

Academic Stress And Career Anxiety: Mediating Role Of Social Competence Among Students Of Public Institutions

Farah Qayyum¹, Saira Maqsood¹, Fatima Naeem¹, Fatima Salman¹, Ruqayya Bano¹,
Muhammad Farhan Tabassum²

¹Department of Psychology, Lahore Garrison University, DHA Phase 6, Avenue 4, Sector C, Lahore, Pakistan.

²Department of Mathematics, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.

*Corresponding Author: Muhammad Farhan Tabassum, farhanuet12@gmail.com

Abstract: The educational system and parent's expectation instills academic stress in students and it has become a part of every student's academic life.. They feel less confident about their career choices and become vulnerable to career anxiety which is not conducive to their mental health. Social competence can prove to manage academic stress and career anxiety among students which can increase their abilities to perform diligently in academia. It aims to investigate the mediating role of social competence in relationship between academic stress and career anxiety among students studying in public institutions. The study employed a correlation research design where 100 participants from 4 different public institutes in Lahore, Pakistan selected through a purposive sampling strategy while using Educational Stress Scale (ESS), Career Anxiety Scale (CAS), Social Competence Scale (SCS) along with demographic sheet. The findings revealed that academic stress has significant positive relationship with career anxiety (** $p < .01$) and significant negative relationship with social competence (** $p < .01$). Mediation analysis depicted that social competence played a mediating role between academic stress and career anxiety ($\beta = -.16, p = .03$) in students studying at public institutions. Hierarchical regression showed that social competence negatively predicts career anxiety and academic stress found a significant positive predictor of career anxiety. Finding of this study suggests that effective counseling modules and intervention strategies should provided to students at their institutes to alleviate their' academic stress and career anxiety.

Keywords: Academic stress, Career anxiety, Social competence, Public institutions and Mediation analysis

Introduction

Education is very important for the prosperity of a nation. It is essential for the development of a nation and the progress of the country. The government should provide education and this can happen if the government manages the national resources properly (Awan & Zia, 2015). From a social and economic perspective, it is necessary to acquire higher education. Education systems contributed to an increased level of stress faced by the students (Cheung, Cheung & Wu, 2014). Some educational institutions' demands

which induce stress among students include overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate resources and facilities, semester grading system, shortage of time or assignment/ task-related issues, long hours and expectations of rote learning. Parents and institutions both inculcate the fear of failure among students which affects their self-esteem and confidence. High expectations of parents are one of the major contributing factors that led to increased stress levels (Reddy, Menon & Thattil, 2018).

Stress has become an integral part of our lives which affects every individual regardless of their developmental stage. Most of the people assumed that the student community is not facing any kind of stressors or problems but stress and anxiety are prevalent among children, teenagers and adults as well. Academic pressure is one of the primary sources of stress among students and it can be defined as discomfort and anxiety that is caused by fear of academic failure (Arslan, 2017). Parental negligence, high expectations regarding their academic performances, consider the workload necessary, competition among students and difficulty in the curriculum are potential stressors for students. Academic stress leads to psychological distress in students. This distress occurs due to anticipated academic challenges or failure or even when the student suspects failure. A child's environment is the main source of academic stressors such as home, school, neighborhood or friendship. It is these academic stressors that contribute to the child's mental distress (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). Another type of stress that students experience is social adjustment, especially adapting to university life and being separated from home environment. When students move from the school environment to the university environment they experience psychological, cognitive and social trauma due to the changing educational system and other factors. The students experience new methods of teaching, new academic requirements, establish relationships with students and faculties and even new relations between students (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). At university level they have to decide their careers. A career decision is not an easy process, some students face many obstacles or hurdles in choosing their career path. They are unable to take right decision about their career and this confusion leads them towards anxiety which affects their physical health along with psychological health. Career anxiety hinders or gets in the way of decision-making abilities.

Career indecision prevents students from deciding on a career path (shahmohammadi, 2011). Some researcher reported that 50% of the students experience career indecision (Pisarik, Rowell & Thompson, 2017). In order to give a new type of relationship with the opposite sex, the system of co-education is being enforced. Because of such changes in academic achievement, mental and social health is being affected. A higher level of academic stress can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety among children (Newman, Gray & Fuqua, 1999).

