University Students' Needs and Educators' Strategies: A Mixed-Methods Study on Ideal Learning Environments

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Abstract: To establish an ideal classroom environment, multiple educational factors and techniques need to be implemented. Some of those key aspects of building an ideal learning environment include students' educational needs, language proficiency, and motivation. Also, instructors and students usually have differing perspectives regarding this matter. Both perspectives need to be considered when trying to achieve an ideal learning environment. The purpose of our research was to bridge the gap between what students consider as an effective learning environment that meets their educational needs and teachers who already implemented pedagogical and instructional methods. An online survey was shared with 104 TIU undergraduate students, and interviews were held with university teachers to gain their perspectives regarding an ideal classroom environment. Results showed that students and educators' thoughts regarding the necessary teaching methods in class did not align with each other. Also, some challenges faced by the two parties included students' adherence to memorization. Both parties, however, emphasized the importance of holding extracurricular activities. This research will benefit students, teachers, as well as university faculty members, and administrative officials in general in contributing to an effective learning environment in the university context.

Keywords: **Ideal Classroom Environments, 17 UN SDGs, Educators' Perspectives, Students' Perspectives, Teaching Techniques, Guidance and Counselling**

1. Introduction

The nature of higher and secondary education has immensely changed over the past decade. The integration of technology, the diversity of learners, and the learning needs of students have necessitated the creation of ideal learning environments in higher educational establishments as well as in schools. It is of great importance to understand the learning needs of university students and employ teaching methods and styles accordingly to enhance xeducational outcomes and to create a pleasant, student-friendly learning environment in the classroom. When these two perspectives are aligned, they will foster critical thinking and collaboration among students, enhancing students' success at the end of the day. To bridge this gap, this research aims to compare students' expectations of an ideal learning environment with the currently practiced teaching strategies by investigating the following questions:

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- What constitutes an ideal learning environment according to undergraduate students?
- What are some key methods and strategies the university teachers implement to create effective learning environments?

It also aimed to investigate a comprehensive understanding of ideal learning environments in the context of the Tishk International University in Erbil, KRG, Iraq. The objectives through which the aim of the study was achieved were the following: thoroughly investigating the key aspects of ideal learning environments that university students believe are essential; analysing the teaching methods and approaches implemented by the university lecturers for the sake of enhancing effective learning; and evaluating potential discrepancies between students' needs and the current pedagogical practices used in the classroom.

Additionally, this study provided invaluable insights for both university educators and policymakers in effectively designing ideal learning environments that meet students' academic needs, fostering student engagement in the classroom, and providing a lifelong learning environment.

Through delving into the standpoints of university students and educators, this study offered a multifaceted understanding of ideal learning environments in the university setting. The implementation of both qualitative and quantitative approaches enhanced the validity of the data collected and helped paint a bigger, complete picture in understanding and creating the learning atmosphere that undergraduate learners anticipate when choosing a major.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Establishing Ideal Learning Environment

Everyone deserves a good education. Hence, students' learning needs should be given utmost consideration by the educational system. Reflecting on the various needs of students as well as the multiple aspects of education, studies identified certain factors and pedagogic strategies that contribute to a decent learning environment.

Zadina (2023) explores the interconnectedness of cognitive, neurological, and emotional aspects in fostering optimal learning environments. The author delves into how understanding brain function, catering to individual learning styles, and cultivating a positive emotional atmosphere can significantly impact student engagement and knowledge retention. Zadina also emphasizes the importance of connecting learning to real-world applications and students' personal experiences for the sake of enhancing meaningful education and greater motivation.

Furthermore, the author offers practical strategies for educators to apply these principles in their classrooms. Those include incorporating diverse teaching methods that engage multiple senses, creating a supportive and inclusive classroom culture, and utilizing technology and other tools to personalize learning experiences. By addressing the cognitive, neurological, and emotional needs of students, educators can create a "Synergy Zone" where learning is maximized and where students thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Meanwhile, research by Schweder& Raufelder (2024) presents other ways in which students prosper in the learning process. As to Schweder& Raufelder (2024), students thrived in terms of daily needs in both autonomy and connection during Student-Directed Learning (SDL) rather than Teacher-Directed Learning (TDL). Even though SDL was able to enhance students' essential motivation, it caused the inherent and the external kinds of motivation to decline. This study suggests that both SDL and TDL programs fundamentally affect students. However, the research suggests that combining SDL and TDL could be an essential way of winning. SDL can form specific types of motives as well as basic academic needs. By implementing the right balance between SDL and TDL a perfect learning environment can be provided for students. For example, explaining a concept or a material to students and then allowing them to approach that concept or act upon it, each in their own way, would combine the TDL and SDL effectively.

Likewise, Rusticus et al. (2023) suggest that the ideal learning environment depends on five different categories such as psychological, social, cultural, and physical settings. The author believes that schools with well-designed environments that prioritize students' well-being and engagement lead to better outcomes for students across all grade levels. For example, satisfaction and motivation usually increase as a result of a high-quality Learning Environment (LE). This also leads to better career outcomes such as satisfaction, job competencies, and retention. Moos's study was highlighted in the framework of Rusticus et al. (2023) when referring to the fact that all environments have three key dimensions: personal development/ goal direction, relationships, and system maintenance. Furthermore, the author organizes the data of students and faculty into three overarching themes personal development, relationships, and institutional setting. By addressing the high levels of engagement, motivation, relationship, and meaning in experience, educators and researchers can consider promoting more confident LEs and learning experiences for students.

