

Dropping/Withdrawing Semesters among Preparatory Year Engineering Students at King Abdulaziz University

Abstract,

Dropping/drawing semesters in all academic institutions and the faculty of engineering in KAU/KSA becomes a very common phenomenon recently. This issue threatens time to graduation and delay students plans to finish and get jobs and start their life after graduation successfully. This study investigates the reasons behind dropping/withdrawing semesters. To this end the researcher designed a sixteen-item questionnaire and distributed it to the prep engineering students at KAU. The findings of the study revealed different reasons behind dropping semesters. These reasons fall under three categories: academic, managerial, and social. The study recommends that the university reconsiders some polices to make the students university life enjoying and more relaxing.

Key words: KSA, KAU, dropping courses/semesters, withdrawing courses/semesters, Prep. Year students

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, dropping semesters by KAU prep. year Engineering students becomes very common for different reasons. These reasons fall under academic, managerial, and social influences. Students tend to underestimate courses and register fifteen or eighteen credit hours pushed by the tendency to finish earlier. After the first midterm exam, they discover that they are threatened by failing the course. When they try to drop a course, they got surprised that the university regulations don't allow them, they become forced to drop the whole semester. Instead of finishing early their graduation is delayed one semester or more according to the semesters they drop. This phenomenon doesn't only happen at KAU, it becomes worldwide as generations tend to be more irresponsible and less serious. The two concepts the students seek refuge to are dropping and withdrawal. When you register a class and realize it is the wrong choice, you can drop it and get IF and have refund. Dropped courses do not appear on the official college transcript, and have no grades. When you withdraw, after the adjustment period, you receive a "W" grade on your transcript which is not included in the average but may impact the financial aid. Although dropping and withdrawal are an easy escape for students, the backfire later on in the coming semesters.[1] expressed their worries about the effects on time to graduation of undergraduate engineering students. They refer these worries to lack of maturity and readiness to start confidently in engineering. [2] pointed out that students who withdraw usually take advice from their colleagues and not from academic advisors. Other reasons for withdrawal are family obligations, health problems for the student or anyone in his family and travelling to work [1]. The reasons above and other related reasons become of great concern to universities, students, employers, and the society as there is a big difference between the students entering the engineering pipeline and the number of students remaining to complete their degree.[3].

University students and engineering students in particular are supposed to choose their schedules according to deep understanding and complete awareness of the level of difficulty of these courses and their own aptitude. In addition, their supervisors should help them while choosing the courses with regard to prerequisites and pre-knowledge about courses. Unfortunately, what usually happens is choosing courses according to totally different criteria like the influence of colleagues or instructor preferences. The result is big confusion, suffering, ill estimation of consequences and a great tendency to drop the course

which is forbidden by the university instructions. The other choice is to drop the whole semester and lose time that leads to delayed graduation.

Research question:

Why do engineering students drop/withdraw semesters?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of dropping/withdrawing semesters is a source of inconvenience to all academic institutions. Universities start to reconsider their policies to be able to cope with this dilemma. Not only schools and universities are concerned, but also ministries and governments. The literature below will shed the light on the reasons behind dropping/withdrawing semesters and the consequences on the students, the academic institutions, and the community.