Social competence helps children and youth to engage in altruistic behavior, so they can make important contributions to society (Pascoe, Hetrick & Parker, 2020). Social competence plays an important role in the educational years of students because it helps a student to adopt behavior according to changing demands of the environment. Successful communication and collaborative situations have an individual develop different skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and decision-making, facing challenges, etc (Clinciu, 2013). Reitz (2012) argues that social competence can be defined as the all the skills and knowledge that helps in the determination of the competent behavior that is social. According to N. C. Lang (2010), social series of social learnings that are achieved at each stage of age results into social competence .

Schools, colleges and universities are the main source for Social learning process where the students are involved in the process of learning along with their fellows , teachers and familial support (Joseph & Zins et al, 2007). Educational goal that is also practical in nature, and it should be attain through the social competence. This idea is still relevant in the education development. Social competence development is important from primary to higher education (Oberst et al., 2009). According to Maslow (1970) an environment that is safe and supportive is very much important for the development of self-confidence in students, their self-assessment and

other social opportunities. Feeling of safety is very important for the effective psychological functioning of the students. This will help them in more clear and accurate expression of their view, ideas and experiences in much frequent way. Safety provides a freedom, ensures more efficient learning process and also contributes to the development of social competence. When there is no safety, fear will affect the development of education. Students will not be able to clearly express their views, they will be unable to function by utilizing all the possibilities (Kiuru et al., 2015). This will result into stress, which negatively affects sociability expression and social competence. Fearful environment, or the environment that is not safe is usually developed and promoted the behavior of teacher or friends which also leads to stress and disturbance in the psychological functioning of the students. More specifically the behavior of teacher toward the students is very important, how they react towards their students, in what ways they develop the mutual relationships, and trustworthiness (Han & Kempel, 2006).

With the implementation of appropriate social skills, students can learn effective adjustment in family, school, work and society. Geert Ten Dam and Monique Volman (2007) stated that social competence should be the product of education because it helps in the preparation of the members of the society that are responsible and civic. Both psychological and social perspective should be used to view the social competence. Socially competent behavior is not only learnt during the learning process, but also leads towards the development of a learning environment that is positive. The process of communication and cooperation in education basically reveals the ability of being social competent. So from primary to higher education, more importance should be given to the social competence, specifically to higher education because it provides the necessary background and context for the development of future person and

professional success in growing and rapidly changing economic conditions as well as for the participation in community that is diverse in nature. For the school adjustment, relationships that are positive in nature with teachers and peers is very important. (Kiuru et al., 2015). Context appropriate skills and attitudes that can be applied to their behavior and situations that are social or process or indicate social competence. (Junttila et al., 2006). In childhood an interaction between individual factors, such as affect and cognition and other external factors, such as classroom environment and family helps in the development of social competence (Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010). Students who have higher social competence have less experience with every day life stressors specifically in terms of social skills and stress (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007; Escobar et al., 2013). According to Control Theory (Perry et al., 2005; Rothbaum, Weisz, & Snyder, 1982; Rotter, 1966), when an individual in an unpredictable or stressful situation has a perception of control, this leads towards providing the motivation and achievement. So it can be also beneficial for career competency. There are two important components of perceived control. Primary control and secondary control. Primary control is defined as when the students believe that they have the important skills for the self-regulations which will help them in the betterment of their performance. Secondary control is the ability to adjust their psychological functioning to match with their external environment (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Primary control helps in the achievement of the students whereas the secondary control helps in the maintenance of that achievement. When children try to meet the complex demands of academic and social nature in the classroom this will affect their future academic learning as well as their general wellbeing (Jones et al., 2015). When children enter in school they face high expectations to learn basic skills of the academics forming social relationships with their teachers and class fellows

(Wong, 2015). When they worry about their academic progress or social competence there is a lack of self-efficacy and wellbeing (Hascher & Lauermaun et al., 2017). Stress is considered as a major threats to well-being, negatively affects the academics, social and physiological functioning in the long term (Blair & Raver, 2015; Hjern et al., 2008). Theoretical orientation lies in Self-Determination Theory. It states that individuals have autonomy and psychological growth and development is their instinctive determination. They struggle, to be competent in challenging time and are determined for combining all their experiences into a unified sense of self as according to the stress vulnerability model there is a increase in the likelihood of symptomatic episodes due to the genetic or biological predisposition to certain mental disorders exists and psychological and social factors .The stress-vulnerability model explores how biological factors and stress impacts a person's likelihood of developing a substance use disorder or other mental disorder (Zubin et al. 1977).

