Asian Journal of Research in Education and Social Sciences
e-ISSN: 2682-8502 | Vol. 8, No. 3, 24-32, 2026
https://asianscholarsnetwork.com/asnet-journals
SPECIAL ISSUE: TheSustainImpact International Conference 2026

Academic Apathy in Higher Education: A Study of Student Disengagement

Zhao Yun[1*], Chandran Abraham[1]

[1] Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, Petaling Jaya 47301, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: mc24079055@student.unitar.my

Received: 13 February 2026 | Accepted: 30 March 2026 | Published: 20 April 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2026.8.3.3

Abstract: *As higher education becomes more widespread, student demotivation has emerged as a significant challenge, negatively impacting academic performance and personal growth. Studies indicate that a large proportion of students, especially male students and those in higher grade levels, experience varying degrees of demotivation, with this issue being particularly prevalent in science and engineering fields. The underlying causes are complex and involve a range of factors at the personal, institutional, and societal levels. These include lack of motivation, poor self-regulation, weak professional identity, unengaging teaching methods, poorly structured curricula, and limited resources. In addition, societal pressures, such as employment concerns and a utilitarian approach to education, further contribute to the problem. This study combines questionnaires and interviews to assess the current state of demotivation among students and explore its key influencing factors. It suggests several interventions, including strengthening psychological counseling, enhancing career planning, improving teaching methods, optimizing curriculum design, and fostering a positive social environment. A multi-faceted, collaborative approach is needed to boost students' intrinsic motivation and support their overall development. Addressing student demotivation is essential for achieving SDG4 (Quality Education), as it directly influences learning quality, fosters inclusive and equitable education, and supports the development of lifelong learners capable of contributing to sustainable development.*

Keywords: SDG4; Student Demotivation; Higher Education; Learning Motivation; Comprehensive Development

---

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the popularization of higher education, student demotivation has gradually emerged as a critical issue in the field of education. Research indicates that demotivation not only affects students' academic performance and personal development but also exerts profound negative impacts on the overall quality of higher education. In recent years, extensive research by scholars both domestically and internationally has revealed that demotivation is prevalent among university students and manifests in diverse ways. For instance, some students display negative learning attitudes, such as skipping classes or merely "cramming" for exams, due to insufficient motivation or excessive external pressure. Furthermore, shifts in social values and the intensifying competition in the employment market further exacerbate students' demotivation. Therefore, in-depth exploration of the current status, causes, and coping strategies regarding demotivation among higher education students is of great significance for enhancing educational quality and fostering students' holistic

development. This study aims to provide a theoretical basis and practical guidance for the formulation of relevant educational policies through a systematic analysis of the characteristics and influencing factors of demotivation among college students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Research on student demotivation in higher education is supported by multiple interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, each explaining the formation mechanism of demotivation from different perspectives and covering core variables that affect the phenomenon. These theories complement each other and provide systematic guidance for understanding the multi-dimensional causes of student demotivation.

First, *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)* proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) is the core theoretical basis for exploring individual psychological factors of demotivation. The theory holds that human beings have three innate and universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, these three are the core independent variables of the individual psychological dimension. When these needs are fully met, individuals' intrinsic learning motivation (intermediary variable) will be stimulated and maintained; on the contrary, if these needs are frustrated, intrinsic motivation will be significantly weakened and demotivation (dependent variable) will occur (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the context of higher education, this theory is widely applied to analyze the relationship between individual psychological states and demotivation: for example, if students feel that their learning behaviors are not autonomous ,e.g., such as being forced to choose majors by family members, lacking the right to choose courses independently, they will easily lose interest in learning (Wang, 2015); if students often fail to cope with academic difficulties and lack a sense of competence, their learning confidence will be hit, leading to passive avoidance of learning (Tao & Zhao, 2018); if students have poor interpersonal relationships with teachers and peers, lack effective communication and emotional support, they will feel isolated and gradually withdraw from learning activities (Luo, 2012).

Second, *Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT)* proposed by Eccles et al. (1983) explains demotivation from the perspective of goal orientation and value perception, focusing on the individual cognitive variable. The theory argues that students' learning motivation and learning behavior are jointly determined by two core variables: expectancy of success, which is the subjective judgment of whether they can complete learning tasks successfully and task value, the subjective evaluation of the significance and value of learning tasks. If students have low expectancy of success, e.g., believing that their efforts cannot improve academic performance or low task value, e.g., thinking that professional knowledge has no practical significance for future employment, they will gradually reduce their learning input and even exhibit demotivation behaviors (Eccles et al., 1983). Domestic research also supports this view: Yan (2017) pointed out in his study that the utilitarian trend of some college students makes them overemphasize the practical value of learning, and if they cannot perceive the direct connection between learning and employment, they will easily generate learning aversion, which is consistent with the core viewpoint of EVT.

