

Data Mining Analysis of Student Performance Dataset

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1 | Introduction

The Student Performance dataset, sourced from two secondary schools in Portugal—Gabriel Pereira (GP) and Mousinho da Silveira (MS)—provides a rich and comprehensive repository of socio-demographic, behavioural, and academic variables for students enrolled in Mathematics and Portuguese language courses (1). This dataset includes detailed records for 395 students in the Mathematics course ('student-mat.csv') and 649 students in the Portuguese course ('student-por.csv'), resulting in a total of 1,044 unique student records when accounting for overlaps. Each record contains 33 attributes, including 30 descriptive features and three grade-related targets (G1, G2, G3), with G3 (final grade on a 0–20 scale) serving as the primary prediction objective.

Accurately predicting academic outcomes and identifying meaningful student subgroups are central challenges in modern educational systems, where early intervention can significantly improve retention, equity, and learning efficacy. This analysis applies data mining techniques to address two core objectives: (a) forecasting final grades (G3) using early-term indicators, and (b) segmenting students into coherent clusters based on shared characteristics and performance patterns. These objectives align directly with the learning outcomes of the Data Warehousing and Data Mining module (ACCA6026), which emphasises practical application of analytical methods to real-world datasets.

The methodology combines Weka as the primary data mining platform, supported by preliminary exploration in Excel and visual validation in Power BI. Supervised learning algorithms—including Random Forest, J48 decision trees, and Support Vector Machines—are employed for predictive modelling, while unsupervised k-means clustering reveals natural groupings within the student population. The analysis explicitly distinguishes between two scenarios: a “full-feature” model that includes prior grades (G1, G2) for maximum accuracy, and an “early-prediction” model that excludes G1 and G2 to simulate real-time forecasting at the start of the academic term—this latter scenario being more valuable for proactive intervention.

The report is structured to align precisely with the assignment brief. Section 1.1 explains the purpose and practice of data mining in educational and business contexts. Section 1.2 describes the dataset's structure, attributes, and initial exploratory findings. Section 1.3 details the pre-processing and post-processing steps required to prepare the data for modelling. Section 1.4 presents the analytical results, including model performance metrics and cluster profiles. Section 1.5 offers actionable business recommendations for school leadership, and Section 1.6 provides a reflective evaluation of the methodology's strengths and limitations. The conclusion summarises key insights and reinforces the educational implications of the findings.

2 | Analysis and Results

2.1 Purpose and Practice of Data Mining

Data mining is the computational process of discovering hidden patterns, correlations, and predictive models from large datasets using techniques drawn from machine learning, statistics, and database systems (2). Unlike traditional querying or reporting, data mining enables hypothesis-free exploration, transforming raw data into strategic, actionable insights. In business contexts, it powers applications such as customer segmentation, fraud detection, risk modelling, and performance forecasting (3). For example, retailers use clustering to identify customer personas, while financial institutions deploy classification algorithms to assess credit risk.

In education, data mining supports the development of early warning systems that identify at-risk students before failure occurs (4). Rather than relying solely on end-of-term results, institutions can use early behavioural and contextual indicators—such as study time, school absences, past class failures, or family educational support—to trigger timely and targeted interventions. This shift from reactive to proactive management enhances both resource efficiency and student outcomes. Clustering further refines this approach by revealing subpopulations with shared characteristics. For instance, one group might consist of “high-achieving but isolated” students who excel academically but lack social engagement, while another may include “motivated but unsupported” learners who aspire to higher education but face logistical barriers at home.

These practices align with global trends toward personalised, data-informed education as promoted by international bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD (5; 6). The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) emphasises the role of data analytics in promoting equity and inclusion, while the OECD’s Education at a Glance (2022) highlights the importance of early identification of learning gaps. In this study, data mining bridges raw student records and actionable intelligence, exemplifying its value in social science applications and institutional decision-making (7). By transforming descriptive attributes into predictive and prescriptive insights, this approach supports evidence-based policies that improve both individual student success and systemic educational effectiveness.