Previous literature shown that there is considerable work on perceived stress, sources of stress and severity of stress among students. Undergraduate medical training students are facing a lot of stress everywhere and in Pakistan as well. Academic and psychosocial factors are the major contributors of stress. Numerous sources are inducing stress among students such as parents' expectations toward their children, reoccurrence of examinations one after other, and hugeness of academic syllabus. They are also facing sleeping problems, tension regarding their careers, isolation and they are also worried about their performance in exams. Students perceived the workload required in college, competition among students and difficulty in the curriculum is perceived as stressful for students (Shah, Hasan, Malik & Sreeramareddy, 2010). Researchers in Pakistan have also conducted studies on the impact of stress among students of a public sector university indicating that in order to get a better

education and job opportunities, a huge number of Pakistani youths want to settle abroad or in Western countries. Numerous factors are causing stress among youth such as socio-economic, geo-political and many unknown factors (Khan & Chaudary, 2014).

In Pakistan, there is a massive growth of private schools so the country makes progress. It is mostly demonstrated that the quality of education of private educational institutions is much better than that of public educational institutions. Public institutions have limited resources and as a result, the sources of stress and anxiety related to a career in the life of Pakistani students differ from those in other countries. Student gives their full potential when stress-free environment was provided to them (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018). The responsibility of educational institutions is to identify the core stressors in student's life and support their students individually on how to manage stress and anxiety related to their career effectively throughout their academic years. Researches have been done on stress and career anxiety it was found social competence is an effective component through which students can perform well in their academics. Through academic performance, students can evaluate their competencies and capabilities. This motivates the students which leads to improvement in their performance (Wong, 2015).

There are few indigions and international researches which studying the mediating role of social competence and explore the significane of socialization in academic stress and career decisian. In the support of social competency this research has been conducted with the aim to identifying social competence as a mediator in relationship between educational stress and career anxiety in students studying in public institutions and also to examine the relationship between social competence, educational stress and career anxiety. The relationship between social competences and

coping strategies preference was confirmed by a number of studies. Higher social competences are generally associated with more frequent use of active and coping strategies that are prosocial (Kliewer & Sandler, 1993; Lazsadi, 2015; Reijntjes, Stegge, & Terwogt, 2006; Szabala, 2013; Zimmer-Gembeck, Lees, & Skinner, 2011) and decreased preference of passive coping strategies (Miller, Omens, & Delvadia, 1991; Szabala, 2013). Social competences is also considered a form of coping strategy, because their characteristics transformed into an active approach helps in the coping strategies, or directly affect the decision making abilities regarding the selection of appropriate coping strategy (Han & Kemple, 2006; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Chinaveh, 2013; Kostelnik, Whiren, Soderman, Stein, & Gregory, 2002; Odom et al., 2002).

Stress, depression and anxiety symptoms impair overall health and wellbeing and also affect academic achievement can further adversely affect academic achievement (Bernal-Morales, Rodríguez-Landa, & PulidoCriollo, 2015). In the United States, undergraduate student with higher self-reported anxiety and depression symptoms were found to achieve poorer grades on examinations (Chapell et al., 2005; Hysenbegasi, Hass, & Rowland, 2005). A longitudinal study of Hawaiian secondary school students showed that self-reported depressive symptoms resulted in subsequent poor academic achievement (Kessler, 2012; McArdle, Hamagami, Chang, & Hishinuma, 2014). In a sample of Finnish students aged 13–17, self-reported depression was associated with concentration difficulties, and poorer social relationships, self-learning, poorer academic performance, and worse reading and writing outcomes (Fröjd et al., 2008). Self perception and self image is a essential aspect which influence students thought process in a positive or negative way. Recent researches also showed that Self-esteem affects life satisfaction of university students and it is positively predicts

life satisfaction in students (Afridi & Maqsood, 2019).

