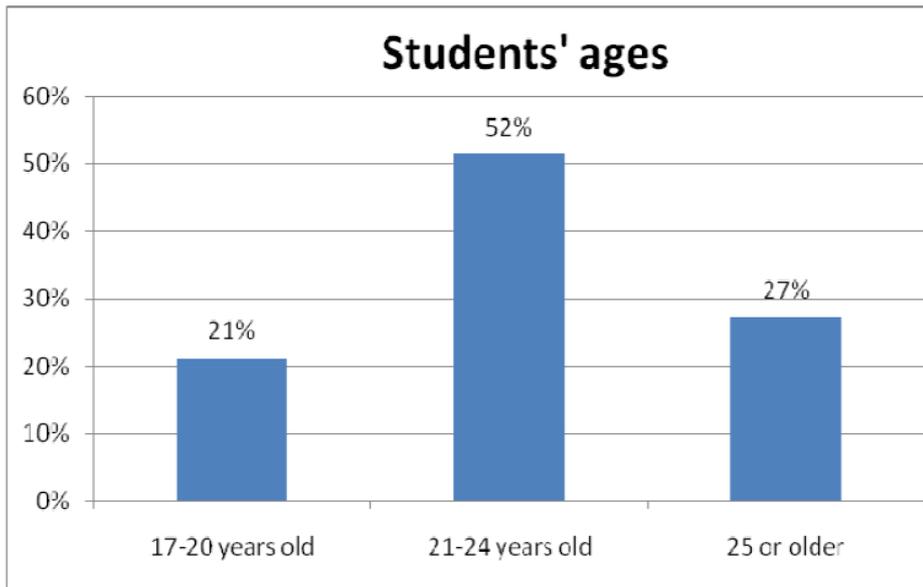
⁹ David Fontana and Eira Williams, "Students' attributions of academic success. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*" (1996, summer, volume 11, Issue 2, 105-116, retrieved from the web on January 27th, 2010, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a739128241>),

¹⁰ Skip Downing, "On course: Strategies for success in college and in life" (2000, retrieved from the web on January 30th, 2010, [http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/On%20Course%20\(The%20Book\)](http://www.oncourseworkshop.com/On%20Course%20(The%20Book))).

¹¹ Loots AGJ, "Student involvement and retention in higher education: The case for academic peer mentoring programmes for first-years", *Education as Change* (2009, July, vol. 13, 1, 211-235. Retrieved from the web on January 15th, 2010, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a911251892&db=all>).

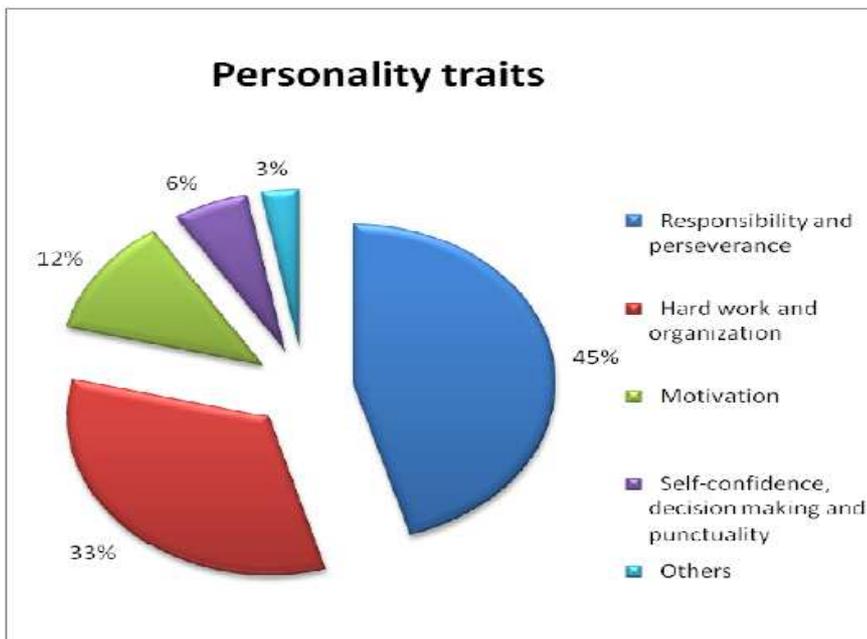
¹² Susan Frost, "Academic advising for student success: a system of shared responsibility." (*ERIC Digest*, ED340274, November 91, retrieved from the web on January 3rd, 2010, <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/bib/91-11dig.htm>).