2.1 Why do students drop/withdraw courses?

Students drop semesters/courses because of variety of reasons that fall under three main subtitles: academic, managerial, and social reasons. Most of the reasons refer to students' lack of responsibility and seriousness and some other reasons are out of the students' hands and might be unavoidable unless the university reconsiders its policies. [4] explained the reasons behind dropping courses including online courses. Among these are Isolation and technological problems. [5] identified two reasons why student withdraw from classes: reasons related to students and reasons related to the courses themselves. Personal reasons turned out to be more important than they are thought to be. This leads to the fact that instructors need more feedback about their students. [6] referred dropping courses to carelessness and lack of understanding which results in losing follow up with instructors, lack of motivation and losing the desire to study on their own. All this leads to the unavoidable result of dropping courses and semesters. [7] students usually drop courses if they feel that they are misplaced in the course, they registered late, they can hardly make friends, they missed the beginning of the course where teachers set the rules and explain their policy, less happy with the instructors' approach in teaching, don't find the table appropriate with their preferences and have difficult financial problems or tough family circumstances. [8] The type of relation between the student and the teacher sometimes determines the student decision to continue or drop out a course. The social interaction between the students themselves and between the teacher and the students is sometimes a decisive factor in taking the decision to drop or to stay. [9] said that higher education is one of the big investments in any country and graduation rates reflect how much attention is given to this investment. One of the critical issues that need to be discussed is course withdrawal which has negative effects on students' time to graduation. [1] mentioned that challenging courses may lead to withdrawal from these courses. Furthermore, Fear of decrease in the students' GPA may lead to the same result. [10] after interviewing students they discovered that the level of satisfaction with the first and second course affects their decision to continue or to drop the course. Other reasons for dropping courses are the learning environment, the mismatch between professional and personal interest and the course components, low trust in distance learning, doubts about online communication and distance learning tools.

2.2 Consequences of dropping courses

Dropping semesters has negative consequences on students with regard delayed graduation, losing the momentum of resuming study and other related drawbacks. The financial loss, extending the time to graduation, causing unnecessary suffering to students exemplified by difficult registration schedules, additional living expenses and delay of leading a settled life with a regular salary for graduating students are all consequences of dropping course and semesters. [4],[11], [12] identified the characteristics of University of Buffalo students with regard to withdrawing and repeating courses, and examined the effect of dropped and repeated courses on time to degree which calls for new policies with regard to repeating

and withdrawing.[13] pointed out that long time to degree is a critical issue in the United States as it costs the country billions. The authors also discussed the correlation between course load and students' performance keeping in mind the variable of struggling students. When students drop courses and/or repeat a course more than once, they are increasing the number of courses they will ultimately take to earn their degrees [14]. A delay in graduation can lead to incurring additional registration and tuition costs, potentially incurring additional living expenses, and delays the time at which the prospective graduate begins earning a salary as an employed engineer. The financial impacts are further increased if a student is financing the cost of attending college with student loans [11]. The time to graduate with a bachelor's degree in engineering can expand from 4 to 8 years [15]. Academic progress can be slowed down because of drawing from courses and in certain cases may lead to leaving study at all[16]. [17] mentioned certain drawbacks for course withdrawals including cost curricular implications.

The above literature shows that dropping and withdrawing courses can be a solution for struggling students but leaves bad consequences on the students' university journey. It may give bad impression that the student is not serious which may affect his image before the recruitment committees in the future. A dedicated hardworking student will not need to drop or withdraw courses as he plans very well, consults the people in charge and chooses courses wisely.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Population and sample

The population of the study is all preparatory year male and female engineering students in all universities in KSA. These are mainly Saudi students and other scholarship students from other countries including sons of non-Saudi staff teaching at Saudi universities. This age group was chosen as they face some troubles in the preparatory year in terms of the GPA required for joining the different field in engineering. Some of them discover that Engineering is beyond their abilities, so they think about dropping and withdrawal as an instant solution until they make up their minds. The sample of the study is all engineering students in the preparatory year at KAU.