In the light of above mentioned literature, it is concluded that higher education is necessary for the development and prosperity of nation. Nature of education systems contributed to an increased level of academic stress faced by the students. Institutions' demands (e.g overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate resources and facilities, semester grading system, shortage of time or assignment/ task-related issues, long hours and expectations of rote learning), and high expectations of parents related to education are potential source of stress highlighted in previous researches and these factors can develop Atychiphobia (fear of failure) among students which affects their self-esteem and confidence.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the relationship between academic stress, social competence and career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.
2. To investigate the mediating role of social competence in relationship between academic and career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.
3. To find the predicting role of academic stress and social competence on career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.

Hypothesis of the Study

H1: There would be a significant relationship among academic stress, social competence and career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.

H2: There would be a significant mediating role of social competence in relationship between academic and career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.

H3: There would be a significant predicting role of academic stress and social competence on

career anxiety in students studying at public institutions.

Scope of the Study

In 21st Century Education plays an important role regarding development and prosperity of nations. Due to the globalization of education and technology, it is the core need for the progress of any country (Awan, 2014). Social competence is primary components that play an important role in the lives of students. Students who are socially competent interact effectively with others people and in other words have positive self-concept regarding them. Student faces educational stress due to competition in education settings. Parent expectations towards their children lead career anxiety in them. The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship among these variables and explore possible mediating roles.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the participants

| Demographic Characteristics | f | % |
|-----------------------------|----|------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 50 | 50.0 |
| Female | 50 | 50.0 |
| Faculty | | |
| Science | 80 | 80.0 |
| Arts | 20 | 20.0 |

Table 1 showed that 100 male and 100 females were selected for the research study and there was an equal representation of both genders. Sample was selected from the discipline of Arts and Sciences.

Measuring Tools

Demographic Sheet: It consists of questions related to age, gender, insituation type, and discipline.

Academic Stress Scale: Academic stress is also known educational stress scale developed by (Sun, Dunne, Hou, & Xu, 2011). It consisted of 16 items. This scale measures domains that include pressure from study, worry about grades,

Research Methodology

The correlational research design was used in the current study. The study considered Academic stress as an independent variable, Career anxiety as a dependent variable and social competence as a mediator. 100 participants were selected from 4 different public institutions of Lahore, Pakistan, with an age range of 18 -23years (M=19.85, SD=1.76). The data was collected through a purposive sampling strategy. School children of 10th grade, College (1st and 2nd year) and university (BS) going students were included in the current study. Those students who studying in private institutions were excluded. Those students who were studying in madrasahs were also excluded.

despondency, self-expectation and the workload. It is a five Likert scale, ranging from 1= “strongly disagree” to 5= “strongly agree”. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the scale is .64.

Career Anxiety Scale (CAS): The career Anxiety Scale (CAS) is another instrument used in the present research. This scale has 12 items. The career anxiety scale was a six-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1= “strongly disagree” to 6= “strongly agree”. The reverse items of the scale are (3, 5, and 7). The Cronbach alpha reliability of the scale is 0.53.

Social Competence Scale: Social competence was assessed through Social competence

Questionnaire developed by (Price, Spence, Sheffield, & Caroline, 1995). It has 8 items and a three-point Likert-type scale. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the scale is 0.52.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Departmental Board of Studies and Board of Advance Studies and Research, Lahore Garrison University, Lahore. In the present research, first of all, permissions were taken from the authors to use their scales before collecting data. The permission was taken from both English and Urdu authors. Translated scales were used and permission from the author who has translated the scale was also taken. Then an authority letter was signed by the Department of Psychology, Lahore Garrison University, Pakistan. The permission from the university was taken. The researcher visited different government institutions and took permission from respective heads of the institutes to administer questionnaires to relevant participants. For data collection, the author explained the nature and purpose of the study to the participants. Informed consent was signed by the participants. It was assured to participants that their information will be kept confidential and private. The consent was taken by the participant and also given information about the nature of the research. For the analysis of the result, the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) 21 was used.