¹³ See appendix 1.



Graph 1: Students' ages

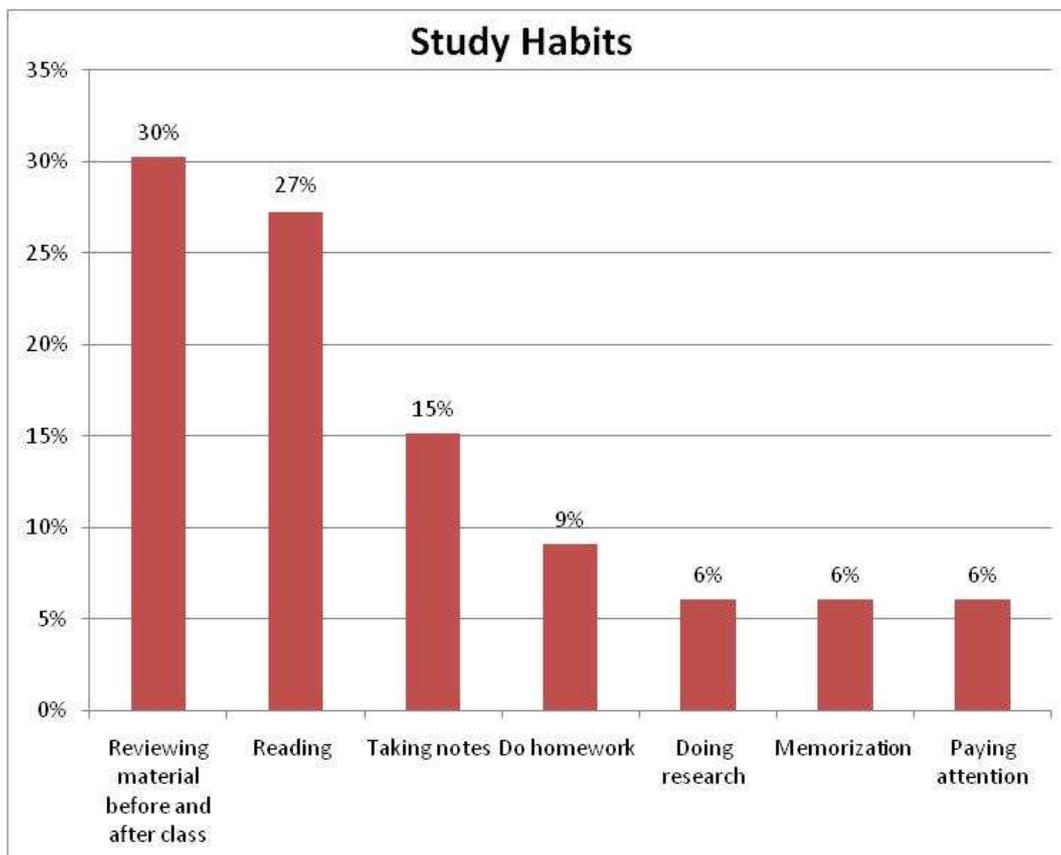
Regarding the first criterion, the personality traits that students consider the most important to succeed in their studies are responsibility and perseverance (45%), hard work and organization (33%), motivation (12%) and others like self-confidence, decision making and punctuality (6%). This indicates that students really care about their studies and work rigorously to meet the course requirements.



Graph 2: Personality traits

Furthermore, in terms of study habits, learners considered reviewing material before and after class, reading, taking notes and doing homework as the most important. Similarly, students' learning preferences include interacting with others, reading, using visual aids, learning about new topics and

