Understanding and Addressing Motivational Challenges Among University Students

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Abstract: *This paper explores the intricate dynamics surrounding the motivation and perspectives of university students born after the mid-1990s (Generation Z). It brings to light the generation gap and the clash between the expectations of educators and the realities of changing student interests. The paper uncovers a new paradigm where many students lack intrinsic motivation, struggle with study commitment, and prefer easy solutions, often relying on readily available information without critical evaluation. If left unaddressed, these trends pose profound challenges to the educational system, potentially leading to a society reliant on information consumerism. Additionally, the paper examines the role of educators in adapting to these changes, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to education beyond mere knowledge transfer. Strategies to address these challenges are discussed, highlighting the importance of redefining the role of educators, cultivating intrinsic motivation and critical thinking skills, and fostering a more dynamic, effective, and supportive learning environment aided by student selection based on a genuine interest in study subjects and motivation to study.*

Keywords: *motivation; generation z; information consumerism; holistic approach;* student-centered learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Engaging students in their studies and encouraging active class participation is an enduring challenge for educators worldwide. This challenge has become even more complex in recent years due to societal shifts and evolving student preferences, particularly among Generation Z born after the mid-1990s. The educational landscape is now characterized by a generation gap, where the expectations of teachers and school programs often clash with students' changing interests and behaviors. A new paradigm is emerging, with many students lacking intrinsic motivation, perseverance, and the ability to commit to rigorous academic pursuits. This paper delves into these challenges, providing insights into the motivations and perspectives of modern students and proposing strategies to mitigate their impact on the quality of education and the development of students as independent thinkers.

1.1. The New Paradigm: Lack of Intrinsic Motivation and a Preference for Easy Solutions

A concerning trend within this generation is the apparent lack of intrinsic motivation among many students [1, 2, 3]. Many students prefer easy solutions and shortcuts, seeking quick fixes rather than investing time and effort in deep learning. Students skip classes, don't turn in assignments on time, come to exams entirely unprepared, or do not

show up, seem unmotivated, and remain passive in the classroom. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the proliferation of technology, which provides instantaneous answers to virtually any question. As a result, students may rely on platforms like ChatGPT or Gemini for answers without critically evaluating the information or engaging in independent problem-solving.

The generation gap between educators and students is evident in various aspects of academic life. Traditional teaching methods and course structures may fail to resonate with modern students' preferences and learning styles, who are digital natives accustomed to instant access to information and rapid gratification. This misalignment in expectations can lead to disengagement and apathy toward learning as students struggle to find relevance and meaning in their academic pursuits. The consequences of this shift in student behavior are far-reaching and demand immediate attention. A decline in intrinsic motivation and critical thinking skills jeopardizes education quality and undermines students' development as independent, lifelong learners. Moreover, an overreliance on external sources of information without proper evaluation fosters a culture of superficial understanding and mechanical memorization, rather than deep comprehension and analytical thinking. If left unaddressed, these trends threaten to erode the foundations of academia and perpetuate a cycle of intellectual passivity [1, 3].

In addition to these general considerations, according to several studies, this "astounding" level of disengagement was found to be (post)pandemic-related stress, depression, exhaustion, and trauma. It was found that three-quarters of college students experienced disruptions in the home, and over 90 percent of surveyed students reported that they or their families or close friends had difficulty coping with various stressors [2].

Two years of distance learning was traumatic and has damaged not only students' mental health but also their social skills and ability to adapt to traditional academic expectations [3]. Most four-year universities act as if nothing has changed and consider four or five courses a semester and all the projects and exam pre-conditions as an average load. As a result, many students suffer from cognitive overload and experience no sense of connection and urgency, view their schoolwork as futile, and feel powerless and lost [2].

Student needs and curriculum priorities constantly change, and teachers must ensure that presented content is relevant and practical. AI-led education analytics can help identify critical trends, extract key markers, and help teachers develop the most effective content that drives digital transformation.

2. WHO ARE THESE GEN-Z STUDENTS?

To effectively address motivational challenges, it is imperative to understand the perspectives and motivations of modern students. For many students born after 1995, life is characterized by a constant influx of information and stimuli, facilitated by technology and social media [4, 5]. These students spend more time on their devices than in real interactions, typically communicating with images, videos, or short cryptic messages with peers whom they do not anyhow feel close with. While technology offers unparalleled connectivity and convenience, it also poses significant challenges to forming meaningful relationships and navigating the complexities of growing up into healthy individuals within society, as they are almost entirely disconnected from normal relationships. Students may struggle to establish genuine connections with their peers and mentors. The reliance on virtual interactions and social media platforms often fosters superficial relationships, devoid of the depth and intimacy essential for emotional well-being. Moreover, constant exposure to curated images and idealized lifestyles on social media can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation, further perpetuating emotional distancing.

