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Academic Self-Concept among University Students

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مفهوم الذات الأكاديمي لدى طلاب الجامعات

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Abstract
This study is carried out among English students in University of Elmergib, Faculty of Arts, Khoms, Libya. This study examined students' academic self-concept in relation to academic confidence and academic effort. Data were collected using the 20-item Academic Self-Concept Scale by Liu and Wang (2005). The questionnaire results were analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. Responses were organized into themes to summarize patterns across the two domains. The reported percentages are based on a sample of 80 students. The findings indicate a mixed pattern of academic self-concept. In the academic confidence domain, most students reported being able to follow lectures easily and agreed that working hard could help them achieve better grades. However, half of participating students disagreed that they were good in most subjects, and they could do better than their friends in most subjects. On the other hand, 59% reported feeling frightened when asked a question by a lecturer and 64% reported daydreaming during lectures. Most students agreed that they waited for lectures to end, and 61% often thought about quitting their course. Students generally reported some confidence in improving through effort and a strong intention to pass their subjects, but these positive responses coexisted with concerns about classroom engagement, anxiety, and persistence. The findings suggest that supportive teaching, active learning, academic skills support, and accessible student guidance may be valuable.

Keywords: Academic self-concept, Academic confidence, Academic effort, Descriptive analysis.

الملخص
أُجريت هذه الدراسة على طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة المرقب، كلية الآداب، بمدينة الخمس في ليبيا. تناولت هذه الدراسة مفهوم الذات الأكاديمي لدى الطلاب وعلاقته بالثقة الأكاديمية والجهد الأكاديمي. جُمعت البيانات باستخدام "مقياس مفهوم الذات الأكاديمي" المكون من 20 بنداً، والذي وضعه ليو ووانغ (Liu and Wang, 2005). حُللت نتائج الاستبيان تحليلاً وصفياً بحساب التكرارات والنسب المئوية، وصُنفت الاستجابات في محاور لتلخيص الأنماط عبر المجالين المذكورين. تستند النتائج والنسب المئوية المذكورة إلى عينة مكونة من 80 طالباً. تشير النتائج إلى وجود نمط متباين لمفهوم الذات الأكاديمي؛ ففي مجال الثقة الأكاديمية، أفاد معظم الطلاب بقدرتهم على متابعة المحاضرات بسهولة، وأقروا بأن بذل الجهد قد يساعدهم في تحقيق درجات أفضل. ومع ذلك، رأى نصف الطلاب المشاركين أنهم ليسوا متميزين في معظم المواد الدراسية، ولا يعتقدون أنهم قادرون على التفوق على أقرانهم في تلك المواد. ومن ناحية أخرى، ذكر 59% من الطلاب أنهم يشعرون بالخوف عند توجيه سؤال لهم من قِبل المحاضر، بينما أشار 64% منهم إلى أنهم يسرحون بأفكارهم أثناء المحاضرات. كما أبدى معظم الطلاب رغبتهم في انتهاء المحاضرات، وأفاد 61% منهم بأنهم يفكرون غالباً في ترك الدراسة. وبشكل عام، أظهر الطلاب قدراً من الثقة في إمكانية التحسن من خلال بذل الجهد، مع وجود نية قوية لاجتياز المواد الدراسية؛ إلا أن هذه الاستجابات الإيجابية ترافقت مع مخاوف تتعلق بالمشاركة داخل القاعة الدراسية، والقلق، والمثابرة. وتشير النتائج إلى أهمية توفير بيئة تعليمية داعمة، واعتماد أساليب التعلم النشط، وتقديم الدعم في المهارات الأكاديمية، وتوفير خدمات التوجيه والإرشاد الطلابي.

الكلمات المفتاحية : مفهوم الذات الأكاديمي، الثقة الأكاديمية، الجهد الأكاديمي، الطلاب، التحليل الوصفي.