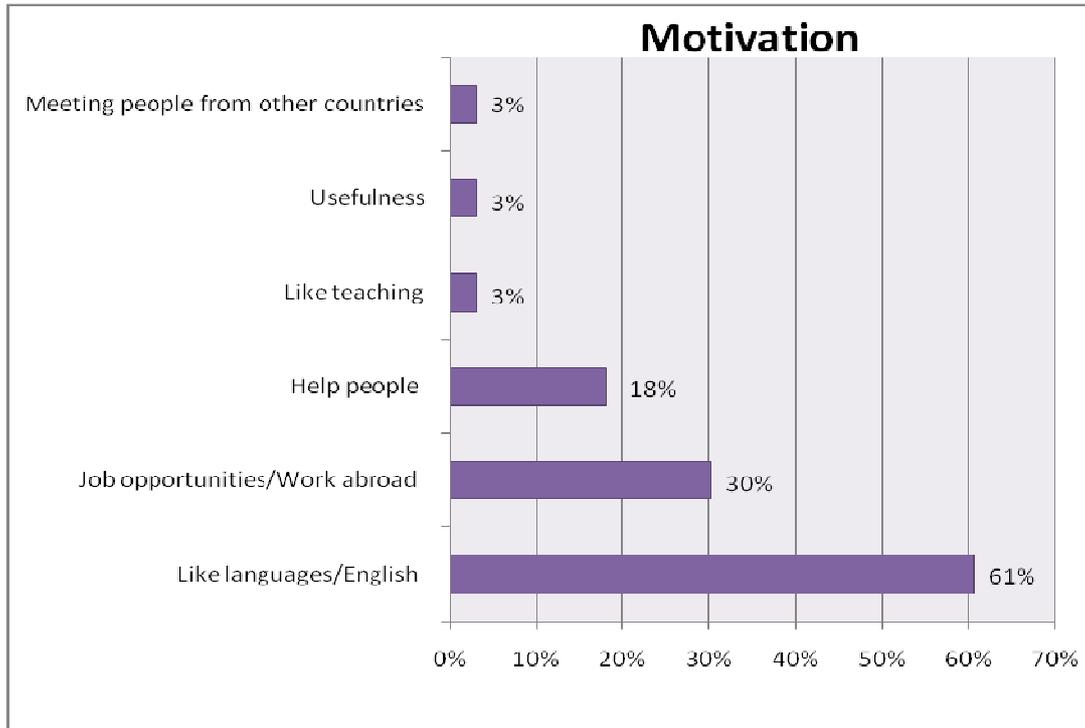
listening. These aspects show that students like dynamic classroom experiences that promote interaction and the inquiry of appealing topics for discussion and presentations.



Graph 3: Study habits

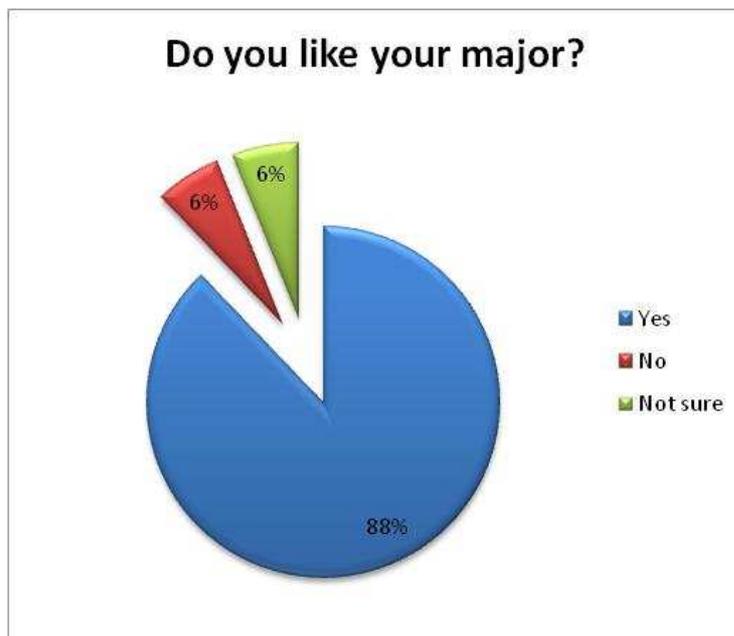
Students were also asked what motivated them to study English teaching. According to Norris-Halt¹⁴, motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the learner’s positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community. Instrumental motivation underlies the goal to gain some social or economic reward through L2 achievement, thus referring to a more functional reason for language learning. This can be shown in the students’ answers in relation to their motivation to study English teaching. 61% of the learners mentioned as the first aspect their interest in languages, especially English, 30% cited the need to have job opportunities, including working abroad and 18% mentioned the possibility to help people. This shows that students who enroll in the BEI program have language learning motivation to find better opportunities in life.

