

## Qualitative Report: Factors affecting motivation

### Abstract

This report is based around the subject of motivation, primarily in relation to students and their motivation towards their university journey; recent studies, such as the 'Self Determination Theory' (Ryan & Deci, 2020), have indicated that due to basic internal and external factors, motivation level will rise while striving to obtain a personal goal. We will be discussing how this experiment was created; involving a step by step process of the method chosen to carry out this experimental focus group; including 4 main participants. Outlining the key themes identified from the participants conversation, was crucial to analyse the findings; the results, containing quotes from the transcript taken from the duration of the focus group, suggest that numerous factors towards motivation are vital in a student's learning process. Thus, ending in the discussion; suggesting that the answer to the question found in the introduction, is not as straightforward, as it presents differently pertaining to each separate individual.

### Introduction

Having a reason to drive us to complete our goals is an internal feeling all individual's experience; stimulating the continuation of effort towards said goals, pushing us to do our best. Otherwise known as motivation, this state influences our mindset in a positive way to ensure we behave at the highest capability we can produce, to then achieve any desired outcome we may hold. The reasons that drive our motivation, whether intrinsic; 'Technically intrinsic motivation pertains to activities done "for their own sake," or for their inherent interest and enjoyment' (Deci & Ryan, 2000), or extrinsic; external factors that influence our actions, make said desire more achievable to all individuals; a theory relative to this subject was that of the 'Self Determination Theory' (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This theory suggests that every individual has three particular basic needs to mentally stimulate their motivation levels; autonomy, relatedness and competence. To arouse motivational behaviour, an individual must feel as though they have willingly chosen to partake in the particular direction that's been taken, to feel as though they belong or 'fit in' with society and the current rules of society, also, have the experience and skill set to partake in said activity. 'Thwarting of any of these three basic needs is seen as damaging to motivation and wellness.' (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In recent years, studies have been performed in relation to the connection between students, and their motivation towards education, one specific study had closely examined the correlation between motivation and adult learners; the study suggested that adult learner's main motivation was that of extrinsic influence, 'If an instructor places significant barriers to student success, student desire to succeed may suffer', 'The results of this survey reveal that teachers play a very important role in the success of their students'. (Green & Kelso, 2006). Another qualitative study I have examined was conducted to explore what factors may affect levels of motivation in students; though it had its limitations, it suggests that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors were both crucial to elevate motivation levels, 'In their study, Nabavi and Asgarian reported that the motivation for learning was a phenomenon influenced by the environment and factors such as psychological characteristics, personal desires, interest in the major, educational equipment, and surrounding stimulants' (Allahqoli et al., 2019). These studies have influenced this experiment to take place, to answer the follow question; what factors have an influence on university students' motivation to apply for, and maintain engagement with, a university degree programme?

## Method

### **Participants**

There were four participants that took part in the study; two male and two female. All participants were university students and ranged in age between 20 and 45. Participants were selected to take part in the study based upon the provision of interest noted by a group of university applicants during their stage of application over the previous two years. Email communication was sent including a brief outline of the purpose of the study and the focus group was arranged. Of those who had responded and were interested in taking part in this study, the four participants outlined above were those that were able to attend on the date and time, and at the location of the focus group.

### **Data Collection**

A semi-structured interview schedule was created by the researcher that aimed to explore motivation in university students. Ten open-ended questions were developed with some additional prompts included to elicit specific examples from participants. The interview schedule was used to conduct one 60-minute focus group with the four participants which was audio recorded. Following completion of the focus group, the researcher transcribed the information provided by participants verbatim to use for data analysis. Participants names were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in the final report, and any identifying information within the final transcript was removed or replaced with another pseudonym to further ensure no participants could be identified from any quotes used. The final transcript was provided to students to analyse for the purpose of a second-year research report.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method to analyse the focus group conducted for this study to identify patterns/themes within the data. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework were followed to analyse the data. First, the transcript was read through multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Next, comments and initial codes were noted in the margin to reduce large excerpts of data to smaller, meaningful codes, followed by an attempt to search for patterns from the codes and notes developed to develop themes. Single statements were reviewed regarding their relevance, to critically review if it was only one person's opinion or an opinion in general among/across the participants. The fourth stage involved reviewing and modifying the preliminary themes and memoing/cutting and pasting of data to support the themes being developed. At this stage, data that was proposed to relate to each of the themes was considered to decide whether the data really did support that theme. The fifth and final phase related to analysis involved defining themes and constructing a final list of themes and associated sub-themes.

## Results

A thematic analysis was conducted on the focus group transcript. Three key themes were developed, and these can be seen in Table 1. As can be seen, there were three key themes that were identified, however for the purpose of this report, the first two (internal and external motivators) will be interpreted in detail.

**Table 1.***Themes and Sub-Themes with Illustrative Quotes*

| Theme                    | Sub-theme           | Quote                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Internal Motivators      | Self-esteem         | "It's like it feels a bit of an honour to go to uni to be honest" (Mark lines 252-253)                                                      |
|                          | Competence          | 'They want me to submit all three essays online and I ain't got a bloody clue half the time' (Mark lines 61-62)                             |
|                          | End goals           | 'my goal, career wise, would be to go into either forensic psychology or potentially work with young offenders.' (Emily lines 192-193)      |
| External motivators      | Life influence      | 'my dad is definitely my main motivator' (Alex line 571)                                                                                    |
|                          | Lecturers           | 'his passion for it made me really excited to go in each week and learn about more stuff' (Emily lines 342-343)                             |
| Environmental motivators | Campus              | 'I quite like my campus.' (Emily line 284)                                                                                                  |
|                          | Social interactions | 'I can get through even things I don't particularly enjoy when they're there because it just makes it a bit more fun.' (Alex lines 665-666) |

**Theme 1: Internal Motivators**

The first theme was internal motivators. This theme was developed based upon the four participants talk regarding the things that motivate them to attend university that are directly related to their own enjoyment or future aspirations. Three sub-themes were generated; Self-esteem, competence, and end goals.