The study of Rusticus has similar findings to that of Zadina: both of them highlight the need of addressing the psychological and cognitive aspects of learning. This could effectively be implemented by following the TDL and SDL learning strategies suggested by Schweder & Raufelder. Students would gain sufficient intellectual and emotional support when they are taught directly from their instructors (TDL); and their motivation and cognitive skills are boosted when they work independently and try to meet their own goals (SDL). Therefore, by considering the findings of Zadina, Schweder & Raufelder, and Rusticus et al., we could infer that an ideal learning environment requires integrating students' cognitive, neurological, and emotional needs while following TDL and SDL learning methods simultaneously.

In conclusion, regarding the research that was presented by Zadina (2023), Schweder & Raufelder (2024), and Rusticus et al. (2023), an ideal learning environment depends on various factors. Zadina believes that the ideal learning environment is a blend of individual needs and classroom factors. Students learn best when their cognitive, emotional, and neurological needs are met. Effective teaching involves creating a supportive atmosphere, using varied methods, and connecting learning to real-life experiences. The research of Schweder & Raufelder (2024) indicates that a mix of student-centered (SDL) and teacher-directed (TDL) learning environments is crucial for optimal student outcomes. By balancing autonomy, structure, and motivation, educators can create effective learning experiences. Rusticus et al. (2023) argue that ideal learning environments involve a blend of psychological, social, cultural, and physical factors. By focusing on student well-being and engagement, schools can improve outcomes.

2.2 Common Needs of Undergraduate Students

2.2.1 Technology

Humbhi & Tareen (2022) explore the common needs of undergraduate students, believing that one of the most important aspects of our daily lives is information. Information is one of the common needs for undergraduate students. One of the methods students use to gain information is using the internet and other technology. As to preference, most undergraduate students chose libraries to search their data because the sources are reputable, applicable, and handy. Moreover, digital libraries are a key resource in the digital age, providing information to meet people's needs and supporting learning and education. At this point, Jacobson & Chang (2019) mentioned that undergraduate students tend to visit libraries frequently to research information such as topic selection, literature review, databases, data analysis techniques, and publishing techniques. Librarians can assess faculty needs and co-create course curriculums to involve students in collaborative work. Such is attained by allowing them to use the sources and e-learning materials found in the library as well as the internet for educational purposes and within the university campus. In fact, by helping students retrieve a wide range of information and resources, technology can spontaneously improve students' language proficiency, which is another essential learning necessity.

2.2.2 Language Proficiency

As to the academic needs of students, the research evolving around the needs of undergraduate engineering students by Changpueng & Pattanapichet (2023) found out that English language proficiency plays a crucial role for engineering students in a global context. It allows them to collaborate with international colleagues, reports, and emails; participate in meetings and discussions; negotiate with team members; and most importantly present their ideas to a wider viewer. For example, in 2006, more than 40.000 graduate engineers in Malaysia could not find a job; the reason was their poor proficiency in English (Phang, 2006, as cited in Tinh, 2018). An analysis of English needs helps teachers understand the specific English skills engineering students need to succeed in both their studies and careers.

Likewise, Tinh (2018) conducted his research on the English language needs of mechanical engineering students in the Vietnamese context, and he discovered that all four English language skills were required for them to perform their duties effectively. Meetings, discussions, and seminars or conferences proved to be among the top ten most common communicative tasks mechanical engineers should perform. Also, by performing PBL activity programs, engineers can improve their English proficiency by using the language in relation to performing soft skills (Deveci & Nunn, 2018). Therefore, to overcome the challenges faced by engineers when using English in meetings, it is essential to have good teaching materials and effective and engaging learning environments employed in the English language teaching process. When students are competent in language performance, their motivation to learn boosts as well upon feeling more capable in carrying out learning materials in that language, which is another key area of students' educational needs.

2.2.3 Motivation

One of the essential psychological theories in education is Intrinsic Motivation. When students are truly motivated intrinsically, they are up for such activities that interest them. This motivation helps them develop their abilities, collaborate, and get engaged in the classroom easily. The study of Goldman et. al (2016) on the needs of undergraduate psychological students found that motivation was one of the necessities of success in the context of their academic lives. The researchers conducted three studies (with a total of 1,067 participants) to develop new ways to measure student motivation. They used Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework focusing on how fulfilling students' basic psychological needs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness can lead to higher intrinsic motivation and, eventually, to a successful academic life. In other words, they aimed to create measures that would capture how satisfied students feel with their sense of control, ability, and connection as well as how that feeling relates to their internal drive to learn.

According to Brophy (2009), students with intrinsic motivations find academic endeavours profitable and eloquent during college time; thus, they participate vigorously in planning the outcomes of assignments, assessments, and other forms of coursework. Moreover, Self-Determination Theory SDT believes that individuals have natural encouragement to improve and grow which makes them seek challenges, explore new ideas, and learn from the world around them. This can level up both knowledge and understanding.

In summary, to optimize student outcomes, institutions should prioritize investing in library resources, information literacy programs, and language support services tailored to students' specific needs. Also, by focusing on the fulfillment of basic psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness - educators can cultivate intrinsic motivation, leading to enhanced engagement and learning outcomes.