This generation values autonomy, creativity, and instant gratification, is eager for money, and often prioritizes (digital) experiences over material possessions. However, contrary to stereotypes of hedonism, many students also harbor a deep-seated desire for purpose, meaning, and personal fulfillment. On the other hand, they are easily distracted, are not competitive, tolerate less risk, and avoid failure in real life, making them less prone to experimenting. As such, they seem several years younger and less mature, are not very familiar with norms and expectations of (higher) education, have less life experience, require more guidance in both school-related and personal matters, and require more frequent, short and to the point feedback [6]. Consequently, they will hesitate to ask questions or talk in the class, to avoid saying the wrong thing. In addition, Gen Z students have much less reading experience and lack sustained concentration, making them (almost) unable to process traditional textbooks with hundreds of pages of engineering fundamentals. They prefer e-textbooks with short chapters, interactive figures and online courses on Coursera-like platforms with built-in quizzes and YouTube videos. In essence, they want flexible learning opportunities, a mix of independent and group work and instant gratification to keep them involved.

The updated European Digital Competence Framework DigComp 2.0 considers the knowledge, skills and values needed by 21st-century citizens and presents a matrix for understanding the core competencies required to adapt to and actively participate in the digital world. This includes both the positive side of modern technologies and the numerous negative phenomena such as misinformation and digital bullying [7]. Understanding these underlying considerations and motivations is crucial for educators seeking to connect effectively with and engage modern students.

3. STEPS TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Addressing university students' motivational challenges requires a multifaceted approach integrating pedagogical innovation, student support services, and community engagement. Educators should adapt their teaching methods and align with modern students' preferences and learning styles, incorporating technology and real-world applications to enhance relevance and engagement [8]. Innovative teaching methods such as experiential learning opportunities, project-based assignments, and collaborative activities must cater to modern students' diverse learning styles and preferences to enhance student engagement and motivation. Additionally, fostering a supportive learning environment that encourages risk-taking, experimentation, and collaboration can help cultivate intrinsic motivation and resilience in students. Furthermore, leveraging technology and multimedia resources can help make learning more interactive, dynamic, and accessible.

Universities can play a pivotal role by [3, 9]:

- **Providing strong academic advising:** Advisors can help students define clear goals, explore career options, and select courses that align with their interests.

- **Promoting active learning:** Engaging teaching methods that encourage participation, problem-solving, and real-world applications can rekindle student interest.

- **Developing time management resources:** Workshops and resources on effective time management strategies can equip students with the tools to juggle their commitments.

- **Developing a sense of community:** Creating opportunities for social interaction, peer support groups and mentorship programs can reduce feelings of isolation and increase a stronger sense of belonging.

- **Promoting mental health awareness:** Universities can offer accessible mental health services and programs to help students cope with personal challenges and maintain well-being.

Students also have a significant role to play in maintaining motivation. Here are some strategies they can adopt [10, 11]:

- **Setting SMART goals:** Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound goals provide a clear roadmap and a sense of accomplishment.

- **Developing effective study habits:** Creating a dedicated study space, establishing regular routines, and utilizing time management techniques can enhance focus and productivity.

- **Building a solid support system:** Connecting with peers, professors, or mentors can offer guidance, encouragement, and a sense of accountability.

- **Practicing self-care:** Prioritizing adequate sleep, healthy eating habits, regular exercise and sport can improve overall well-being and boost motivation.

- **Recognizing and celebrating achievements:** Acknowledging progress, no matter how small, can be a powerful motivator.

Understanding and addressing motivational challenges among university students is crucial for fostering academic success and personal growth. By employing a combination of institutional support and individual strategies, students can navigate this critical period with a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

3.1. The importance of student-centered learning

Central to addressing motivational challenges is student-centered learning, wherein the focus shifts from the teacher as the only source of knowledge to an active participant of students in the learning process [9]. This approach emphasizes personalized learning pathways, self-directed inquiry, and critical thinking skills, empowering students to take ownership of their education and lifelong learning. Empowering students is igniting the flame of self-determination within them, fostering a spirit that embraces learning for the present and a lifetime.