Results and Discussion

Pearson product moment correlation coefficient (r) was used to find out the relationship between academic stress, social competence and career anxiety. Before carrying out correlation analysis, assumptions i.e. assessing the linearity through scatter plot, checking the outliers, normality and independence of observations for the analysis

were met. Mediation analysis was carried out to find out the social competence as a mediator in relation between academic stress and career anxiety in students studying in public institutions. To examine this, PROCESS (3.4) software was used and provided the analytical framework that estimated the direct, indirect and total effects of the mediation models. Mediation analysis was carried out using Andrews Hayes (v3.3) process macro. Academic Stress was set as a predictor (X), Career Anxiety was the outcome (Y), Social Competence was selected as the mediator (M). The traditional approach to mediation consists of three regression analysis steps to reveal the relationship among variables.

The first step is to find the total effect (c) i.e. ($X \rightarrow Y$), the second step is to obtain indirect effect referred to as an ($X \rightarrow M$), and the third step is referred to as b ($M \rightarrow Y$). The mediation is significant if total effect, the indirect effect is significant and the direct effect is smaller than the total effect. If the direct effect is still significant, it is called partial mediation. Hierarchical Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the predictors of dependent variable i.e., career anxiety.

Table 2 showed there was significant positive moderate correlation of academic stress with career anxiety (** $p < .01$) i.e. higher the academic stress also higher will be career anxiety among students studying in public institutions. It also showed that significant negative moderate correlation of academic stress with social competence (** $p < .01$) i.e. higher academic stress lower will be the social competence in students studying in public institutions. . Academic stress has a significant negative relationship with social competence. In an academic setting, anxiety is often regarded as a negative emotion that greatly affects undergraduate students all over the world.

Table 2 Intercorrelations, Means, Standard Deviations of Educational Stress, Social competence and Career anxiety among students studying in public institutions

| V | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-------------------|-------|--------|--------|
| Academic Stress | – | -.64** | .58** |
| Social competence | | – | -.56** |
| Career Anxiety | | | – |
| M | 49.97 | 17.74 | 45.03 |
| SD | 9.09 | 3.72 | 8.09 |

Note, M =Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, **p<.01, *p<.05

This negative emotion also impairs the decision-making abilities of students. When students are not able to decide on their career path, students are most likely to suffer from career anxiety. It has been revealed from many studies that there is a positive correlation between career-related anxiety and career indecision. When a student

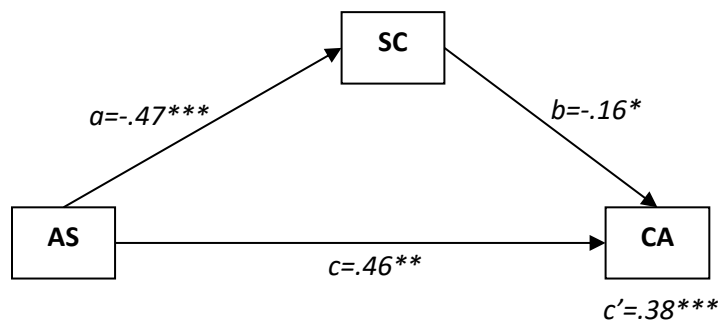
chooses his or her career there are a lot of options in front of him and he has to select one from these career options. The student learning environment plays an important role in deciding the student chooses the right career path (Daniels, Stewart, Stupnisky, Perry & LoVerso, 2011).

Table 3 Model Coefficients for the Mediation Analysis

| | | Consequent | | | | | |
|-------------------|---|-----------------------|-----|------|---------------------|------|------|
| | | M (Social Competence) | | | Y(Career Anxiety) | | |
| Antecedents | | β | SE | P | β | SE | p |
| Academic Stress | A | -.47 | .03 | .001 | c' | -.16 | .03 |
| Social Competence | | | | | b | -.38 | .001 |
| | | R ² =.22 | | | R ² =.23 | | |
| | | F(1, 195)=53.81, | | | F(2, 194)=28.53, | | |
| | | ***p<.001 | | | *p<.05 | | |