Third, *Social Learning Theory* proposed by Bandura (1977) focuses on the impact of social environment and observational learning on student demotivation, involving environmental variables such as peer influence and social reinforcement. The theory holds that students' learning attitudes and behaviors are not only determined by individual factors but also shaped

by observational learning and social feedback: if students often observe their peers' negative learning behaviors, such as skipping classes, plagiarizing assignments, and expressing dissatisfaction with learning and receive no negative feedback or even implicit approval, they will easily imitate such behaviors and gradually form demotivation (Bandura, 1977). Yu (2017) found in his research on the construction of academic atmosphere in colleges and universities that a poor academic atmosphere, such as widespread passive learning among peers will have a negative demonstration effect on students, accelerating the formation of learning aversion, which verifies the explanatory power of Social Learning Theory in the research of student demotivation.

Fourth, *Ecological Systems Theory* proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a holistic perspective for this study, integrating individual, institutional, and societal factors into a unified analytical framework. The theory holds that individual development is the result of the interaction between the individual and the external ecological environment, which is divided into micro-system, such as individual and family, meso-system, such as school, and teacher, and macro-system, such as society and culture. Applying this theory to the research of student demotivation, it can be found that demotivation is not caused by a single factor but the result of the interaction of multiple factors at different levels: for example, the micro-system factor, such as low self-efficacy of students, meso-system factor ,such as monotonous teaching methods of teachers, and macro-system factor, such as intense employment pressure interact with each other to exacerbate student demotivation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory provides a theoretical basis for the multi-dimensional analytical framework constructed in this study.

2.2 Analytical Framework and Variables Definition

Based on the above theoretical foundations and combined with domestic research results on college students' learning aversion (Song et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2012), this study constructs a multi-dimensional analytical framework of student demotivation in higher education, which includes three core dimensions: individual psychological dimension, institutional educational dimension, and societal environmental dimension. All dimensions act on the dependent variable (student demotivation) through the intermediary variable (learning motivation), and the specific framework and variable definitions are as follows:

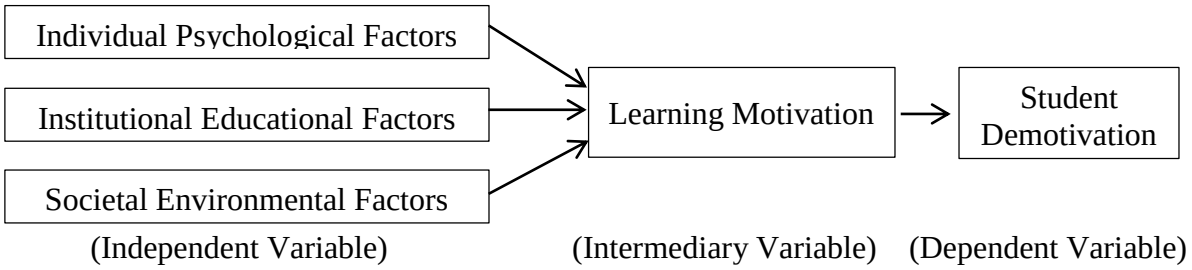

Figure 1: Analytical Framework of Student Demotivation in Higher Education

2.2.1 Dependent Variable: Student Demotivation

Student demotivation (also known as learning aversion) refers to the negative psychological state and behavioral performance of college students in the learning process due to the lack of learning motivation, which is specifically manifested in four aspects: cognitive demotivation (lack of interest in learning content, unclear learning goals), emotional demotivation (negative emotions such as boredom and disgust towards learning), behavioral demotivation (skipping classes, perfunctory homework, passive participation in learning), and motivational demotivation (lack of intrinsic motivation, relying only on external pressure to learn) (Song et

al., 2023; Meng, 2017). This study takes the degree and manifestation of student demotivation as the dependent variable, which is the core object of this research.

2.2.2 Intermediary Variable: Learning Motivation

Learning motivation refers to the internal driving force that stimulates, maintains, and guides students' learning behaviors towards a certain goal, which is the core intermediary variable connecting various influencing factors and student demotivation (Zhou & Wei, 2024). According to the source of motivation, it can be divided into intrinsic motivation (driven by interest, curiosity, and the desire for self-improvement) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external pressure such as exams, employment, and family expectations). When learning motivation is strong, students will actively participate in learning activities; when learning motivation is weakened or lost, demotivation will occur (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Tao and Zhao (2018) also pointed out in their study on college students' psychological counseling that improving learning motivation is the key to solving learning aversion, which confirms the intermediary role of learning motivation.