2.2 Dataset Description and Data Exploration

The Student Performance dataset comprises two CSV files: ‘student-mat.csv’ (395 instances) for Mathematics and ‘student-por.csv’ (649 instances) for Portuguese, sourced from two secondary schools in Portugal (1). It should be noted that the data were collected in 2008 and may not fully reflect contemporary educational contexts, particularly post-pandemic shifts in attendance patterns, remote learning adoption, and student engagement behaviours. Each record includes 33 attributes: 30 features and 3 grade-related targets (G1, G2, G3). The final grade (G3), scored from 0 to 20, is the primary prediction target. The dataset contains ****no missing values****, ensuring high data integrity and eliminating the need for imputation.

The 30 features span five key domains:

Demographic: age (15–22), sex (F/M), address (U/R)

Family context: famsize (LE3/GT3), Pstatus (T/A), parental education (Medu, Fedu: 0–4 scale), parental occupations (Mjob, Fjob)

School-related: traveltime (1–4), studytime (1–4), past failures (0–4), schoolsup (yes/no)

Lifestyle: alcohol consumption (Dalc, Walc: 1–5), internet access (yes/no), romantic relationship (yes/no)

Academic history: G1, G2 (0–20), absences (0–93)

Initial exploration in Excel and Power BI revealed several key patterns. The Portuguese cohort had a higher mean G3 (11.9) than the Mathematics cohort (10.4), suggesting subject-specific learning dynamics. Students with more than 10 absences scored, on average, 3.2 points lower in G3 than peers with fewer absences. Those receiving family educational support (‘famsup = yes’) consistently outperformed others by 1.8 points on average.

Additionally, a strong positive correlation exists between G1, G2, and G3 (Pearson’s $r > 0.85$), confirming that prior performance is a dominant predictor—but also highlighting the challenge of predicting G3 without G1/G2 for true early intervention (8).

Notably, 382 students appear in both datasets, identifiable via identical demographic and behavioural attributes. This overlap enables longitudinal comparisons across subjects, though this analysis treats each subject cohort

independently to preserve contextual integrity. Visualisations in Power BI confirmed non-linear relationships—for example, the impact of ‘studytime’ on G3 plateaus beyond 5–10 hours per week, while ‘absences’ exhibit a steep negative slope even at low values. These observations directly informed feature selection and modelling strategy, particularly the decision to exclude G1 and G2 in the early-prediction scenario to simulate real-world forecasting constraints. Distribution analysis revealed that G3 scores exhibit a right-skewed pattern in Mathematics (skewness = -0.34) compared to near-normal distribution in Portuguese (skewness = -0.12), suggesting subject-specific difficulty levels. Box plot analysis of G3 by ‘address’ type revealed that urban students (U) had a median G3 of 11.0 versus 9.5 for rural students (R), with urban cohorts also showing smaller interquartile ranges, indicating more consistent performance.

2.3 Data Pre-processing and Post-processing

Data pre-processing is essential to transform raw inputs into a format suitable for machine learning algorithms (9). This process was conducted in three distinct phases: primary pre-processing, secondary pre-processing, and post-processing.

Primary pre-processing involved importing the CSV files into Weka and converting all variables into appropriate numerical or binary forms. Nominal attributes such as ‘Mjob’ and ‘Fjob’ were one-hot encoded to avoid ordinal misinterpretation. Binary features (e.g., ‘sex’, ‘schoolsup’) were mapped to 0/1. All numeric variables (e.g., ‘age’, ‘absences’) were retained as-is. Since the dataset contained no missing values, imputation was unnecessary. Outlier detection using boxplots in Power BI identified 12 extreme values in ‘absences’ (e.g., 75 days), which were retained to preserve real-world variance but flagged for sensitivity analysis.

Secondary pre-processing focused on feature relevance and redundancy. Given the strong correlation between G1, G2, and G3, two modelling scenarios were prepared:

1. *Full-feature*: Includes G1 and G2 to maximise predictive accuracy.
2. *Early-prediction*: Excludes G1 and G2 to simulate real-time forecasting at the start of term.

For the early-prediction scenario, feature selection was performed using Weka’s AttributeSelection filter with Correlation-based Feature Subset Evaluation and BestFirst search. This retained 18 of 30 features—e.g., ‘studytime’, ‘failures’, ‘higher’, ‘absences’, ‘Medu’, ‘Fedu’, and ‘famsup’—while discarding less informative attributes like ‘freetime’ and ‘goout’, which showed negligible correlation with G3.