Considering these dynamic changes, educators' roles are adapting to better align with the needs and expectations of modern students. Rather than focusing solely on transmitting knowledge, educators should adopt a broader approach to education, emphasizing mentorship, guidance, and personal development [9]. This entails creating a supportive learning environment where students take ownership of their learning and are empowered to explore their interests and passions. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote critical thinking skills and information literacy, equipping students with the tools to evaluate the validity and reliability of sources independently. This entails incorporating media literacy education into the curriculum and allowing students to practice discernment and analysis in various contexts.

Beyond the classroom, collaboration between educators, parents, and policymakers is essential to address the systemic factors contributing to the decline in student motivation and academic performance. This may involve reevaluating educational policies, investing in teacher training programs, and advocating for holistic approaches to student development that prioritize academic achievement, social-emotional learning, and personal growth.

3.2. Personal connection with students

One important motivation booster is promoting your course and building a personal connection with students [3]. Students take courses for many reasons, including filling a schedule gap or balancing challenging courses with easier ones. Educators must explain why their course is relevant and valuable and why attendance and participation in course activities are important.

It is essential to monitor student engagement throughout the semester through surveys, group discussions, and one-on-one conversations, and consequently, to have an honest debate about the problems of disinterest with students, asking them what is going on and helping them to articulate their feelings and fears. This involves building personal relationships and connections with individual students and proactively reaching out to disengaged students, not reprimanding them but finding out what's going on and how you can help. This implies rejecting pedagogy that contributes to student alienation. In particular, teachers need to give unmotivated or alienated students a

perspective: instead of letting them fail, they need to work with them one-on-one to develop a plan to help them succeed. Suppose students must complete a research project at the end of the semester. In that case, it is essential to define milestones and steps and interact with students individually as they move through each stage [3].

One of the ways of activating students is to treat them as co-teachers and give them active roles and responsibilities in the delivery of classes: to initiate lessons, lead class discussions, and work with student teams to develop exciting classroom activities. Due to their reduced cognitive capacities, many students disengage with the Socratic questioning approach and with lectures without pauses. Team-based activities and active learning strategies work better, including inquiry, problem-solving, case studies, and debate. Going a step further, it is also essential to encourage students to work together and build strong and supportive relationships, which promotes collaborative active learning and can bridge a gap and alleviate emotional distance between students.

To engage students effectively, consider treating them as co-teachers, granting them active roles in class delivery. This can involve initiating lessons, leading discussions, and collaborating on exciting classroom activities with student teams. Traditional lectures often fail to captivate all students, particularly those with reduced cognitive capacities, who may disengage without interactive elements like pauses and Socratic questioning. Opting for team-based activities and active learning strategies, such as inquiry, problem-solving, case studies, and debates, proves more effective in fostering engagement and comprehension. Additionally, fostering collaborative relationships among students is crucial. Encouraging them to work together promotes active learning and helps bridge gaps and alleviate emotional distance, ultimately enhancing the learning environment for all.

3.3. Coping with emotional distancing in the digital age

Universities and educators play a pivotal role in facilitating emotional growth and connection among students. Beyond academic instruction, universities serve as communities where students form lasting friendships, discover their identities, and develop crucial social and emotional skills. Therefore, it is incumbent upon universities to prioritize the following initiatives to counteract emotional distancing [3, 10, 12]:

1. **Promoting Offline Interactions:** It is paramount to encourage face-to-face interactions and create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue and shared experiences. Universities can organize social events, group activities, and collaborative projects that foster genuine connections and camaraderie among students.

2. **Fostering Emotional Intelligence:** Integrating emotional intelligence training into the curriculum can help students recognize and manage their emotions effectively [11]. Through workshops, seminars, and counseling services, universities can empower students to cultivate empathy, resilience, and self-awareness—essential qualities for navigating interpersonal relationships.

3. **Creating Supportive Environments:** Establishing a supportive and inclusive campus culture is essential for nurturing emotional well-being. Universities should prioritize mental health resources, counseling services, and peer support networks to ensure students feel valued, heard, and supported in times of need.

4. **Role Modeling Healthy Behaviors:** Educators play a crucial role as mentors and role models in students' lives. By demonstrating healthy communication, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills, teachers can set a positive example for students and cultivate a culture of respect, compassion, and authenticity within the classroom and beyond.