2.2.3 Independent Variables

Independent variables refer to the various factors that affect student demotivation through learning motivation, which are divided into three dimensions based on the analytical framework, and each dimension includes specific sub-variables, combining the core viewpoints of existing domestic research (Yin, 2020; Xu & Chen, 2013):

① Individual Psychological Dimension: Including three sub-variables: self-efficacy, the subjective judgment of one's ability to complete learning tasks (Bandura, 1977), professional identity, the recognition of one's major, including the interest in professional content and the recognition of professional prospects, (Song et al., 2023), and self-regulation ability, the ability to plan, monitor and adjust one's learning behaviors independently, (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Yin (2020) found in his case study that low professional identity and insufficient self-regulation ability are important reasons for college students' learning aversion, which are consistent with the sub-variables defined in this study.

② Institutional Educational Dimension: Including three sub-variables: teaching methods, the diversity and interactivity of teaching methods adopted by teachers, (Lv et al., 2012), curriculum design, the rationality of curriculum setting, whether it is combined with professional characteristics and market demand, (Chen, 2012), and resource support, the adequacy of teaching resources, such as libraries, laboratories, and teacher guidance, (Wang, 2015). Yu (2013) pointed out that monotonous teaching methods and unreasonable curriculum design will reduce students' learning interest and lead to learning aversion, which supports the setting of these sub-variables.

③ Societal Environmental Dimension: Including three sub-variables: employment pressure (the intensity of competition in the employment market for college graduates, Yan, 2017), social values, the utilitarian trend of social values, emphasizing the practical benefits of learning, (Eccles et al., 1983), and peer influence, the learning attitude and behavior of peers around, (Bandura, 1977). Pang (2019) found in his study that the intense employment pressure makes some college students lose confidence in their future, thus generating learning aversion, which is consistent with the impact of employment pressure on demotivation.

2.3 Literature Summary

Existing domestic and foreign studies have explored the phenomenon of student demotivation from multiple perspectives, proposed relevant theoretical explanations, and identified some influencing factors (Song et al., 2023; Zhou & Wei, 2024). However, there are still some deficiencies: first, most domestic studies focus on a single influencing factor ,such as individual psychology or school education and lack a holistic analysis framework integrating individual, institutional, and societal factors; second, the definition of variables in existing studies is not systematic, and the logical relationship between variables is not clear; third, some studies lack the support of multi-theory integration, and the explanatory power of the research results is limited. Based on this, this study constructs a multi-dimensional analytical framework by integrating multiple theories, clarifies all relevant variables, and combines questionnaires and interviews to conduct empirical research, which is intended to make up for the deficiencies of existing research and provide more targeted theoretical and practical guidance for solving the problem of student demotivation in higher education.

Research on demotivation among higher education students, both domestically and internationally, has yielded significant results. In terms of manifestations, demotivation typically presents as negative learning attitudes, diminished interest, and behaviors aimed at evading academic responsibilities, such as skipping classes and plagiarizing assignments.

Regarding influencing factors, personal aspects, including the lack of learning motivation, insufficient self-regulation, and low professional identity, are widely recognized as critical contributors. Simultaneously, environmental factors such as institutional teaching management, curriculum design, societal employment pressure, and prevailing values also exert a significant influence on the emergence of demotivation. Within the theoretical framework, perspectives from social work have been introduced to explore pathways for enhancing learning motivation, while axiological analysis has revealed how the alienation of higher education's personal value contributes to this issue. Existing studies, employing methods such as questionnaires and in-depth interviews, have provided rich data and diverse perspectives for understanding demotivation. However, current research tends to focus heavily on phenomenological description and factor analysis. Studies specifically targeting concrete countermeasures to alleviate demotivation remain insufficient, particularly regarding interdisciplinary and comprehensive intervention strategies, which warrant further exploration.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining questionnaire surveys with interviews, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current status and influencing factors of demotivation among higher education students. Regarding the questionnaire survey, a structured questionnaire was designed based on existing research achievements. It encompasses dimensions such as learning motivation, self-regulation ability, and teaching satisfaction.