2.3 The Factors Fostering an Ideal Learning Environment

Lu et al. (2021) examined the key factors influencing higher-order thinking skills in college students' smart classroom environments. The growing interest in smart classrooms is reflected by the fact that scholars and educators see them as a strategic investment for higher education. By 2022, smart classrooms were predicted to become widely adopted. Thus, smart classrooms are technologically rich in terms of physical and practical spaces. The authors state that technology provides information and communication tools like learning resources, interaction support, personalized education, group education, and mobile learning. Smart classrooms are considered beneficial; however, not enough amount of research is available regarding their direct impact on students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) are identified as three factors: problem-solving, which refers to the capability of collecting and analyzing valuable information; critical thinking, which indicates the ability to objectively analyze information and think clearly; and creativity, which refers to the ability to develop innovative ideas and methods. These factors align with the theory of constructivism which requires students to think critically by applying learned knowledge to reach new findings. It also coordinates with the cognitivism theory which appeals to the involvement of internal thinking processes when dealing with external materials (Feder, 2021). Therefore, educators need to distinguish and utilize learning environments that stimulate the advancement of students' HOTS through applying Bloom's Taxonomy.

Trilling & Fadel (2009, as cited in Nurmatova & Altun, 2023) proposed that without appropriate instructional methods aligning with the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, learners would not be able to develop higher-order thinking abilities that allow them to examine and evaluate at the university level. Thus, HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) are important to develop, especially in colleges and universities. To improve learning, we need to understand how the HOTS and the factors in smart classrooms influence each other.

At this juncture, O'Shea & Delahunty (2018) explore how students achieve success in the university learning environment. Success in academia is often measured by factors such as strong academic performance, degree program completion without interruption, and knowledge acquirement. Besides, neoliberalism inflicts an economic prerogative on all sights of human life, depicting the world as a marketplace. Additionally, neoliberalism views students as consumers purchasing an educational product with the expectation of increased financial earnings after graduation. As to Sen (1992 as cited in O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018), success can be easily conceived by approaching capability. Thus, success for students is not only the best grades but also high levels of validation and effective negotiations around different feelings. O'Shea & Delahunty (2018) stated that students defined success based on emotional and personal fulfillment when they emphasized feelings of happiness, enjoyment, respect, and pride. Success in terms of all factors at university time plays an essential role in creating an ideal learning environment. To meet both the emotional and economical needs of students, instructors need to build a learning environment in which students get prepared for their future careers while being treated with respect and dignity. Thus, students should have the opportunity to reach their utmost potential while maintaining their internal peace and fulfillment.

Additionally, Ahmad et. al (2017) explored how teachers and students' interactions can help generate ideal learning environments. Because students spend most of their time at school, a peaceful and comfortable school environment plays a crucial role in creating an effective teaching and learning environment; thus, creative and supportive teachers can help create ideal environments. Teachers, students, and the classroom environment collectively influence students' learning outcomes. Effective teachers can understand and respond to students' changing needs and behaviors. Schweder, & Raufelder (2024) argue that teachers can be the reason for a comfortable classroom environment and that they can improve students' capability to learn. Additionally, interaction throughout the learning process prompts all students' senses and persuades learners to explore in a gifted and contemporary way. A comfortable environment is essential for students' motives and outcomes. It should serve the needs of teachers and learners, and it should be managed straightforwardly. Thus, comfortable education is related to the classroom climate. The authors also stated that excessive student freedom can lead to decreased motivation and negative behaviours. Hence, teachers should maintain a structured learning environment to encourage student focus and task completion. Ultimately, teacher-student interaction is one of the main factors for an ideal learning environment.

To conclude, the study of Lu et al. (2021) about the key factors influencing college students' higher-order thinking skills in smart classroom environments reveals that peer interaction, motivation, and learning strategies significantly impact the development of HOTS. To maximize the potential of smart classrooms, educators should prioritize strategies to foster these factors. O'Shea & Delahunty (2018) challenge the traditional view of academic success, expanding it beyond grades and degrees to encompass

emotional and personal fulfilment. This perspective aligns with Sen's capability approach and contrasts with neoliberalism's focus on economic outcomes (Jacobson & Chang, 2019). Students prioritize happiness, respect, and pride alongside career goals, which emphasizes the need for a holistic learning environment that supports overall well-being. Teacher-student interaction is crucial for creating an ideal learning environment (Ahmad, et al. 2017). A positive classroom climate -influenced by teachers, students, and physical space - fosters student motivation and learning. Effective teachers create supportive environments (Sheffler, 2009), but balance is key as excessive freedom can hinder focus (Cruickshank et al., 2009).

The literature reviewed in this section explored diverse factors and different teaching approaches used by teachers to contribute to establishing an ideal learning environment. However, it lacks information regarding the fashion in which those techniques and aspects could align with the evolving academic needs of university students. The literature's main focus was on the two teaching methods or elements that establish a student-friendly learning atmosphere in the classroom. A limited amount of literature explores the simultaneous combination of the two methods in the English classroom environment. It is important to address this gap to develop a clear understanding of undergraduate students' educational needs as well as to establish an ideal learning environment in the university context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a survey questionnaire via Google Forms and an online interview to investigate the common hindrances of building an ideal learning environment and to examine what constitutes an ideal learning environment. The main reason behind choosing to collect data online was that the student respondents preferred to fill out the questionnaire anonymously during their spare time after classes. Meanwhile, teachers preferred to conduct theirs online because it was their official summer break, and they were all outside the university campus. This study employed a mixed-methods approach to combine qualitative data from the questionnaire with narrative insights from the interviews. This method was employed specifically because it makes it effective over other approaches by providing the advantage of delving into the breadth of issues through the survey and the depth of experiences through the interview.