3.2 Design of the study

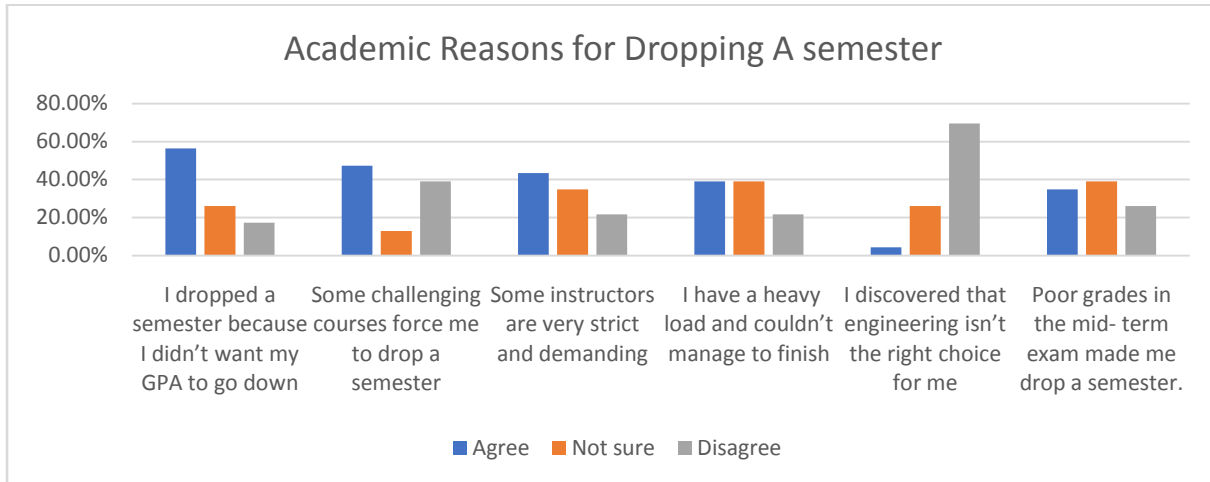
The data collection tool of the study is a survey consisting of sixteen items that fall under three categories. The first category is about the reasons of dropping semesters related to academic affairs. The second category is about reasons that come from the university regulations and rules that may cause pressure on students. Reasons related to the social life of students including personal and family issues are represented in the third category. The survey was validated and piloted on a group of students outside the sample and sent to google forms. The pie charts resulted after answering the survey were grouped into bar-charts for later analysis in the results chapter.

4. RESULTS

The results chapter contains the respondents' answers with regard to the three categories in the questionnaire. The reasons of dropping courses related to academic affairs, managerial purposes and

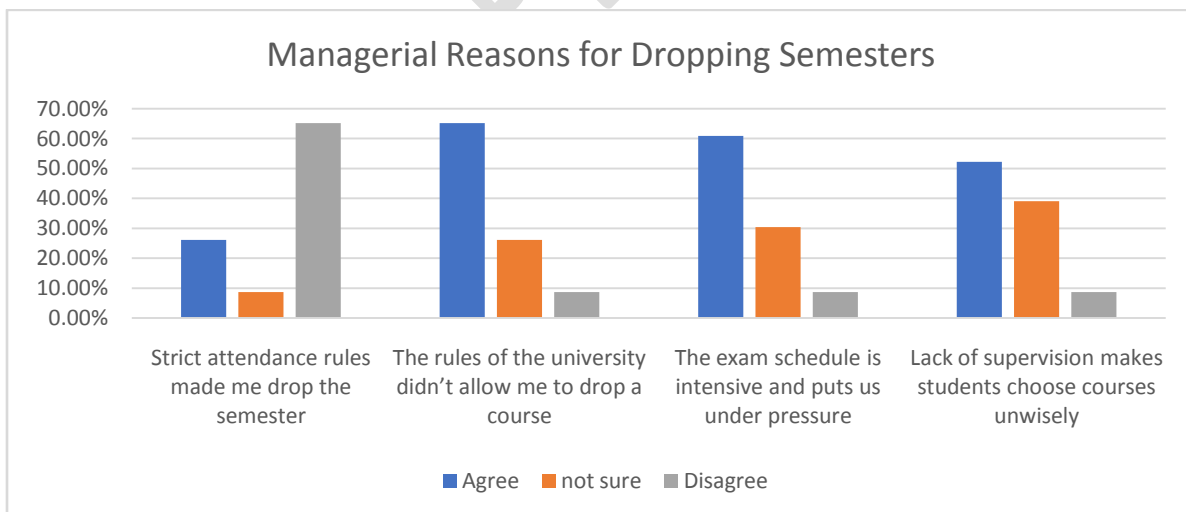
social purposes. The bar charts are also followed by detailed paragraphs that explain how respondents answered the sixteen items in the questionnaire.