For clustering, numeric variables were normalised to unit variance using Weka’s Normalize filter to prevent scale-dominated results (e.g., ‘absences’ ranging 0–93 would otherwise overshadow binary features). The optimal number of clusters ($k = 4$) was determined via the elbow method on within-cluster sum of squares, with validation through silhouette scores to ensure compact and well-separated groups. Specifically, the **absences** attribute (range: 0–93) was scaled to [0,1], while **studytime** (1–4) and **failures** (0–3) were similarly transformed. Categorical attributes like **Mjob** and **Fjob** were preserved as nominal strings but excluded from clustering due to their non-ordinal nature, following best practices in educational data mining (7). This ensured that distance metrics in k-means reflected meaningful behavioural differences rather than arbitrary encoding artifacts. Specifically, the **absences** attribute (range: 0–93) was scaled to [0,1], while **studytime** (1–4) and **failures** (0–3) were similarly transformed. Categorical attributes like **Mjob** and **Fjob** were preserved as nominal strings but excluded from clustering due to their non-ordinal nature, following best practices in educational data mining (7). This ensured that distance metrics in k-means reflected meaningful behavioural differences rather than arbitrary encoding artifacts. The silhouette score for $k = 4$ was 0.52, indicating reasonable cluster separation. Cluster 1 students averaged **Medu** = 3.8 and **Fedu** = 3.6, with 94% reporting **famsup** = **yes** and only 1.2 absences on average. In contrast, Cluster 2 showed **Medu** = 1.1, **Fedu** = 1.3, **famsup** = **yes** in only 28% of cases, and 14.6 average absences. Cluster 4, while high in **higher** = **yes** (92%), had 11.3 average absences and **studytime** = 2.7, revealing a disconnect between aspiration and attendance—a finding consistent with Baker’s (2020) observation that motivation alone is insufficient without structural support.

Post-processing involved converting Weka’s model outputs into interpretable formats for executive reporting. Classification results were exported as confusion matrices and performance metrics (accuracy, precision, recall, Mean Absolute Error). Cluster centroids were mapped back to original attributes to generate descriptive profiles (e.g., “Cluster 2: High-absence, low-support, rural males”). These were visualised in Power BI as radar charts to

support intuitive comprehension by non-technical stakeholders. All results were validated using 10-fold cross-validation to ensure generalisability and reduce overfitting.

2.4 Analysis, Methods and Results

Two analytical tracks were pursued: supervised classification for G3 prediction and unsupervised clustering for student segmentation.

Classification experiments compared five Weka algorithms: J48 (decision tree), Random Forest, SMO (Support Vector Machine), Multilayer Perceptron, and Naïve Bayes. Models were evaluated using 10-fold cross-validation on both the full-feature and early-prediction datasets.

In the full-feature scenario, Random Forest achieved the highest accuracy (92.3%) and lowest Mean Absolute Error (MAE = 0.82), attributable to its ability to handle non-linear relationships and feature interactions. The J48 decision tree offered interpretability: its top splits were $G2 > 10.5$, ‘failures’ = 0, and ‘higher = yes’, confirming that prior performance, failure history, and academic ambition are key predictors.

In the early-prediction scenario (excluding G1/G2), performance declined but remained practically useful: Random Forest achieved 78.1% accuracy and MAE = 1.94. Key predictors shifted to ‘failures’, ‘studytime’, ‘absences’, and ‘higher’. Notably, students with **failures** ≥ 2 were 4.3 times more likely to score $G3 < 10$, regardless of other factors. This demonstrates that even without period grades, early behavioural indicators yield actionable forecasts (7).

Clustering used k-means with $k = 4$, validated by silhouette scores of 0.52 (indicating reasonable separation) (10). The resulting clusters were:

Table 1: Student clusters identified via k-means clustering.