¹⁴ Jackeline Norris-Holt, “Motivation as a Contributing Factor in Second Language Acquisition”, *The Internet TESL Journal* (v. VII, n. 6, 2001, retrieved from the web on February 25th, 2010. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Norris-Motivation.html>).



Graph 4: Motivation

This motivation in students is shown in their satisfaction with the major, since 88% of them expressed they like what they study.

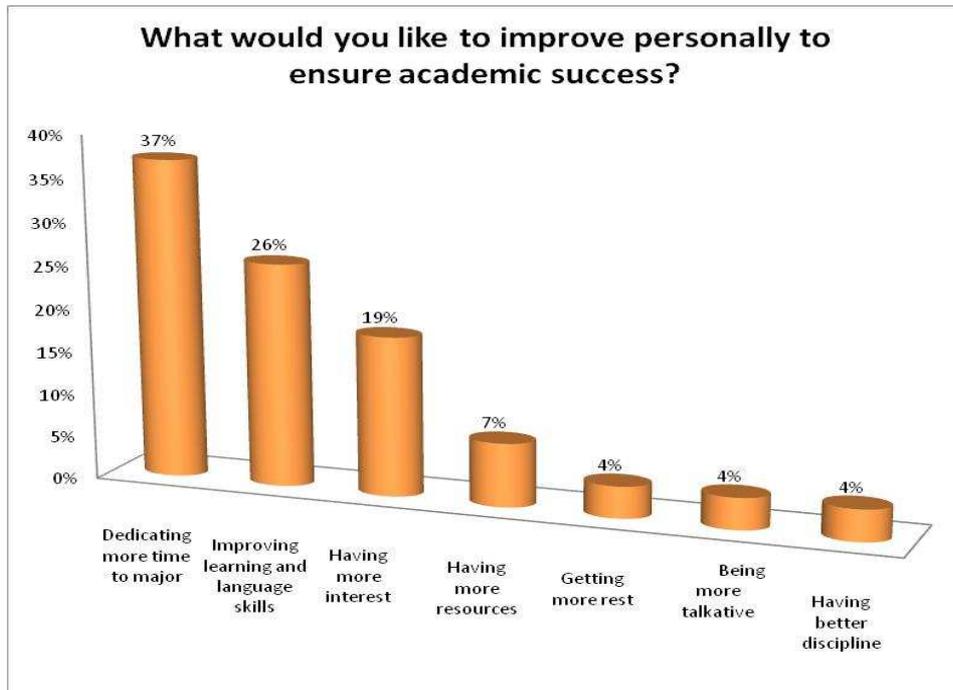


Graph 5: Satisfaction with major

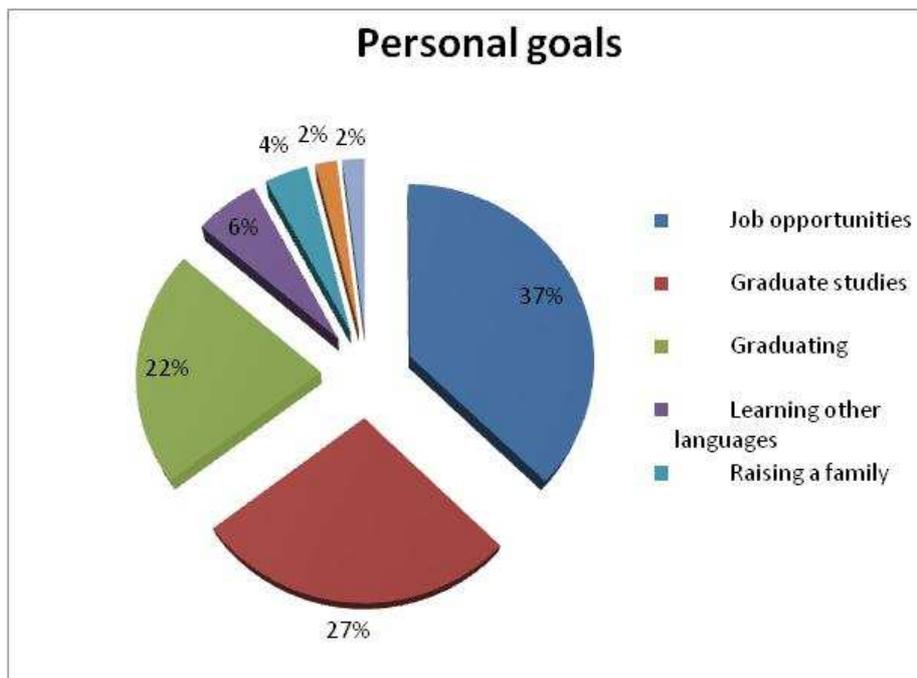
In fact, pursuing a university degree is important for them because by receiving higher education they are assured of a better lifestyle and future, as they grow personally and professionally. In order to achieve this, a constant improvement is necessary; students said that dedicating more time to their major (37%), becoming better at their own learning and language skills (26%), and showing more interest towards their studies (19%) would definitely influence them positively on their way to academic success. In addition, the learners' short-term personal goals include graduating with a major in English Teaching, pursuing graduate studies and being given different job opportunities.