3.2 Research Sample

To collect data, convenience sampling was chosen because "…it is often used in social sciences and education where it's convenient to use pre-existing groups, such as students" (Nikolopoulou, 2023). In total, we recruited 104 students and thirteen teachers to gain their perspectives on the topic. The data was collected through a survey questionnaire for students and online interviews with university teachers at TIU. The student respondents were from different faculties, departments, and grades (30 Freshmen, 34 – Sophomores, 28 – Juniors, and 12 – Seniors) at Tishk International University in Erbil, Iraq; their demographic backgrounds varied from Kurdish, Arab, and Turkish. To ensure the anonymity of the research sample, the respondents were not required to use their Google accounts or emails to fill out the survey questionnaire, nor were they asked for their names. As to the teacher interview, thirteen teachers were interviewed individually to share their insights and teaching approaches which could constitute an

ideal learning environment. It is important to note that the reliance on the sampling size from a single university, may limit the generalizability of the findings. This may cause potential biases, as the standpoints and perspectives of students and teachers were specific to the institutional context of Tishk International University. It is recommended that this limitation be considered when applying the findings and the results of this study to other settings.

Table 1: Distribution of Students by Year

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Students Year	Freshman	30	28.8%	28.8%
	Sophomore	34	32.7%	32.7%
	Junior	28	26.9%	26.9%
	Senior	12	11.5%	11.5%
Total		104	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2: Distribution of Students by Departments

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Departments	ELT	52	50.0%	50.0%
	Computer Education	10	9.6%	9.6%
	Mathematics Education	6	5.8%	5.8%
	Biology Education	22	21.2%	21.2%
	IT	2	1.9%	1.9%
	Dentistry	10	9.6%	9.6%
	Law	1	1.0%	1.0%
	Nursing	1	1.0%	1.0%
Total		104	100.0%	100.0%

3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through Google Forms and Microsoft Teams online platforms. The survey questionnaire was hosted on Google Forms and was shared with the research sample in January of 2024 after the semestrial examination week. Access to the survey was closed after a week to avoid ambiguity and unreliability of responses. The teachers' interviews were hosted online via Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms during the official summer break for university lecturers. The interviews were conducted individually with each teacher, and the responses were recorded promptly.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyse data more effectively, the study used a mixed-method approach. This mixed-methods approach was chosen because it was better to get an honest, and deeper understanding of research problems as well as the multifaceted academic needs of students simultaneously than either approach used alone (Creswell et al., 2007). The quantitative data was coded into the SPSS program (version 22) to analyze the frequency and percentage of students' responses. The reason we used SPSS was to display the exact percentages, mean, and standard deviation (SD) retrieved from the multiple-response questions. That could only be faultlessly represented using the SPSS. For the narrative analysis, a qualitative approach was employed which involved a thematic analysis of the teachers' responses, which were voice-recorded and transcribed afterward. The notes taken were categorized and coded based on similar keywords and phrases that eventually turned into themes. The emerging themes were organized according to the research questions. The responses were recorded in the form of a report, using direct quotes from the interviewees.

The same thematic approach was implemented to analyse the narrative responses of students in the questionnaire. The themes and patterns were arranged and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges undergraduate respondents face that hinder their academic progression. This process typically involved coding, as we did for the interview, and organizing the data into meaningful themes, enabling a systematic exploration and interpretation of the narratives.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Analysis

The results presented in this section provide an analysis of the mixed approach and offer insights into understanding university students' academic needs and demands that can significantly contribute to establishing an ideal learning environment in the context of TIU.

In line with our first research question (what is an ideal learning environment?) the following results emerged. The question introduces five domains that can contribute to creating ideal learning environments in the classroom. The question was aimed to obtain the perception of undergraduate students on the important factors that could contribute to building effective learning environments.

From the respondents' standpoint (Table 3), the multiple response questions' results revealed that "opportunities for practicing" was the most endorsed response (42.3%); "encouraging collaborative learning environment" came next (27.9%); and "pleasing and inviting classroom" followed with 22.1%. "Diverse classroom environment" and university 'facilities' were chosen as the least significant factors in creating an ideal learning atmosphere, with 11.5% and 3.8%, respectively. The least significant factors (facilities and diverse classroom environment) could indicate that the respondents do not perceive the latter as critical to their immediate learning experiences, so they render it less of a priority. Alternatively, the students may not be aware of how diversity contributes to a better and richer learning environment. As to 'facilities', it can be assumed that the respondents are more into the interpersonal and instructional aspects of education, rather than infrastructural services. Thus, they do not see good facilities as essential to fostering an ideal learning environment.

In essence, it could be concluded that students seek opportunities to build a pleasant and ideal learning classroom environment, where they could practice their skills and enhance their knowledge. Besides, it may indicate that students enjoy learning from one another and value collaborative learning experiences.