This study selected students from a university in Jinan City, Shandong Province and nine universities in Jinan City as research subjects. Questionnaires were distributed through a combination of online and offline methods to ensure coverage across diverse gender, grade, and major groups. Upon completion of data collection, the results were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics and differential analysis were conducted to reveal the overall status of demotivation and inter-group differences.

For the interview component, 30 representative students were randomly selected from the survey participants for in-depth interviews, aiming to explore the underlying causes of demotivation. Interview content primarily revolved around students' learning experiences, life arrangements, career planning, and perceptions of the institutional teaching environment. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into textual data, with key themes extracted through content analysis.

The integrated application of the aforementioned methodologies ensures data diversity and richness, thereby enhancing the scientific rigor and reliability of the research findings and laying a solid foundation for subsequent analysis.

Component	Procedures & Implementation	Objectives & Outcomes
Sampling Strategy	Stratified Selection: 30 representative students were randomly selected from the larger survey participant pool.	To ensure a diverse and unbiased subset of data for deeper analysis.
Data Collection	In-Depth Interviews: Audio-recorded sessions focused on: 1. Learning experiences 2. Life arrangements 3. Career planning 4. Perceptions of the teaching environment	To explore the underlying causes of demotivation through direct dialogue.
Data Processing	Transcription & Analysis: Audio recordings were transcribed into text. Method: Content Analysis	To extract key themes and patterns from the qualitative data.
Overall Integration	Mixed-Methods Application: Combining survey data with interview insights.	Enhanced Rigor: Ensures data diversity, scientific reliability, and a solid foundation for conclusions.

4. Analysis of the Current Status

Based on survey data from students across multiple universities, demotivation appears to be a prevalent issue. Research indicates that over 60% of students experience demotivation to varying degrees, with significant differences observed across gender, grade level, and academic major. Specifically, the demotivation rate among male undergraduates is significantly higher than that of their female counterparts (69.76% vs. 53.06%, $P < 0.05$), which may be attributed to differences in gender role cognition and learning motivation. Furthermore, demotivation shows an increasing trend across grade levels, rising annually from freshman to senior year. This progression may be associated with the accumulation of academic pressure and unclear career planning. From a disciplinary perspective, students in science and engineering fields exhibit higher demotivation rates compared to those in the humanities, potentially due to disparities in course difficulty and practical requirements. Presenting these data visually through charts can more clearly reveal the distribution characteristics and changing patterns of demotivation among university students.

5. Discussion on Influencing Factors

The emergence of demotivation among higher education students is the result of multiple interacting factors, which can be primarily categorized into three dimensions: personal, institutional, and societal.

At the personal level, the lack of learning motivation is considered a primary cause. Upon entering university, some students lack clear academic goals and career planning, failing to

design their university life rationally, thus struggling to ignite intrinsic motivation. Additionally, insufficient self-regulation causes students to lose direction in a relatively relaxed academic environment, preventing them from effectively balancing study, entertainment, and social activities, thereby negatively impacting their enthusiasm. Concurrently, the lack of professional identity cannot be overlooked; students who are assigned to uninteresting majors or lack clarity regarding future employment may develop aversion toward their studies, further exacerbating demotivation.

At the institutional level, unreasonable teaching methodologies and curriculum design are key triggers. The prevalent phenomenon of "reading from the textbook" and overly simplistic assessment formats in current higher education leads to a lack of interest in in-depth exploration among students. Furthermore, the lag in teaching resources following university expansion negatively affects the learning experience, shortages in hardware facilities (such as laboratories and libraries) restrict practical activities, while large-class teaching models diminish teachers' attention to and supervision of individual students. Simultaneously, the uniformity and lack of scientific rigor in teaching management fail to accommodate students' personalized needs and psychological characteristics, leading to resistance and subsequent demotivation.

At the societal level, employment pressure and shifts in social values act as catalysts. With intensifying social competition, many students feel heavy employment pressure and perceive a weak correlation between their current studies and future careers, thus reducing their investment in learning. Moreover, the prevalence of utilitarian values in the social environment subtly influences students' attitudes; some prioritize short-term gains over long-term knowledge accumulation, further eroding their intrinsic motivation.

In summary, the formation of demotivation is an interwoven result of multi-dimensional factors, necessitating comprehensive strategies across personal, institutional, and societal levels to mitigate this issue.

6. Recommendations for Mitigation

In response to the aforementioned factors, specific and feasible countermeasures are proposed across three levels: student, institution, and society.