4.1 Bar chart (1) The respondents' answers to the questionnaire with regard to the first category (the academic reasons for dropping courses).



Bar-chart (1) above illustrates the respondent answers with regard to the academic reasons for dropping courses. It is clear in the chart above that the majority of the respondents either agree or not sure about the academic reasons for dropping courses. In item five, most of the respondents (nearly 63%) disagreed that engineering isn't their right choice. The responses for item one showed that the majority had unanimous agreement that fear of the GPA falling down is a main reason for dropping courses. Almost in all items, the confusion and lack of certainty dominate the respondents' answers to the questionnaire.

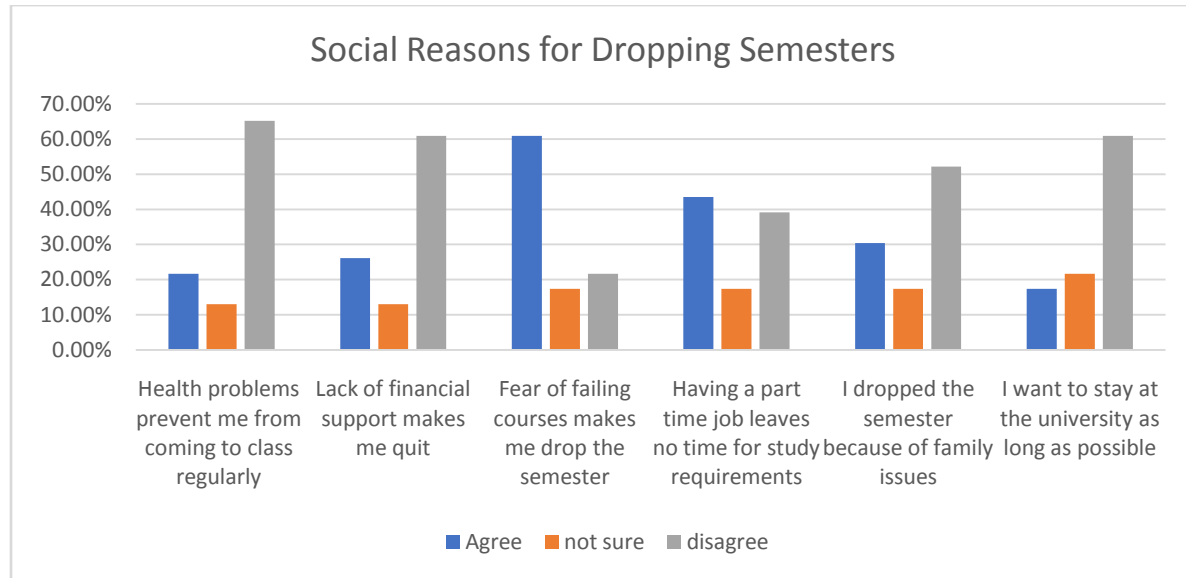
4.2 Bar chart (2) The respondents' answers to the questionnaire with regard to the second category (the managerial reasons for dropping courses).



Bar-chart (2) represents the respondents' answers with regard to the managerial reasons for dropping courses. The respondents' answers mainly in items two, three and four in the chart witnessed great consensus that the university rules play a big role in dropping courses (63%, 60% and 52% respectively).

In item one, the majority of respondents (63%) disagreed that strict attendance rules are behind dropping courses. The confusion increased gradually among the respondents in the four items in the chart (9%, 26%, 30%, and 39%, respectively).

4.3 Bar chart (3) The respondents' answers to the questionnaire with regard to the third category (the academic reasons for dropping courses).