As shown in Table 3 the results of mediation analysis showed that the direct effect of the path a from Academic Stress (X) to Social Competence (M) was statistically significant (b=-.47, ***p<.001). Furthermore, that direct effect of path b from Social Competence (M) to Career Anxiety (Y) was negatively and statistically significant (b=-.38, ***p<.001). The direct effect of path c from Academic Stress (X) to Career Anxiety(Y) was statistically significant (b=-.16, **p<.03). The indirect effect c' (b=-.08, ***p<.001) tested through bootstrapping (.03) is statistically significant at confidence interval

95% CI (-.15, -.02). The study aimed to investigate the mediating role of social competence in academic stress and career anxiety among students studying at public institutions. When students move from a school environment to a university environment it can cause psychological, academic and social shock to them, due to the educational system and other factors. The study revealed that students with better social skills protect themselves from distress. It helps them to cope with highly stressful or academically loaded situations (Omkarappa, Rentala & Nattala, 2019).

Figure 1 Emerged Statistical Model of Research

Note. Fig 1 showed standardized regression coefficients of path a, path b and path c' (total and indirect effect) are significantly mediated by the

variable Social Competence. The standardized regression coefficients path c (direct effect) is statistically significant

Table 4 Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting social competence and educational stress for Career Anxiety among students studying in Government institutions

| Predictors | ΔR^2 | β |
|----------------------|--------------|---------|
| Block I | .01 | |
| Faculty | | -.19 |
| Block II | .11 | |
| Academic Stress | | -.33*** |
| Block III | .11 | |
| Social Competence | | .38*** |
| Total R ² | .23 | |
| N | 100 | |

In block 1, faculty explaining 1% of the variance in career anxiety with $F(1, 195) = 1.12$. After adding the Academic stress in block 2, the variance explained by the model was 11% with $F(4, 150) = 12.76$, $p < .001$. Then after adding Social Competence in block 3, the total variance explained by the model was 22%, $F(4, 150) = 18.97$, $p < .001$. Individuals with social competence skills can resolve interpersonal and intrapersonal skills effectively. They can control their feelings in difficult situations. They are equipped with problem-solving skills. These factors lead to high academic success. Individuals with these attributes effectively manage their emotions and used their skills appropriately. If an individual is competent, the stress and anxiety among students will be less in test taking and examinations. Interpersonal skills help the

individual to seek academic help from their parents, teachers and other people (Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992). This shows that self-competence is very important predictor for academic success and to decrease career anxiety faced by the students.

In conclusion, the analysis of the results revealed that social competence have a significant positive relationship and can predict their academic performance. This research is in pipeline with our study that students who are socially competent and believe in their capabilities are less likely to experience academic stress and career anxiety (Akbaribooreng, Hosseini, Zangouei & Ramroodi, 2015).

Conclusion

It is concluded that students who have a higher degree of social competence are more academically successful, accepted and appreciated by their peers, have a healthy relationship with community members. Because of this, their academic performance will be higher. One of the important goals of the university is to prepare students for their future careers. Students are constantly facing psychological distress due to academic stress, and this leads students towards career anxiety which impairs their physical and mental health badly. So, this study established social competency as strong mediator between academic stress and career anxiety along with significant predictive role and relationship.

Limitations and Suggestions

The Study relies on self-reported data from selected participants which causes self presentational biases. Students were selected from one city only and not from other regions.

It is recommended that Counselors should be hired for career counseling of the students at School, College and University.

It is suggested that students develop social skills because social competence plays an important role in the educational years of students. It helps students develop social skills according to changing demands of their environment.

Implications

This research will be helpful for educationists and school counsellors in order to design and implement more appropriate interventional and innovative programs for the management of psychological distress, social adjustment and curriculum related difficulties. The role of social competency is also established as a helpful skill and coping strategy to reduce academic stress and enhance decision making ability, so students can cope with academic stress and take right decisions regarding their career. This study will motivate students to increase socialization,

engage themselves in altruistic behavior and show positive contribution towards humanity. This research also highlights the responsibility of educational institutions in order to identify the core stressors in student's life and support them individually to manage stress and anxiety related to their career effectively throughout their academic years.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. All the co-authors have seen and agree with the contents of manuscript and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review of any other publication.

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