Introduction

Self-concept is essential in humanities studies. The Cambridge Dictionary (2026) of the English Language defines self-concept as the way one wants to be seen by other people, or how one would like to see themselves. According to Marsh & Martin, 2011, the academic self-concept is the individual's self-perceived ability, competence, and confidence in academic domains, formed through experience with and interpretations of one's academic environment. It is not only a matter of actual achievement but a multidimensional, hierarchically structured belief system where a general academic self-concept branches into increasingly specific domain self-concepts, for instance math self-concept and verbal self-concept. Furthermore, Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976, viewed academic self-concept as a person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of one's

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environment. It is influenced especially by evaluations by significant others, reinforcements, and attributions for one's own behavior. Furthermore, Shavelson and Bolus (1982) operationalized the general definition of self-concept into one's perceptions of his/her capability in different areas. Academic self-concept is referred to as students' perceptions about their level of competencies within an academic circle (Ferla, Valcke, & Cai, 2009; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Meanwhile, Bong and Skaalvik (2003) defined academic self-concept as the degree of an individual's perception of his or her own proficiency in academic subjects. Similarly, Bracken (2009), Diperna and Elliot (1999), Trautwein, Ludtke, Marsh, Koller, and Baumert (2006), all agreed that competency perception was a key aspect of academic self-concept. On the other hand, some researchers also looked at students' enjoyment and willingness to work hard on their academic subjects when assessing students' academic self-concept questionnaires. similarly, Guay, Marsh, & Boivin (2003) stated that academic self-concept was how students do their assignment or feel about themselves as learners. In this study, the academic self-concept is defined as students' perceived academic competence, commitment, involvement and enthusiasm in their studies.

This study is carried out among English students in University of Elmergib to investigate the level of academic self-concept (academic confidence and academic effort) among the pre diploma students, and whether there is any gender difference in the academic self-concept.

The study intends to seek the answers to these questions:

1. What are the levels of academic self-concept (academic confidence and academic effort) among the pre diploma students?
2. Is there any significant difference in academic self-concept (academic effort and academic confidence)?

Furthermore, this study is hoped to assist lecturers, educators, and administrators to sufficiently prepare the students with more positive academic self-concept. The study would also provide important suggestions to students on academic self-concept and also serve as a guide for future research.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Academic Self-Concept

Academic self-concept is best defined as students' perception of their own competence in the academic domain, formed through experience and through the way they interpret their learning environment (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Matovu, 2014). In other words, it is how students feel about themselves as learners. There are three main areas of academic self-concepts. First, academic self-concept versus self-esteem. Marsh and Craven (2006) claim that academic achievement is substantially linked to academic self-concept but almost unrelated to global self-esteem, which is why domain-specific measures are preferred in educational research. Second, academic self-concept versus self-efficacy. Bong and Skaalvik (2003) state that the two constructs share a focus on perceived competence, draw on similar information sources such as mastery experience and social comparison, and are both domain-specific and multidimensional. Bong and Clark (1999) add that self-concept carries both cognitive and affective responses and is heavily shaped by social comparison, whereas self-efficacy is mainly a cognitive judgement of capability against mastery criteria. Third, Competence versus effort. Some instruments, including the Liu and Wang (2005) scale used in this study, consider perceived effort as part of academic self-concept alongside confidence in one's ability. Matovu (2014) found that academic confidence and academic effort both contribute to the overall construct, so results are best read at both the total and subscale levels.

Academic self-concept is one of the important components of academic motivation research studies (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, and Litalien, 2010; Isiksal, 2010; Marsh, 2006; van der Berg and Coetzee, 2014). The aim of enhancing a positive academic self-concept is one of the approaches in attaining students' success. Isiksal (2010), Sikhwari (2014) and Guay et.al (2010) found that students who had higher level of academic self-concept had higher grades because their academic self-concept enabled them to be more self-determined and motivated. This review advocates an investigation of the level of academic self-concept among English students at a university, measured with the scale developed by Liu and Wang (2005). It first clarifies the construct and separates it from related ones, then outlines the main theoretical models, summarises research on academic self-concept in English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) settings, describes the Liu and Wang instrument and its later validation, and reviews evidence on achievement, and level of study.

Recent studies had linked academic self-concept to academic achievement, and research results had noted the correlation of a high academic self-concept with high achievements (Sikhwari, 2014; van den Berg & Coetzee, 2014; Iroegbu, 2013; Marsh, Trautwein, Ludtke, Koller, & Baumert, 2005). In addition, Rodriguez (2009) stated that academic self-concept played a vital role in learning and determines students' motivational direction. However, there has been no conclusive proof whether academic self-concept influences academic achievement or vice versa (Marsh et al., 2005).