Graph 6: Reasons for pursuing a university degree

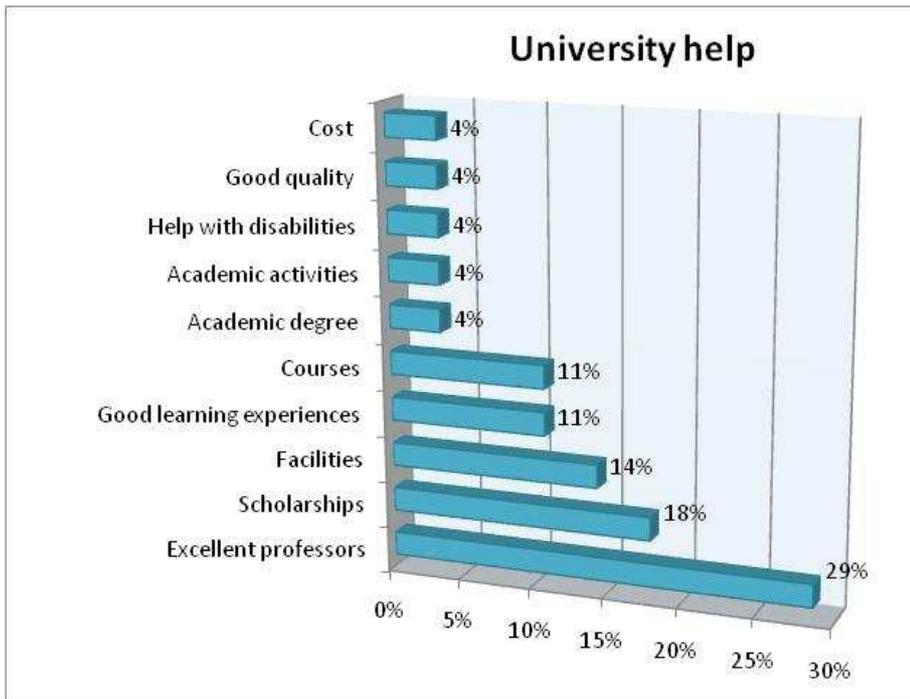


Graph 7: Personal aspects to improve

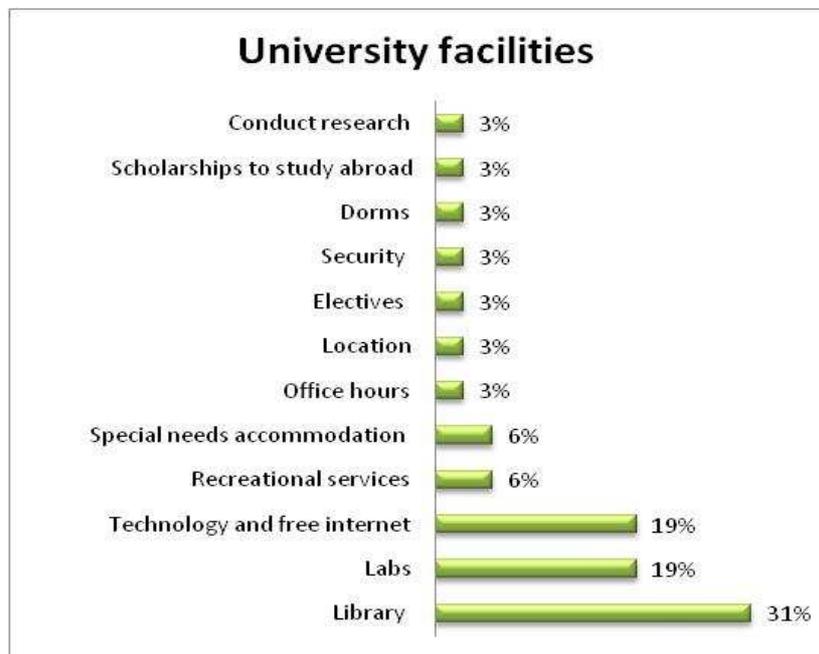


Graph 8: Personal goals

About the university context, students indicated that UNA has helped them reach their academic goals by offering excellent professors, financial aid, facilities, good learning experiences and a good variety of courses, including extra-curricular ones. Some aspects the university offers learners to help them in their studies are the two libraries, one having many specialized books and connection to on-line resources, the language and multimedia labs, technology and free access to Internet, recreational services like cultural and sports events, and accommodation for people with special needs throughout the campus.



Graph 9: Help from university

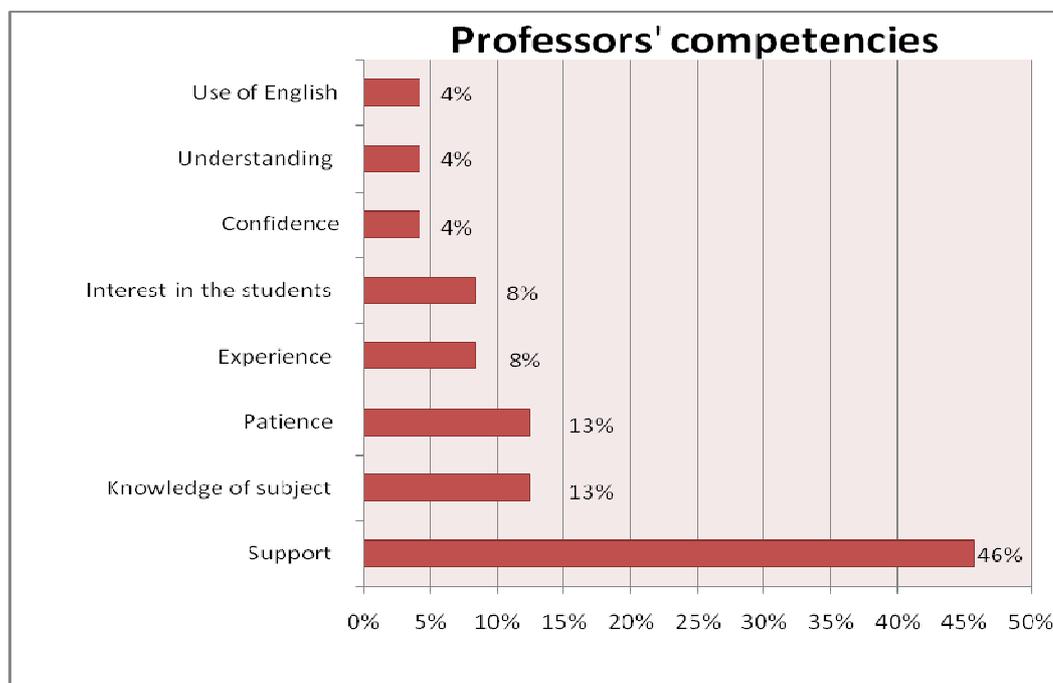


Graph 10: University facilities

The professors' personality is, indeed, a key factor in order to assure success in students. As stated by Ghanizadeh and Moafian, "Teachers who displayed more friendly and understanding behavior

in their interactions in the classroom tended to enhance not only learner achievement but also their attitudes towards the subject matter”¹⁵.

Regarding the qualities professors should have in order to help learners in their academic goals, the students answered that traits such as support (with a 46%), knowledge of subject (13%), patience (13%), experience (8%), and interest in the students (8%) were the most important ones.



Graph 11: Professors' traits

As stated by Professor Miranda, “I think that in order to contribute to the academic success of our students, first of all we have to accept them as individuals. Every person should be accepted whether they are enthusiastic and hyperactive or whether they are shy and quiet. The professor has to build an environment of trust in his or her classroom so that the student feels secure and can build his or her self-confidence in his social abilities for learning. It’s important to awaken in the student the joy of learning and of continuing to learn through life”¹⁶.