5. **Embracing Diversity and Inclusion:** Promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance among students from various backgrounds. Encouraging open discussions and promoting cultural competency can further enhance understanding and empathy among students, reducing emotional distance and promoting a sense of unity.

In conclusion, addressing emotional distancing in the digital age requires a concerted effort from universities and educators to prioritize students' emotional well-being and interpersonal connections. By promoting offline interactions, fostering emotional intelligence, creating supportive environments, and role-modeling healthy behaviors, universities can empower students to navigate the complexities of growing up and develop into emotionally resilient and socially connected individuals within society.

3.4 Student admission: selecting students based on their academic capabilities and motivation

It would be unfair to say that only educators and universities should adapt to new student generations. Societies still need sound engineers, doctors, scientists, and specialists in many other disciplines, and becoming one still requires hard work, commitment, and ownership. Besides general end-exam results, we believe universities should also introduce a student admission process that considers students' motivation, interest in a

particular study, and willingness to commit their time and effort. Too often have we seen students engaged in, e.g., information technology studies not because they are interested in these topics but because their parents or themselves believe that it offers them an excellent financial future, despite any genuine interest and knowledge in these topics. These students are unable or unwilling to answer study requirements and disturb other students and their learning process due to their disengagement and attitude.

In other words, besides the point that educators and universities should adapt to new students, selecting the right students who can withstand the university requirements is equally valid. Besides entrance exams, Universities can consider student's motivation, interest, and commitment in a few ways to create a well-rounded admissions process [13]:

1 **Personal statements and essays:** these can be prompts that ask students to describe their academic goals, why they're interested in a specific program, or challenges they've overcome.

2 **Letters of recommendation:** teachers and mentors can write about a student's work ethic, passion for a subject, and initiative in class.

3 **Portfolios:** portfolios can showcase a student's talent and dedication to artistic or creative fields.

4 **Interviews:** motivated students will be able to articulate their goals clearly, demonstrate their knowledge of the field, and ask insightful questions about the program. Interviewers can assess students' communication skills, enthusiasm, and study commitment and how they overcome challenges: explore how students have dealt with academic or personal difficulties, showcasing their resilience and dedication.

5 **Extracurricular activities:** participation in clubs, projects, or internships related to the field of study can demonstrate a student's passion and initiative.

6 **Incorporating technology** can also enhance student engagement and participation. Utilizing interactive multimedia resources, online platforms for collaboration, and educational applications can provide students with additional avenues to participate in their learning process and stay motivated.

4. CONCLUSION

Motivating students at universities in the 21st century presents a complex and multifaceted challenge, exacerbated by the generation gap and shifting paradigms in education. It requires a nuanced understanding of student's perspectives, motivations, and preferences. The employment world is currently definitely changing because of the

influence of digitalization. By embracing innovative teaching methods, fostering a supportive learning environment, and redefining the role of educators, universities can create an engaging educational experience that resonates with modern students and empowers them to become active participants in their learning. Ultimately, by prioritizing intrinsic motivation, personal development, critical thinking skills, and student-centered learning, educators can empower students to thrive academically and prepare them to navigate an increasingly complex and dynamic world, ensuring their success as young humans. Educators can enable students to excel academically and navigate the world's ever-evolving complexities by focusing on intrinsic motivation, personal growth, honing critical thinking abilities, and adopting student-centered teaching approaches. This ensures their readiness to succeed as individuals in today's dynamic society.

The critical developmental tasks of adolescent adulthood — breaking away from the parental home, achieving a degree of emotional and financial independence, forming an identity and a sense of direction, and building more intimate interpersonal relationships — have become more difficult not only because of the lockdown and the shift to remote learning but also because of a cultural environment in which identity options have increased. The script of young adulthood has become more diverse and is far more confusing and complex today than when I was growing up. It's no wonder many students feel lost without a clearly defined roadmap or model.

The usual coping mechanisms— for young adults - playing video games, social media, drugs and alcohol, and, of course, actively participating in the online digital world— can be profoundly inappropriate and counterproductive in some instances by promoting self-isolation, fueling social anxiety, internalizing external judgments, and clouding a sense of priorities. We may react to student disengagement with annoyance, frustration, and even anger. We should not do that. Instead, please take action to re-engage your students and put them back on the path to success.

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