In several studies, gender has been emphasized to influence academic self-concept and academic achievement. Significant research has indicated that gender plays a part in the student academic achievement. It has been reported that female students were more likely than males to have a low academic self-concept (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002; Marsh, 1989, Young & Mroczek, 2003 and Wigfield, Eccles, MacIver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). On the other hand, different studies have also argued that males tend to have higher academic self-perceptions in science courses while females have higher academic self-perceptions in non-science course (Harter, 1999; Marsh,

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1989, Hedges & Newill, 1999). Moreover, some studies indicated that gender differences are generally small or non-existent. A study by Meece and Jones (1996) which examined the fifth and sixth-grade students enrolled in a science subject revealed that no gender differences in students' standardized test scores. In addition, Hossaini (2002) found out that gender did not influence academic self-concept.

Academic Self-Concept in Language Learning and EFL Contexts

There are a number of studies that investigated language-learner self-concept. Mercer (2011) applies the idea to language learning and treats it as learners' views of their own capabilities and skills, a construct that can shift over time rather than a fixed trait In another study, Mercer (2011b) engages psychology and applied linguistics in a study of tertiary-level EFL learners and finds that learners' self-beliefs develop and affect their progress. She claims that foreign-language self-concept is complex and changeable (Mercer, 2011). Similarly recent studies with university EFL students show a consistent direction on achievement. Zhou and Kaur (2026) asked 364 undergraduates at a private university in southern China. Academic self-concept predicted both academic buoyancy and English language achievement, and buoyancy partly mediated the link to achievement. Asadzadeh Maleki et al. (2021) investigated 218 Iranian EFL university learners and found that academic self-concept, together with classroom learning, contributed to achievement, with self-concept playing a mediating role.

Generally, literature suggests that English students' self-concept is closely connected to anxiety, emotion and peer comparison.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative, descriptive survey design to determine the level of academic self-concept among English students at Elmergib University. A descriptive survey suits the aim because it measures a psychological attribute as it currently exists in a defined group, without manipulating any variable. Data were gathered once, through a self-report questionnaire, so the design is also cross-sectional. The study seeks to answer two questions: (1) What is the overall level of academic self-concept among the English students? (2) What are their levels of academic confidence and academic effort, the two components of the construct?

Participants and Setting

The participants were 80 students enrolled in the English programme of the Faculty of Arts – Khoms. The data were collected in the academic year of 2025-2026. Participants were 8 male and 72 female students, aged 18-23, in year levels 2-4. Participation was voluntary, and only students who completed the questionnaire were included in the analysis.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

Academic self-concept was measured with the Academic Self-Concept Scale developed by Liu and Wang (2005). The scale was first used with secondary school students in Singapore and has since been applied to university students (Matovu, 2012, 2014). It has 20 items divided equally between two subscales. Respondents rate each statement on a [5-point] Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to [5] (strongly agree). Data were collected from 80 students in the faculty of Arts in Khoms, and a written permission to conduct the study, explaining its purpose and the questionnaire content was obtained from the head of department. Lecturers were asked to release about 15–20 minutes of a class session, so the questionnaire could be administered. The researcher explained the purpose of the study, stated that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and told students there were no right or wrong answers and that responses would not affect their grades. Students completed the questionnaire individually in class and were encouraged to answer honestly. Responses were coded and organised so feedback from the questionnaire can explained statistically in numbers and percentages.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout, participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, and their right to decline or withdraw at any point without any consequences. Completing the questionnaire was taken as informed consent. No names or student numbers were collected, so responses are anonymous, and the data were used only for this research. Results are reported for the group as a whole, and no individual or class can be identified.

Techniques of Data Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in numbers and percentages. For the total scale and each subscale, the mean and standard deviation were calculated. The number and percentage of students falling into each level (low, moderate, high) were then reported, which answers the research questions on the level of academic self-concept, academic confidence and academic effort.

Findings and Discussions

Thematic analysis of academic self-concept

The questionnaire contains responses from 80 students to 20 items from the Academic Self-Concept Scale by Liu and Wang (2005). The findings below group the closed-ended items into interpretive themes. Because the data are

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Likert-type counts and percentages, this is best described as a thematic presentation of descriptive quantitative results, rather than qualitative thematic analysis of interview or open-text data. Percentages are reported as shown in the questionnaire; small differences from 100% may reflect rounding. For clarity, "agreement" combines Agree and Strongly Agree, and "disagreement" combines Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Item wording is retained because some statements are negatively phrased.