Bar chart (3) above shows the respondents' answers with regard to the social reasons behind dropping courses in the faculty of engineering. It is very clear in the chart that the majority of respondents disagreed that social reasons are enough to drop courses except for four (having a part time job) where agreement and disagreement are nearly equal (42%, 39%). Confusion is minimized to lower percentages between 13% and 21%. Fear of failing courses was the most item that witnessed unanimous agreement (60%). All in all, disagreement overwhelmed the respondents answers that social rules aren't a strong reasons for dropping courses.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The study investigatesthe reasons behind dropping courses in the faculty of engineering at King Abdulaziz University. The researchers used a sixteen- item questionnaire to confine the main reasons that may lead engineering students to drop courses and they classified these reasons under three sub titles: academic reasons, managerial reasons and social reasons. The answers of the respondents vary among agreement, being confused and disagreement.

In the first category of items, there is unanimous agreement that students' keenness on keeping a high GPA and fear of failing courses are the main reasons for dropping courses. To achieve this,students avoid being with strict very demanding teachers who are not tolerant to late submissions of assignments. They also avoid registering courses with teachers who ask students to be always prepared and ready for exams and quizzes. This tendency agrees with [5], [6] who referred students' withdrawal and dropping to the same reasons and other reasons like lack of understanding and carelessness. This calls for reconsidering the faculty of engineering policy with regard to unifying procedures among the teaching staff so that all of them will be in the same boat and students will not look for the very lenient doctor and escape the extremely strict one. A balanced approach will be the right choice that guarantees fair treatment to all students.

The second category of items is related to the managerial reasons behind dropping semesters in the faculty of engineering at KAU. The majority of respondents agreed that not allowing students to drop a course, the intensive exam schedules and the lack of supervision are valid reasons for dropping semesters. Such unanimous agreement calls for reconsidering these reasons especially the ones related to exam schedules where students sometimes sit for two exams in the same day. Lack of supervision is another important reason for dropping semesters as students choose their schedules unwisely without pre- knowledge about prerequisites and plans. Surprisingly, they didn't agree that strict attendance rules are justified reasons for dropping semesters which reflects clear understanding that attending classes is very important for students. This means that blaming the students all the time is not always right; in some cases, students are only victims and deserve sympathy and cooperation.

According to the respondents, family issues are not enough reasons to drop semesters except for fear of failing courses and having a part time job. In the Saudi culture it is considered a shame to fail courses, that's why students prefer to drop a semester and not to fail. Similarly, having a part time job becomes a dream for Saudi young men as they have the tendency to become financially independent though they don't pay fees. They also disagreed for staying in the university as long as possible, as they want to finish and have a job as soon as possible and the university recently introduced rules to limit the student staying at the university to five years for engineering students. These results show a mature awareness about life and future that was not apparent few years ago. This refers to the new leadership that encourages Saudis to be self -independent and ready to achieve the goals of vision 2030 suggested by the crown prince.

In fact, this sudden change of the way Saudi young men approach new concepts of the future and life is a good surprise that requires hard time and great efforts. When you discover that young Saudi students are keen on being independent, hardworking and don't seek excuses to extend time to graduation, you feel proud of the positive fruits of the vision that got ripe before the due time.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study show that students have valid reasons for dropping semesters especially those related to managerial reasons like lack of supervision. In the first two semesters the university give ready schedules for students as they are still unaware of the plan and the prerequisites. After that, the student needs a supervisor to help him choose the field of the study that goes with his attitude and aptitude. Moreover, when the student is face to face with an intensive exam table where he has to do two exams in the same day, he becomes panicked and frustrated. These findings sound the alarm and calls for reconsidering the university policies with regard to dropping courses and semesters.

The study is limited by the sample size and the time over which the study was conducted. It was also limited by the sensitivity of the subject of the study where the university departments are reluctant to get involved in the study in terms of answering interview questions or the surveys. Surprisingly, some students didn't agree to answer the survey although they were assured that it is confidential.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the university start to take students' worries and suffering into consideration in terms of students' supervision and the exam schedules. It is also recommended that all instructors have a unified policy in dealing with assignments and attendance rules. More research is needed about this very critical issue to unravel the secrets and put the findings into immediate action that relaxes both the students and the university departments.