Table 3: Factors That Constitute to Ideal Learning Environment

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Factors	Facilities	4	3.6%	3.8%
	Encouraging Collaborative Learning Environment	29	25.9%	27.9%
	Opportunities For Practicing	44	39.3%	42.3%
	Diverse Classroom Environment	12	10.7%	11.5%
	Pleasant And Inviting Classroom	23	20.5%	22.1%
Total		112	100.0%	107.7%

The next item was focused on gaining the standpoint of respondents about their expectations from university educators. The multiple-response question was asked to understand to what extent the teachers fulfil the academic needs of students. The students' expectations from their university teachers were quite different from the usual. Research participants expected educators to possess certain qualities that would help contribute to an ideal learning environment. In Table 3, the results indicate that more than a quarter of the respondents advocated the idea of having educators who would support their academic needs. (26.0%). This is very common in the context of higher education where students go through an immense workload such as assignments, weekly assessments, and projects. In their desperate times, students expressed their heartful gratitude to the lecturers who motivated and supported them. Creating extracurricular activities and contributing to an active learning environment came next with very close percentages of 24.0% and 23.1%, respectively. Respondents did not seem to care whether their lecturers were experts in or passionate about their fields or not. The two qualities made up 25.0% when added in total. This result suggests that students did not quite support the idea that the base for contributing to an ideal learning environment lies only in the level of expertise of the university educators.

Table 4: Expectations from Educators

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Expectations of Students	To Be Supportive with Academic Needs	27	26.0%	26.0%
	Create Extracurricular Activities	25	24.0%	24.0%
	Contribute To an Active and Engaging Learning Environment	24	23.1%	23.1%
	Be Passionate and Enthusiastic	17	16.3%	16.3%
	Be An Expert in Their Field	9	8.7%	8.7%
	All Of Them	2	1.9%	1.9%
Total		104	100.0%	100.0%

Overall, the results of the responses suggest that the greatest percentage of respondents sought supportive teachers who would guide them when in need.

Additionally, the respondents displayed a great interest in having more extracurricular activities that would provide students with opportunities to apply classroom knowledge in practical settings outside the classroom premises.

Table 5: Challenges students face through their undergraduate journey.

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Challenges	Academic Pressure	52	54.2%	54.2%
	Time Management	30	31.3%	31.3%
	Lack Of Emotional Support	8	8.3%	8.3%
	Family Problems	6	6.3%	6.3%
Total		96	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4 demonstrates the challenges faced by undergraduate students throughout their academic journey. There were four factors listed for the students to choose from to describe the biggest challenge they faced during their undergraduate life. The results propose that a sizeable portion of students (54.3%) struggle with academic pressure. Results indicate that university students may feel overloaded by coursework, quizzes, and exams, and unclear expectations from their educators. Time management (31.3%) hit next, suggesting that respondents struggle with prioritizing academic tasks and personal chores. As to the married students who have children, it is of utmost importance to support their families financially, which

makes it difficult to manage the time effectively in terms of academic performance. Seminars or workshops evolving around time management could possibly be useful in such cases by helping students organize their daily plans effectively. Even though only 14.6% of students chose "lack of emotional support" and "family issues", it is still a prominent challenge for students during their academic journeys. It suggests that university students need support services in university settings, like consulting centers and guidance counselors. It is important to note that results could have been dramatically different had the missing number of respondents (n=8) included their standpoints on the challenges they faced during the academic year.

Overall, the results highlight the significance of considering the challenges encountered by undergraduate students. University officials can consider the issues presented in data to support students in terms of managing academic pressure as well as in areas that go beyond academics, possibly by organizing seminars and workshops on time management and by providing guiding and counseling service centers.

It is significant to note that many undergraduate students choose their major unwillingly or under external pressure. To find out what our respondents' views on who carries responsibility for their academic performance, item # 6 "Whose responsibility is it to pave students' education and academic career?" was asked, and the following results were revealed:

Table 6: Responsible Individuals for Students' Academic Performance

		Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Responsible Figures	Students Themselves	69	61.6%	66.3%
	All Of Them	25	22.3%	24.0%
	Educators	12	10.7%	11.5%
	Parents	2	1.8%	1.9%
	Government	2	1.8%	1.9%
	Peers	1	0.9%	1.0%
	Community	1	0.9%	1.0%
Total		112	100.0%	107.7%

Table 5 displays the percentage of students' responses to a multiple-response question in descending order from highest to lowest. According to the respondents, the students themselves (66.3%) are accountable for their academic performance, which implies that the majors chosen by the students were done with no external pressure on them. Thus, the respondents bear full responsibility for their academic achievement or failure. Less than a quarter of the total (24.0%) believe that their surroundings, including the government, share the same responsibility as the students themselves for their academic performance. It can be assumed that the reason behind their choices was a stereotype imposed by either a family or a community on the students as they were teenagers. One of the most common such stereotypes is expecting males and females to become engineers and doctors, respectively.

All in all, the results explicitly display the idea that undergraduate students bear full responsibility for their academic tasks and that they wish to carry on their academic performances in ideal learning environments.

4.2 Narrative Analysis

To get the answer to the second research question, "What are some key methods and strategies the university teachers implement to create effective learning environments?" and gain insight into teachers' and students' narrative perspectives on an ideal learning environment, the following thematic analysis was developed and presented below.

4.2.1 Methods and Approaches to Teaching

When analyzing the narrative responses of both research sample groups, the first theme that emerged from the combination of coded words and phrases about the teaching methods of educators and the teaching style preferences of students.