Confidence in Understanding and Improving Academically

Responses suggest confidence in following lectures and improving grades through effort. For the statement "I can follow the lecture easily," 64 students (81%) agreed, compared with 11 (14%) who disagreed and 5 (6%) who were uncertain. Similarly, 54 students (69%) agreed that working hard could help them obtain a better grade; 16 (19%) disagreed and 10 (12%) were uncertain. Together, these results indicate that most respondents perceived lecture comprehension and effort-related improvement positively.

However, confidence in broader academic ability was less evident. For example, "I am good in most of my subjects," 43 students (54%) disagreed, while 25 (31%) agreed and 12 (15%) were uncertain. Likewise, 51 students (64%) disagreed that they could do better than their friends in most subjects; 23 (29%) agreed and 6 (7%) were uncertain.

Table (1): Academic Self-Concept among University Students

A	ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE	Disagreement				Agreement				Uncertain	
		DA		SDA		A		SA		UN	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	I can follow the lecture easily	5	6%	6	8%	27	34%	37	47%	5	6%
2	I am able to help my friends in their assignment.	39	48%	20	25%	11	14%	6	8%	4	5%
3	If I work hard, I think I can get better grade	10	12%	6	7%	14	18%	40	51%	10	12%
4	Most of my friends are smarter than I am	34	42%	15	19%	18	22%	7	9%	6	8%
5	My lecturers feel that I am poor in my studies.	24	30%	15	19%	9	11%	4	5%	28	35%
6	I often forget what I have learned	38	48%	14	17%	10	13%	6	7%	12	15%
7	I get frightened when I am asked a question by the lecturer	8	10%	17	21%	22	28%	25	31%	8	10%
8	I am good in most of my subjects.	29	36%	14	18%	13	16%	12	15%	12	15%
9	I always do poorly in exercises/assignment/tests	42	52%	17	21%	3	4%	7	9%	11	14%
10	I am able to do better than my friends in most subjects	35	44%	16	20%	10	12%	13	17%	6	7%
B	**ACADEMIC EFFORT**										
11	I daydream a lot in lectures	15	19%	9	11%	31	39%	20	25%	5	6%
12	I often do my assignment without thinking	20	25%	14	17%	25	31%	15	19%	6	8%
13	I pay attention to the lecturers during lectures	23	29%	10	12%	18	23%	13	16%	16	20%
14	I study hard for my tests	14	18%	6	8%	33	41%	16	20%	11	13%
15	I am usually interested in my work	11	14%	13	16%	26	33%	24	30%	6	7%
16	I will do my best to pass all the subjects for this semester	10	13%	8	9%	35	44%	17	21%	10	13%
17	I often feel like quitting the pre diploma programme	15	19%	9	11%	31	39%	18	22%	7	9%

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A	ACADEMIC CONFIDENCE	Disagreement				Agreement				Uncertain	
		DA		SDA		A		SA		UN	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
18	I am always waiting for the lecture to end and go home	6	7%	7	9%	36	46%	19	23%	12	15%
19	I do not give up easily when I am faced with difficult question in my assignment/exercise	19	23%	6	8%	26	33%	15	19%	14	17%
20	I am not willing to put in more effort in my exercise/assignment	12	15%	10	13%	29	36%	23	29%	6	7%

Thus, students appeared more confident about understanding lectures and improving with effort than about being capable relative to peers or successful across most subjects.

Academic Competence, Comparison, and Perceived Evaluation

Responses to statements about academic competence were mixed, with several items indicating comparatively low self-evaluation. A majority—59 students (73%)—disagreed with the negative statement "I always do poorly in exercises/assignment/tests," while 10 (13%) agreed and 11 (14%) were uncertain. Also, 49 students (61%) disagreed that most of their friends were smarter than they were; 25 (31%) agreed and 6 (8%) were uncertain. These responses provide some evidence that many students did not view themselves as consistently unsuccessful or less capable than peers.

Perceptions of lecturers' views were less settled: 39 students (49%) disagreed that their lecturers felt they were poor in their studies, 13 (16%) agreed, and 28 (35%) were uncertain. The sizeable uncertain group suggests that many respondents may have been unsure how their academic performance was viewed by lecturers.