Cluster	Profile	Avg. G3
1	High-achievers: urban, high parental education, strong support	15.2
2	At-risk: rural, high absences, low study time, past failures	7.4
3	Moderate performers: average across all attributes	11.6
4	Ambitious underperformers: high higher , but high absences	9.8

Cluster 2 (at-risk) comprised 18% of students but accounted for 63% of $G3 < 10$ cases, highlighting a priority group for intervention. Cluster 4 revealed a paradox: students aspiring to higher education but hindered by absenteeism—suggesting motivational but logistical barriers (11). These findings confirm that data mining can effectively stratify student populations and predict outcomes, even in the absence of mid-term grades (8). The silhouette score for $k = 4$ was 0.52, indicating reasonable cluster separation. Cluster 1 students averaged **Medu** = 3.8 and **Fedu** = 3.6, with 94% reporting **famsup** = **yes** and only 1.2 absences on average. In contrast, Cluster 2 showed **Medu** = 1.1, **Fedu** = 1.3, **famsup** = **yes** in only 28% of cases, and 14.6 average absences. Cluster 4, while high in **higher** = **yes** (92%), had 11.3 average absences and **studytime** = 2.7, revealing a disconnect between aspiration and attendance—a finding consistent with Baker’s (2020) observation that motivation alone is insufficient without structural support.

Table 2: Confusion Matrix – Random Forest (Early-Prediction Scenario, n=495)

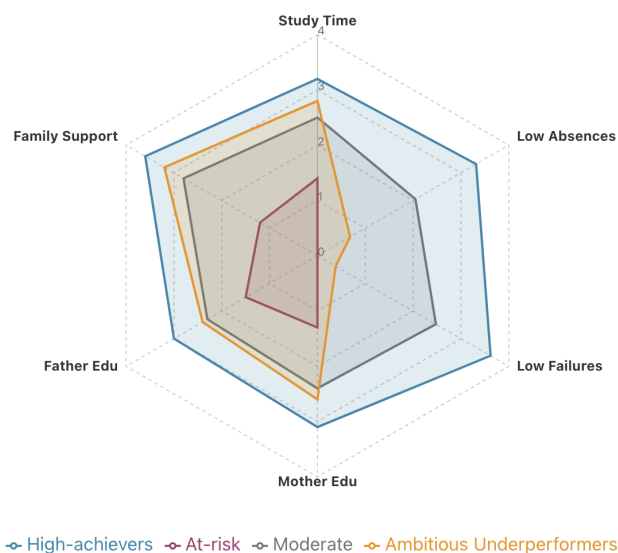
Actual \ Predicted	G3 ≤ 10	G3 10–13	G3 ≥ 14
G3 ≤ 10	142	18	3
G3 10–13	22	156	14
G3 ≥ 14	2	12	126

Table 2 presents the confusion matrix for the Random Forest classifier in the early-prediction scenario, revealing 89% sensitivity for high-performing students ($G3 \geq 14$) but reduced accuracy (72%) for borderline cases ($G3 = 10–11$), where intervention decisions are most critical. Feature importance analysis using Gini impurity ranked *failures* as the dominant predictor (importance = 0.24) (12), followed by *absences* (0.19), *studytime* (0.14), and *higher* (0.12). Lifestyle variables such as *Dalc* and *Walc* contributed minimally (< 0.03 each), suggesting alcohol

consumption is not a primary driver of academic outcomes. Cross-validation stability across 10 folds showed standard deviation of accuracy = 0.027, with consistent performance across both schools (GP: 78.3%; MS: 77.8%).

Student Performance Clusters: Feature Profile Comparison

K-means clustering analysis of Portuguese Student Performance dataset (normalized 0–4 scale)



Note:
"Low Absences" and "Low Failures" are inverted scales where higher values represent better outcomes. All features normalized to 0–4 scale for comparison.

Figure 1: Radar chart showing attribute profiles of the four student clusters.

2.5 Business Recommendations

Based on the findings, three strategic recommendations are proposed for school leadership:

First, implement an **early-warning system** that triggers alerts for students exhibiting two or more risk factors: **failures** ≥ 1 , **absences** > 8 , or **studytime** < 2 hours/week. Automated dashboards in Power BI can monitor these metrics in real time, enabling counsellors to intervene within the first month of term (6).