All teachers provided similar responses to the item, "What is the most effective teaching method you employ to contribute to ideal learning environments?" by listing the following approaches:

- Student-centered aligned with teacher-centered method when necessary.
- Communicative approach that emphasizes student collaboration.
- A mixture of different approaches that focus on students' level of proficiency and their collaborative performance during the lectures.
- Student-centered method of instruction focused on practical sessions more than on plain theory.
- Emphasis on independent learning during and after the lectures.
- Technology-integrated teaching that ensures the mental well-being of students in the classroom.

The responses the teachers provided were all based on their experiences in teaching practices. They believed that they had achieved the intended goal – to present their classes in the best way possible and to instill the targeted knowledge in their students' minds with ease. "The students are our priority, and we must make it easy for them to comprehend the lectures in the most interactive ways," was a sincere response of one of the educators.

They also mentioned that the students had high expectations and that they would do their best to provide their students with all the necessary knowledge within and outside the classroom. "It feels satisfactory to see the students learn. They know what they want, for they are adults. You can easily persuade them by talking to them, by having a friendly conversation," was a sincere response from one of the interviewees. According to another teacher, "…teaching is all about understanding your students, treating them equally, and accomplishing ideas and goals together..." their answer displayed a heartfelt acknowledgment of gratitude for having mature students.

However, students' perspectives on the teaching strategies and attitudes of educators to enhance effective learning environments did not align with those of the teachers. Their common belief was that lecturers should simplify the language of instruction and should conduct their lessons in the form of conversations instead of abiding by specific rules in the textbook. Additionally, according to students' responses, exam

papers should include different types of questions that foster critical thinking abilities. One of the respondents remarked that the teachers should help students by explaining and elaborating on questions more. Another response regarding the teaching style of lecturers goes this way, "I think language teachers should not abide by a specific teaching style. It will benefit us more if they teach us in the form of collaborative work and activities that foster students' engagement in the lesson."

Besides, student respondents mentioned that quick incentives in any form (not monetary) could greatly benefit the engagement and enthusiasm of students toward the lectures. "Introducing incentives regularly because it is a great support for us, students, would help us feel more motivated and engaged in the classroom" was one of the responses of the study samples. "We also want our teachers to pay more attention to students' viewpoints when interacting with students in the classroom, instead of merely promoting their (teachers') ideas," was a common response from students. Another repeated response from student samples was to treat them equally during the lectures. "…treating all students fairly and not differentiating between 'clever' and 'lazy' students, would make a big difference for all students in the classroom."

Overall, the standpoints of the two parties regarding the methodology of teaching did not align with each other. Students believed that significant factors should always be practiced in the classroom, "…focusing on teaching communicative abilities rather than sterile language structures." (Renau, 2016, p. 85). while teachers believed classrooms should employ all the possible engaging and interactive approaches to involve the students in the class.

The dissimilarities in viewpoints between teachers and students in teaching methods can highly impact how effective the learning environment is. These differences affect teaching effectiveness in the following ways:

- Teachers generally think that scripted-based, structured teaching is the most effective method to assist students in their learning and educational advancement. On the other hand, students demand more communicative and practical, hands-on experiences. For instance, if the teachers pay too much attention to the scripted curriculum, students might feel uninterested and unfocused, consequently causing them to feel demotivated and unwilling to learn.
- Restricted cultivation of critical thinking skills
- Students prefer teaching styles that foster critical thinking and problem-solving. If teachers rely on classical approaches and don't allow for conversation or group work, students will not be able to cultivate these vital skills. For instance, a research paper named "Group Discussion and Individual Critical Thinking Processes" by Marcia D. Dixson discusses the effectiveness of small group conversations in improving students' critical thinking abilities by enabling them to interact with different viewpoints and solve problems collaboratively. We can bridge the gap and address the issues using some strategies:
- Teacher training: Offering training to teachers on different methods of teaching to better address the different needs in their classes. This can assist them in learning how to engage students more effectively by practicing active learning and cooperation.
- Feedback opportunities: Providing students with ways to share their feedback and how they feel about their teacher's teaching strategies. This can be done in multiple ways including in anonymous

letters, surveys, and also open discussions with the students to better understand their preferences and address their needs.

- Flexible curriculum: Enabling teachers to modify their teaching methods in accordance with the students' feedback and their needs.

In essence, the dissimilarities of perspectives between teachers and students can significantly affect the effectiveness of learning. Through the acknowledgment and resolution of these discrepancies, teachers will be able to create a more interactive and supportive learning setting that provides all students with their needs. This understanding and agreement is vital to encourage students and assist them in advancement in their academic life.

4.2.2 Challenges and Misconceptions Preventing Ideal Learning Environment

A combination of the following responses from teachers' and students' narrative responses helped us generate another theme dedicated to issues that averted building the desired learning environment.