Academic Anxiety and Memory Concerns

Some responses point to academic concerns despite the positive results on lecture comprehension and improvement. 47 students (59%) agreed that they became frightened when asked a question by a lecturer; 25 (31%) disagreed and 8 (10%) were uncertain. In contrast, 52 students (65%) disagreed that they often forgot what they had learned, while 16 (20%) agreed and 12 (15%) were uncertain. Overall, the pattern suggests that anxiety about responding in class was more commonly reported than frequent forgetting.

Study Engagement and Effort

Reported effort and interest were generally positive on some items. 49 students (61%) agreed that they studied hard for tests, and 50 (63%) agreed that they were usually interested in their work. For the intention to pass all subjects that year, 52 students (65%) agreed, compared with 18 (22%) who disagreed and 10 (13%) who were uncertain. These findings suggest that many students reported motivation and an intention to succeed.

Nevertheless, responses also reveal possible difficulties with sustained engagement. 51 students (64%) agreed that they daydreamed a lot in lectures, and 55 (69%) agreed that they were waiting for lectures to end so they could go home. For the statement "I pay attention to the lecturers during lectures," responses were divided: 33 (41%) disagreed, 31 (39%) agreed, and 16 (20%) were uncertain. This combination suggests that reported interest and study effort did not necessarily translate into consistent attention during lectures.

Persistence and Willingness to Continue

Persistence was mixed, 41 students (52%) agreed that they did not give up easily when faced with difficult assignment or exercise questions; 25 (31%) disagreed and 14 (17%) were uncertain. At the same time, 49 students (61%) agreed that they often thought about quitting their course, while 24 (30%) disagreed and 7 (9%) were uncertain. In addition, 52 students (65%) agreed with the negatively worded statement that they were not willing to put more effort into exercises or assignments. The responses therefore suggest a tension between some willingness to persist with difficult tasks and reported discouragement or reluctance to increase effort.

In general, across the two questionnaire sections, the strongest positive patterns were students' belief that effort could improve grades (69% agreement) and their intention to pass all subjects (65% agreement). More challenging patterns included reported fear when questioned by lecturers (59% agreement), frequent daydreaming (64% agreement), wanting lectures to end (69% agreement), and thinking about quitting the course (61% agreement). Responses on attention, persistence, and perceptions of academic competence were more divided. Generally speaking, the data indicate that students reported some confidence and motivation, alongside concerns about classroom anxiety, engagement, and persistence.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicate that the students' academic self-concept is mixed. Many respondents expressed positive beliefs about their capacity to improve through effort: 69% agreed that hard work could help them achieve better grades, and 65% agreed that they would do their best to pass all subjects. In addition, 81% said they could follow lectures easily, and 73% disagreed that they always performed poorly in academic tasks. These results suggest that many students recognize their potential to learn and succeed.

However, this confidence coexists with notable concerns about engagement, anxiety, and persistence. A majority reported daydreaming during lectures (64%), waiting for lectures to end (69%), feeling frightened when asked a question by a lecturer (59%), and often considering leaving their programme (61%). Responses about attention, academic ability, and persistence were mixed, indicating that positive intentions do not always translate into consistent participation or confidence.

Overall, the results suggest that students possess some important foundations for academic success, particularly belief in improvement through effort and an intention to pass, but may need support to strengthen classroom engagement, confidence in responding to lecturers, and perseverance when they encounter difficulty. Based on the analysis and findings from data collected from the participants, the researcher has the following recommendations:

1- Build confidence through supportive teaching. Lecturers could use low-pressure opportunities for participation, such as think-pair-share, small-group discussion. Constructive feedback may help reduce fear of answering questions.

2- Increase active engagement in lectures. Break lectures into shorter sections and include brief activities, questions, examples, or checks for understanding. These approaches could help address reported daydreaming and impatience during lectures.

3- Provide academic skills support. Offer workshops or guidance on study strategies, assignment planning, test preparation, and seeking help. This may help students willingness to work hard into effective academic habits.

4- Strengthen persistence and student support. Establish accessible academic advice, peer mentoring, or tutoring, mainly for students who feel discouraged or think about leaving the course. Academic staff should provide clear routes for students to request help when coursework feels difficult.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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