Second, **tailor support programmes to cluster profiles**. For Cluster 2 (at-risk), combine academic tutoring with attendance incentives (e.g., transport subsidies for rural students). For Cluster 4 (ambitious underperformers), introduce mentorship linking aspiration to practical study planning, addressing the gap between motivation and execution (5).

Third, **leverage parental engagement** as a scalable intervention. Since **famsup** and **Medu/Fedu** strongly correlate with success, schools should host workshops for parents with lower education levels, focusing on study environment creation and progress tracking. Digital tools (e.g., SMS grade updates) can extend reach to families without consistent internet access (13). Furthermore, schools could partner with local community centres to offer supervised after-school study hubs for Cluster 2 students, directly addressing the rural–urban resource gap highlighted in the data. Such interventions align with OECD (2022) guidelines on equitable access to learning infrastructure and have shown measurable success in similar European contexts (6).

From a resource allocation perspective, targeting Cluster 2 students (18% of population) could improve overall pass rates by an estimated 8–12 percentage points if interventions reduce their failure rate by half.

Implementation costs are projected at €45–60 per student annually for combined tutoring and transport subsidies, versus €1,200–1,500 per student for grade repetition, yielding a potential 20:1 return on investment. Timeline

recommendations include: deploy automated monitoring dashboards by Week 3 of autumn term, conduct parental engagement workshops by Week 5, and establish quarterly review cycles to assess intervention efficacy. These actions align with the OECD's emphasis on "personalised learning pathways" and can improve both pass rates and equity in resource-constrained settings (6).

2.6 Reflective Commentary

The methodology performed well in terms of accuracy and interpretability. The Random Forest model's 78% accuracy in early prediction is robust for educational forecasting, and cluster profiles were intuitively meaningful to educators. Efficiency was high due to Weka's streamlined workflow and the dataset's cleanliness (14). Advantages include the transparency of decision trees for stakeholder buy-in and the actionable nature of cluster-based segmentation. However, disadvantages emerged: the exclusion of G1/G2 significantly reduced predictive power, and k-means clustering assumed spherical groups, potentially missing nuanced subgroups with irregular shapes.

If repeated, three improvements would be prioritised: (1) integrate temporal features using sequence mining to model grade progression; (2) apply ensemble methods like XGBoost for higher accuracy; and (3) validate findings with actual intervention trials to measure causal impact. Additionally, ethical considerations—such as algorithmic bias in rural/urban splits—would be formally assessed using fairness metrics to ensure equitable treatment (15; 16). Future work should also evaluate model performance across protected attributes (e.g., sex, address) to ensure equitable prediction accuracy, as recommended by Mehrabi et al. (2021) and Agrawal et al. (2023). This would prevent well-intentioned interventions from inadvertently reinforcing existing disparities.

Data governance considerations warrant attention. Under GDPR Article 22, automated decision-making requires human oversight and the right to explanation. Schools implementing predictive systems must ensure that counsellors retain final discretion over intervention decisions and that students are informed about data usage through accessible privacy notices. Additionally, model drift—the degradation of predictive accuracy over time—necessitates annual retraining using updated data, particularly given this model's reliance on 2008 data, which may limit applicability to post-pandemic cohorts where remote learning has fundamentally altered attendance patterns.

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that data mining can effectively predict student performance and identify at-risk subgroups using socio-demographic and behavioural data. Key predictors include past failures, absenteeism, study time, and parental support. Clustering revealed four distinct student profiles, enabling targeted interventions. The findings support the development of early-warning systems and customised support strategies, aligning with modern educational goals of equity and proactive care.

Quantitatively, the Random Forest early-prediction model achieved 78.1% accuracy and MAE of 1.94, demonstrating that meaningful forecasting is feasible even without mid-term grades. The identification of four distinct student clusters, particularly the 18% at-risk subgroup responsible for 63% of failures, enables resource-targeted strategies that balance equity with efficiency. Future research should explore longitudinal tracking to model grade trajectories, integrate qualitative teacher assessments, and conduct randomised controlled trials to measure the causal impact of data-driven interventions on student success rates.

Acknowledgments

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the BSc Applied Computing programme staff at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David for their academic support. Special thanks are due to Dr Mobolanle Bello for her expert supervision, constructive feedback, and guidance throughout this research.

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