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Appendices

Appendix (1)

The survey

Dear students,

It gives me great pleasure to share this survey with you about the reasons behind dropping semesters by KAU prep. year engineering students. This questionnaire is part of a research that is intended to investigate the problem and probably find a solution. Your cooperation in filling the survey will be greatly appreciated.

أعزائي الطلاب، يسعدني أن أشارك معكم هذه الاستبانة حول الأسباب الكامنة وراء حذف الفصل الدراسي من قبال طلاب السنة التحضيرية في كلية الهندسة بجامعة الملك عبد العزيز. هذه الاستبانة جزء من بحث لدراسة هذه المشكلة ومحاولة إيجاد حل لها. تعاونكم في الإجابة على الاستبانة سوف يكون موضع تقدير.

أ. الدكتور سلامة سليم محمود

Reasons for dropping semesters by KAU prep. Year engineering student

#	Item	Scale		
		Agree أوافق	Not sure غير متأكد	Disagree لا أوافق
	Academic Reasons أسباب أكاديمية			
1	I dropped a semester because I didn't want my GPA to go down قمت بحذف الفصل لأنني لا أريد أن ينزل معدلي التراكمي	56.5%	26.1%	17.4%
2	Some challenging courses force me to drop a semester بعض المقررات الصعبة تجبرني على حذف الفصل	47.8%	13%	39.1%
3	Some instructors are very strict and demanding بعض المدرسين شديدون جدا وطلباتهم كثيرة	43.5%	34.8%	21.7%
4	I have a heavy load and couldn't manage to finish لدي عبء دراسي كبير ولم أستطع الاستمرار	39.1%	39.1%	21.7%
5	I discovered that engineering isn't the right choice for me اكتشفت أن الهندسة ليست خيارا صحيحا	4.3%	26.1%	69.6%
5	Poor grades in the mid term exams made me drop the semester. التحصيل المتدني في اختبارات منتصف الفصل جعلني أحذف الفصل	34.8%	39.1%	26.1%
	Managerial Reasons أسباب إدارية			
7	Strict attendance rules made me drop the semester قواعد الغياب المتشددة جعلتني أحذف الفصل	26.1%	8.7%	65.2%
8	The rules of the university didn't allow me to drop a course قوانين الجامعة لا تسمح بحذف مقرر/مادة	65.2%	26.1%	8.7%
9	The exam schedule is very intensive and leaves students under pressure جدول الاختبارات مكثف جدا مما يجعل الطالب تحت الضغط	60.9%	30.4%	8.7%

10	Lack of supervision makes students choose courses unwisely نقص الأشراف يجعل الطلاب يختارون المقررات بشكل غير حكيم	52.2%	39.1%	8.7%
	Social reasons أسباب اجتماعية			
11	Health problems prevent me from coming to class regularly المشاكل الصحية تمنعني من حضور المحاضرات بشكل منتظم	21.7%	13%	65.2%
12	Lack of financial support makes me quit نقص الدعم المالي يجعلني أتوقف عن الدراسة	26.1%	13%	60.9%
13	Fear of failing courses makes me drop the semester الخوف من الرسوب يجعلني أحذف الفصل	60.9%	17.4%	21.7%
14	Having a part time job leaves no time for study requirements وجود وظيفة بدوام جزئي لم يترك مجالاً لمتطلبات الدراسة	43.5%	17.4%	39.1%
15	I dropped the semester because of family issues المشاكل العائلية جعلتني أحذف الفصل	30.4%	17.4%	52.2%
16	I want to stay at the university as long as possible أريد أن أبقى في الجامعة أطول فترة ممكنة	17.4%	21.7%	60.9%

UNDER PEER REVIEW