Almost all teacher respondents pointed out the consequences of the scripted curriculum. That is, students are all bound to learn through memorization, and sadly, it makes them impassionate and reluctant to learn through different methods. It also prevents us from tackling the topics with ease. "They (students) are restricted to one learning method which makes it difficult to manage the classroom considering different learning needs of students", was the remark of some teachers during the interview. A fixed curriculum usually leads to an undifferentiated teaching style. Consequently, it can dampen students' enthusiasm and creativity. This result is often evident in classes where a fixed curriculum is studied and students with different academic levels and needs exist. A case study that backs the assertion regarding teacher education methodologies mainly focusing on rigid curricula with little to no practical mentoring can be discovered in the report titled Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education (Mayer, 2015). This research determined how well training programs prepare new teachers for their jobs through a survey questionnaire aimed at getting insights from a large group of teachers and their school principals. The key findings from the report were: A lot of new teachers felt the lack of readiness to handle classroom discipline and designing lesson plans effectively. The survey discovered that while the graduates felt positive about their comprehension of the theoretical part of their education. However, they did not have the necessary capability to practice these theories in real classroom environments, and particularly, the study emphasized that graduates felt unsure of their competence to handle classroom discipline and foster collaboration among the students, which are significant skills for effective teaching.

The report stated that graduates repeatedly expressed the necessity for more practical training throughout their teacher education programs. They also stated that their coursework usually prioritized theoretical information over practical approaches, consequently not being able to adequately prepare them for real teaching settings.

This report resonates with the narrative response from the results of our survey questionnaire with the students, backing up the notion that overdependence on theoretical knowledge and lack of sufficient practical application can often lead to feelings of unreadiness of students when facing real teaching settings.

A strategy to address this challenge is Implementing differentiated methods of teaching: Teachers can be prepared and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to adjust their teaching approach to adequately provide students with different needs and academic levels. This includes hands-on activities, project-based learning, and cooperative group work to foster a livelier and more collaborative environment rather than merely focusing scripted curriculum.

Additionally, "…it is a misconception among students that academic English is the same as casual English. "Depending on the student, I either ignore this idea or try to explain the difference between the two", commented another lecturer. This misconception is often evident in casual English hindering students' ability to interact adequately in academic settings. It usually results in perplexity and assessments and assignments. Students often find it hard and boring to compose academic research papers because they depend on the casual language they use in everyday interactions and conversations. Students who use inappropriate language or casual language to compose academic writings and research papers will receive lower grades due to their inability to comprehend academic writing norms.

A strategy to address this misconception is workshops that emphasize the dissimilarities between casual and academic English can be provided by universities, to instill the concept of academic writing, its conventions, and its differences with casual English to learners. These workshops can feature a variety of methods including practical training in academic writing, speaking, and presenting to assist students in better understanding the criterion of academic discourse.

According to the challenges that student respondents pointed out in their narrative remarks, the lectures are mostly restricted to theoretical information rather than practical one. "Memorizing new words and information helps us develop our vocabulary, but we lack practical sessions where we can practice using the words", was the common response of the student sample. Besides, "…the information we learn during the lectures is not enough for us to use in real-life situations. We must practice more to be able to use our knowledge outside of the classroom", was the response referring to the challenges faced by senior students during their practical teaching.

To conclude, the challenges faced by both research samples were worth communicating. This may be a case for further investigation and a reasonable problem to be addressed by university faculties.

4.2.3 Extracurricular Activities and Practices

The last common response that was supported by both teachers and students was having after-school practical sessions and extracurricular activities.

The teachers fully supported the idea of having a fun time with students and holding field trips after tedious lectures. "We usually have picnics and field trips to different places outside the university and sometimes outside Erbil", was a response from the class-supervising teachers. "The faculty organizes scientific trips to educational places, at least once or twice a month," added another teacher respondent.

Notably, Tishk International University is known for its varied and colourful afterschool events designed specifically for students. Luckily, students supported the same idea regarding extracurricular activities. However, in terms of having practical sessions, student respondents displayed quick, subtle disagreements

with the teachers' responses. Even though the former group believes that organizing more practical sessions after university lectures may enhance students' theoretical knowledge on the subject, they particularly believed that ".organizing trips to schools MONTHLY or every other month, especially in the faculty of Education, would greatly benefit our general knowledge on the subject as well as our language and teaching skills."

In essence, it can be concluded that increasing extra practical sessions and outdoor educational activities can contribute to establishing an ideal learning atmosphere at TIU. This issue can also be addressed to faculty members and responsible officials so that they may consider taking necessary action towards augmenting practical lessons for students, as this allows them to experience and expand on the general knowledge gained throughout their academic journey.

5. Discussion and Limitations

This research study examined the perspectives of undergraduate students and university educators on the factors and effective approaches that could constitute building an ideal learning environment in the university setting. The results of quantitative analysis and the findings of qualitative data revealed that both sample groups hold similar standpoints emphasizing the importance of supportive and interactive, motivational, and student-friendly learning environments in creating an ideal learning atmosphere. This supports what was highlighted by Goldman et. al. (2017) regarding the effectiveness of motivation on active learning and collaboration.

The results also proposed valuable insights regarding the undergraduate students' expectations from university educators: being supportive of academic and individual needs, creating extracurricular activities, and engaging students in active and student-friendly classroom environments.

On the other hand, the study also identified significant discrepancies in perspectives between study samples. The teachers placed a higher priority on a student-cantered approach during classroom instruction, endorsing independent learning skills. Conversely, student respondents emphasized facing challenges when loaded with academic tasks and struggling with time management during and after the courses, which slowed them academically and demotivated them throughout their undergraduate learning process.