**Sub-theme 1: Self-esteem**

Talk of self-esteem was present in all four participants speech throughout the focus group, but the focus of their talk was slightly different. Mark explained that he felt it was "a bit of an honour to go to uni to be honest" (lines 252-253). This suggests that Mark doesn't feel like he belongs in university, perhaps due to always having worked in the construction industry and having less educational experiences. He also says that he "didn't really think there was much point as I'd never

get in" (line 488) when referring to his application for university. Mark appears to be stating that he does not feel competent enough to attend university.

On the other hand, the three other participants seemed to possess a highly level of self-esteem; Alex openly stated at the beginning of the focus group that 'I'm alright with computers' (lines 54-55), 'yeah I've had to teach my dad a few things.' (line 64), suggesting that he had the capability to teach his father skills he is trained at well. Sarah also shows that she is optimistic in regards to herself, 'to show my girls that, like, I can do it' (line 107), this suggests that she acknowledges that she is capable of obtaining a degree on her own, while also being a mother. Emily briefly explained work experience background, during which she indicated a lack of self-esteem was present previously 'wasn't quite in the place where I felt that I had anything to give' (line 526); although she may have struggled with self-esteem, during the focus group, there were no indications this was the case at present.

### ***Sub-theme 2: Competence***

In relation to the follow sub theme, competence was also present; not all participants mentioned whether they had the capability of producing all that is expected to attain a degree at university. Not all comments made were directly at their competence, though it was clear this was relative to create said theme; Mark was quick to mention his struggles with certain aspects of the course, 'They want me to submit all three essays online and I ain't got a bloody clue half the time' (lines 61-62), suggesting he doesn't have all the knowledge that the university is expecting from him. Alex was also quick to mention his skills with computers early into the focus group, 'I'm alright with computers.' (lines 54-55), 'I did ICT at a-level' (line 55), presenting that he has partaken in recent courses to gain knowledge, also complimenting himself in relation to his chosen subject.

### ***Sub-theme 3: End goals***

Overall, the four participants each referred to their own internal reasons for applying to, or continuing to attend, university, with a particular focus placed upon their lack of self-esteem, in the most part, their level of competence to achieve the best they could, and significant mention of career aspirations and how they would meet their end goals.

## **Theme 2: External Motivators**

The second theme was that of external motivators; this theme was apparently important due to the results from the focus group, as well as results from the literature previously discussed in relation to motivation from students and their education. The two sub themes generated; life influence and lecturers.

### ***Sub-theme 1: Life influence***

Most of the participants depicted that life influence was extremely relevant to their motivation of education, participant Mark openly discussed how an accident at work, that severely injured him, forced him to change career paths, 'I got injured at work – quite badly, obviously so that sorta out of the picture to go back into manual labour work now.' (lines 83-84) suggesting that due to his circumstance, he is now motivated to attend university to create a new opportunity for himself and his family. Participant Sarah discussed that family was her main motivator for education, 'to show my girls that, like, I can do it' (line 107), 'I want to set an example for them and do better for them and their futures.' (lines 118-119), 'I can give my girls a comfortable life. And that's basically it.' (lines 598-599). Though Alex' motivation was partly autonomy, a parental figure was a large reason for his attendance in university; 'Yeah, I guess my dad is probably the main reason I went to university in

the first place' (lines 565-566), 'my dad is definitely my main motivator' (line 571), though Alex chose which subject he wanted to study, his father primarily indicated for his son to pursue a degree.

### ***Sub-theme 2: Lecturers***

The subject of lecturers seemed important to most who attended the focus group, in a positive way; it seemed vital for the participants to personally like those who were teaching them during lectures, to retain their motivation to continue attending lectures. Emily shared a positive experience due to a particular lecturer, 'his passion for it made me really excited to go in each week and learn about more stuff' (lines 342-343), Sarah also shared a positive memory due to the efforts from her teacher, 'it was really interactive' (line 394), suggesting the lecturer catering to the student's need of excitement seemed effective for Sarah. Alex also suggested that the lecturer of his subject helped him stay motivated through a 'boring' topic, 'honestly it's really boring, it takes a long time. But the lecturer was just... I dunno – cool?' (lines 429-430).

Overall, all participants suggested that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators played a part in each of their motivation to wanting to achieve a degree in university.

### **Discussion**

The results attained from the discussion, that took place during the focus group, indicated that internal and external influence both seemed vital to each individual in regards to their motivation towards their university journey; given the many quotes presented, depending on the individual, everyone had a primarily key motivator, yet it was not possible to identify whether internal influence was more present than external. Suggesting that the answer to the question, 'what factors have an effect on university student's motivation?', is that there are numerous reasons that affect an individual's mental drive, in relation to university attendance, and it varies, depending on the person's characteristics and their personal life circumstance.

### **Reference List**

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- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation from a self-determination Theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and Future Directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>

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[https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000\\_RyanDeci\\_SDT.pdf](https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/SDT/documents/2000_RyanDeci_SDT.pdf)

## Appendices

Appendix A – Consent form

Appendix B – Interview Schedule

Appendix C – Debrief form

Appendix D – Fully annotated focus group transcript

Appendix E – Table of themes

| Theme                    | Sub-theme | Quote |
|--------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Internal Motivators      |           |       |
|                          |           |       |
|                          |           |       |
| External motivators      |           |       |
|                          |           |       |
| Environmental motivators |           |       |
|                          |           |       |