In terms of successful professors’ teaching strategies, interactive activities and clear and organized explanations were the ones mentioned the most by all learners. As a result, students are inclined to participate in those learning experiences that, under instruction, actively involve them.

Conclusion

Students’ experiences and opinions are essential if there is a desire to improve from professors and a study program like the BEI in order to achieve academic success in learners, which is our main goal. As an illustration, an interview was conducted with a senior student at the BEI program, Johana, in March 2010, the objective of which was to know how she could achieve academic success.

¹⁵ Afsaneh Ghanizadeh and Fatemeh Moafian, “The role of EFL teachers’ emotional intelligence in their success”, *ELT Journal Advance Access* (Oxford University Press, 2009, retrieved from the web on February 25th, 2010, <http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/search?fulltext=academic+success>).

¹⁶ Rocío Miranda, interview conducted on March 4th, 2010, Heredia, Universidad Nacional.

First, I would say that my desire is to learn, not only from books but also from other people's experiences. I also find it very important that the professors show interest in what other students have to say, their opinions, and I like the fact that they motivate the students throughout the learning process. I really enjoy when they ask us to perform an activity or an assignment where they challenge us to show our knowledge about the target language and its culture.

With this in mind, this case study concludes that the BEI program at ELCL provides students with the necessary academic factors to foster their motivation and a sense of commitment to their studies. Moreover, students must be given support and encouragement to excel in their aims. UNA's goals are met in the sense of offering students the necessary context, facilities and a good quality of education so that learners strive for excellence and accomplishment of personal and professional aspirations.

The BEI program at UNA offers students what is required to succeed academically, including its course program, university context and professors' role. The results of learners' effort and enthusiasm will be shown in their future work as excellent professors of English in various institutions of our country, or even abroad. This case study contributes to the field of applied linguistics by addressing the factors that should be carefully considered to guarantee excellence in education and academic success for learners.

The field of second language teaching has been enhanced with the results of this study which indeed strengthens the significance of constant assessment of learners' intrinsic motivation and personal traits that help them learn English. Students can enhance their learning skills when they encounter an academic environment conducive to achievement and high standards of performance. As a result, areas such as new methodologies implemented in the BEI, changes in program of study and students' background needs to be researched and can provide deeper influence for learning enhancement. This research as well has identified an area of the curriculum that welcomes improvement and demonstrates that where greater emphasis is placed on the factors that enhance outstanding majors' achievement, the resultant combination of these new methodologies can provide a further benchmark towards a standard of excellence.

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Appendix 1: survey

The following survey intends to collect information on the factors that contribute to your academic success at Universidad Nacional. The findings are going to be used for a presentation in the International Congress of Higher Education at UNA in March, 2010. We appreciate your collaboration in completing the following anonymous questionnaire.

1. Personal information

Gender	Female	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age	17-20 years old	<input type="checkbox"/>
	21-24 years old	<input type="checkbox"/>
	25 or older	<input type="checkbox"/>
Place of origin	City	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Countryside	<input type="checkbox"/>
Place where you currently live		
Year you became a university student		
Year in your major	3rd	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4th	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Personal factors that contribute to your academic success

1. What personality traits help you succeed in your studies?
2. What kind of study habits do you have?
3. How do you like learning?
4. What motivates you to study English teaching?
5. Do you like your major? Yes No Not sure
6. What makes you pursue a university degree?
7. What would you like to improve personally to ensure academic success?
8. What are your goals in the close future? How do you plan to achieve them?

The university context

1. How has the university helped you in reaching your academic goals?
2. Do you receive a scholarship? Yes No
3. What are other aspects the university offers that help you in your studies?

The role of the ‘Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje’

How have the following criteria supported you in your studies?

1. The program	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Professors	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Course schedule	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Infrastructure	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Labs	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Library	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Outdoor areas	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. The administrative staff	Satisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate	<input type="checkbox"/>	Unsatisfactory	<input type="checkbox"/>

Professor’s role

- What qualities in the professor help you in the comprehension and acquisition of knowledge?
- Which teaching strategies are more successful for you?
- How do UNA professors help you succeed in your academic work?
- What other qualities would you like professors to have to support you in your studies?
- What kind of activities do you prefer to learn English?
-

Other important aspects

- How does your classmates’ academic success influence yours?
- As a future English teacher, what would you do to ensure your students accomplish their academic goals?

Thank you for your cooperation!