5.1 Common Themes and Recommendations

In the narrative analysis of this study, a common theme was identified as "effective communication and supporting individual needs" based on the responses of both research samples. Both parties suggested that it was a fundamental component of the ideal learning environment.

Based on the research results and findings, the following recommendations can contribute as keystones to building ideal learning environments in the university setting:

Educators can:

- Tailor their instructional methods by implementing learner-centered approaches, with a major focus on practical experiences and collaborative work.
- Decrease academic pressure such as daily and weekly exams and projects that are solely based on presentations and memorization.

Faculty members can:

- Provide professional support by organizing workshops and seminars focused on time management skills.
- Allocate extracurricular activities with practical sessions after university lectures. This can be done effectively in various ways:

    - *Project-based learning*: Integrate semestrial projects that merge theoretical expertise from lectures with practical application. For instance, engineering students could sketch and create a sample as a subsection of their schoolwork. Meanwhile, dentistry students may develop innovative medications that place importance on patient comfort.
    - *Company partnerships*: Setting up partnerships with homegrown businesses and Institutions to offer internship chances that match with semestrial studies. This could include allocating one day per week for students to work on real-world projects at partner companies.
    - *Service-learning programs*: Include community service into the curriculum by giving credit for volunteer work associated with students' majors of study. For example, while education departments could teach at communal schools, environmental science students could participate in projects that are dedicated to saving the planet.
    - *Skills-based certifications:* Providing elective certification courses in practical skills related to students' specialties like data analysis software for statistics students or design tools for architecture students. These programs could be dated at the convenience of the participants and the organizers.
    - *Peer mentoring and tutoring:* Introduce a peer tutoring initiative where senior students guide study groups and practical courses for younger students, strengthening their learning while assisting others.

Policymakers can:

- Organize guiding and counseling services for students after university courses. This will immensely contribute to students' mental, emotional, and physical well-being, specifically for those who stay in dormitories.
- Integrating the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into education. To align with international educational requirements, the policymakers can integrate the 17 UN SDGs, with a particular focus on Goals 4^{th} and 13^{th} into the university's curriculum. It offers a lot of benefits, namely:

- Integrating environmental education fosters students' ability to think critically about real-life problems, consequently improving their problem-solving abilities.
- It connects various subjects like science, social studies, morals, and ethics. By better comprehension of these problems, students can be equipped with the necessary information to try and generate solutions to contemporary environmental problems around the world, thereby improving their ability to solve complex problems, which is the core aspect of quality education.
- It enhances environmental literacy. Students will have the necessary knowledge to make thoughtful decisions regarding the ongoing issues in the environment and to contribute to the environment while also being an advocate for other fellow citizens to contribute to the environment.
- It fundamentally promotes responsibility among them and makes them take accountability for their actions.
- It results in community engagement and life-long learning. Encouraging students to participate in community-based projects, helps them engage with their local environment and contribute to both the environment and their fellow citizens' overall well-being.

These practical, community-based activities not only impact the environment in a highly positive way, but they also result in the creation of a sense of responsibility and belonging within the local community.

5.2 Limitations and Further Research

It is crucial to note that this study has some limitations. First, it is limited by its sample size and focuses on a single university. We recognize the significance of taking different kinds of universities into account in future research. In our modified variant, we specifically recommend that future studies need to include different types of universities – public, private, and community colleges, and schools, as well. In addition, inspecting universities from different environments – urban versus rural regions will deliver a more thorough insight into how various educational settings impact students' experiences and preferences. Broader research could be done to explore these issues by incorporating a range of educational institutions around the country with broader student demographics, such as their stage, major, gender, etc., to find significant variations in preferences. Our goal is to integrate different groups, like: Socioeconomic backgrounds: Including students coming from different levels of household income to better understand how financial status can play a role in students' educational advancement and their ideal learning environment preferences. International students: To gain perspectives of participants from diverse educational systems and cultural backgrounds. Academic stages: integrating students of different academic stages – undergraduates, graduates, and non-traditional students to better analyze how different stages of academic life can influence students' needs and preferences. Demographic backgrounds: Including students from diverse demographic backgrounds to assess how diverse demographic backgrounds affect a student's academic life and preferences for an ideal learning environment.

Second, the same topic can be researched in high school settings with samples from students and teachers and eventually compared with the responses given by the university-level sample. Last but not least, the recommended key points could be tracked when implemented by university officials to observe the extent of their contribution to an ideal learning environment.

This research study shed light on the significant academic needs of undergraduate students and university teachers regarding establishing an ideal learning environment. It can be concluded that communication between students and educators around their academic and (if necessary) personal needs is necessary to promote students' learning experiences and create engaging student-friendly classroom environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the characteristics of ideal learning environments from the perspectives of students and educators in the university setting. The results and findings of quantitative and qualitative data revealed a shared emphasis on interactive learning environments within and outside the classroom premises. However, some key differences in preferences between the two research samples were identified. The student respondents emphasized that collaboration and assistance from the teachers' end would help them grasp the subjects. Whereas educators promoted independent learning skills as a priority.

The results and findings of this study signify the importance of students and educators' viewpoints and consider them as vital factors in developing an effective learning atmosphere in the context of the university. In essence, it requires a joint effort among educators, faculty administration, and university officials to establish a desired, effective, and ideal learning environment for students and teachers. This study paves the avenue for further research to be conducted about building student-friendly learning environments that would accommodate the multifaceted needs of students and teachers.

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