First, at the student level, strengthening psychological counseling and career planning guidance is essential to help students establish correct motivations and goals. As research shows, many students experience demotivation due to unclear objectives or confusion about future development. Therefore, universities should conduct mental health education and career planning courses to guide students in recognizing the significance of learning and cultivating self-regulation. Additionally, organizing career experience activities can help students understand the connection between social demands and personal development through practice, thereby enhancing motivation.

Second, at the institutional level, improving teaching methods and optimizing curriculum design are vital pathways. Given that monotonous teaching and outdated content fail to stimulate interest, universities should actively explore diversified models, such as case-based and project-based interactive learning, to increase participation. Meanwhile, curricula should align more closely with social needs by reducing redundant courses and increasing the proportion of practical courses, allowing students to apply knowledge practically and boosting their sense of achievement.

Finally, at the societal level, fostering a positive social atmosphere is crucial. The deterioration of the employment environment and the spread of negative values impact students' psychology. Governments and all sectors of society should work together to improve the employment market mechanism, providing a fair competitive environment. Moreover, the media should shoulder social responsibility by reducing the propagation of impetuous ideas and advocating positive values to help students establish a correct worldview. Collaborative efforts across these fronts can effectively alleviate demotivation and promote the holistic, healthy development of students.

7. Conclusion

Through an in-depth analysis of demotivation among higher education students, this study reveals its prevalence and detrimental effects. Findings indicate that demotivation is influenced by personal, institutional, and societal factors, with significant differences in prevalence rates across gender, grade, and major. This phenomenon not only affects individual academic achievement and development but also negatively impacts the quality of higher education and societal talent cultivation. Therefore, mitigating student demotivation holds significant practical importance.

Future research could further explore the integration of mental health education and career planning to develop more precise and effective intervention measures. Simultaneously, attention should be paid to the impact of evolving social environments on students' psychological states to provide a basis for formulating more comprehensive educational policies.

Acknowledgement
The authors would like to express their gratitude to UNITAR International University for their support of this research.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

References

CHEN Lili. A Brief Discussion on the Problem of College Students' Aversion to Learning and Countermeasures[J]. *Science & Technology Information*, 2012, (8): 69-69.

LUO Ling. Research on College Students' Emotional Problems and Countermeasures[J]. *Journal of Science and Education*, 2012, (19): 255-256.

LV Mei; JI Hao; LAN Xiaoyi; ZHAO Yan. Research on Influencing Factors and Countermeasures of Aversion to Learning among College Students[J]. *Science and Technology Innovation Herald*, 2012, 9(19): 248-248.

MENG Qi. Analysis and Research on the Current Problem of College Students' Aversion to Learning[J]. *Scientific Chinese*, 2017, (3X): 256-257.

PANG Mingqi. An Analysis of the Healing Effect of Confucius' Spirit of Joyful Learning on College Students' Aversion to Learning Psychology[J]. *Jingchu Journal*, 2019, 20(1): 57-63.

Song, S., Hu, Y., Huang, R., Zhuang, Q., & Zhou, M. (2023). An Investigation and Analysis of the Causes of College Students' Aversion to Learning. University (Teaching & Education), (12), 168-171.

TAO Jianhong; ZHAO Yu. Research on College Students' Anxiety, Aversion to Learning Behavior, and Psychological Counseling[J]. *Journal of Educational Guide (First Half)*, 2018, (11): 86-91.

WANG Zihan. Causes of College Students' Aversion to Learning and Countermeasures[J]. *Science and Technology Innovation Herald*, 2015, 12(13): 149-150.

XU Lin; CHEN Xiaoyou. Case Analysis and Countermeasure Research on the Problem of College Students' Aversion to Learning[J]. *Journal of Yunnan Institute of Socialism*, 2013, 15(6): 112-113.

YAN Zhenpu. A Value Analysis of the Causes of College Students' Aversion to Learning[J]. *Education Teaching Forum*, 2017, (36): 3-4.

Yin, Z. (2020). Research on the Problem of Aversion to Learning Among College Students and Countermeasures: Taking Huaxin College of Hebei GEO University as an Example. *Era Character*, (11), 162.

YU Tao. Analysis and Reflection on the Aversion to Learning Emotions of College Students[J]. *Shandong Chemical Industry*, 2013, 42(3): 86-87.

YU Yongguang. Research on Strategies to Improve the Construction of Academic Atmosphere in Colleges and Universities under the Background of New Media[J]. *Education Teaching Forum*, 2017, (3): 17-18.

Zhou, Z., & Wei, A. (2024). Research on the Path to Enhance University Students' Learning Motivation from the Perspective of School Social Work. *Path to Success*, (5), 25-28.