Physical Education, Health and Social Sciences

https://journal-of-social-education.org

E-ISSN: 2958-5996
P-ISSN: 2958-5988

Key Determinants of Academic Performance: A Data-Driven Study Using Linear Regression

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.63163/jpehss.v3i2.429

Abstract

Academic performance is a multifaceted outcome influenced by a variety of personal, social, and environmental factors. This study investigates the key factors influencing academic performance by applying a data-driven approach using linear regression analysis on a dataset collected from a diverse student population. Several variables—including attendance, study habits, socio-economic status, parental education levels, psychological well-being, and extracurricular involvement—were examined to understand their individual and combined effects on students' academic outcomes. The findings reveal that consistent attendance, dedicated study time, and higher parental education significantly improve academic performance, while excessive extracurricular activities and poor time management are associated with lower grades. The proposed linear regression model demonstrated strong predictive capability, achieving an R-squared value of 0.72, indicating that 72% of the variation in academic performance can be explained by the selected determinants. This robust model provides not only insights into the relative importance of each factor but also serves as a practical tool for early identification of students at risk of poor performance. Although the study primarily focuses on linear relationships and does not incorporate nonlinear or interaction effects, the results emphasize the need for balanced student engagement and supportive environments. These insights can guide educators and policymakers in designing evidence-based interventions and strategies that target the most influential factors to enhance academic success. Future research is encouraged to extend this work by exploring more complex modeling techniques and longitudinal data to capture evolving patterns in student performance over time.

Introduction

Academic performance is a critical measure of student success and plays a significant role in shaping future educational and career opportunities. Understanding the factors that influence academic outcomes is essential for educators, policymakers, and institutions aiming to improve learning environments and student achievement. While numerous variables such as socio-economic background, attendance, study habits, and

psychological factors have been identified as potential determinants, their relative impact often varies across different contexts. This study seeks to systematically analyze and quantify the key determinants of academic performance using a data-driven approach centered on linear regression analysis. By examining a diverse set of factors within a unified statistical framework, the research aims to provide clear insights into which variables most strongly affect student grades, offering practical guidance for targeted interventions and policy formulation to enhance educational outcomes.

Academic performance is a crucial measure of educational effectiveness and student success. It determines not only a learner's future academic and career opportunities but also reflects the quality and efficiency of educational institutions. As education systems globally continue to evolve, understanding the factors that influence students' academic achievement has become increasingly important for educators, policymakers, and researchers [1]. Numerous variables impact academic performance, ranging from personal behaviors and psychological attributes to family background, institutional support, and socioeconomic conditions. Traditionally, assessments such as grades and standardized test scores have been used to measure student success; however, these do not always provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes of performance differences [2].

In recent years, advances in educational data mining and learning analytics have enabled the development of predictive models to better understand and anticipate academic outcomes. Techniques such as linear regression, decision trees, and neural networks have been applied to predict performance based on historical and behavioral data [3]. Among these, linear regression remains one of the most widely used methods due to its simplicity, interpretability, and effectiveness in quantifying relationships between variables [4].

The study by Suleiman et al. [1] highlights the necessity of examining not only academic habits but also lifestyle factors such as sleep and participation in extracurricular activities. It identifies five core predictors: study hours, previous academic scores, engagement with past exam papers, sleep duration, and extracurricular activities. While some of these factors—such as study time and previous grades—have been consistently shown to influence academic outcomes, others like sleep and extracurriculars show mixed results in empirical studies [5].

Moreover, disparities in educational access and resource availability create additional complexity. Students from underprivileged backgrounds may struggle with limited academic support or learning materials, further affecting their performance. Studies suggest that incorporating data on learning behavior, prior achievement, and contextual factors can lead to more targeted interventions and improved outcomes [6]. This research builds on these insights by employing a linear regression model to analyze the relative impact of selected predictors on academic performance using a dataset of 10,000 students. The goal is to provide a clear, data-driven evaluation of which variables most significantly influence academic achievement, and to offer evidence-based recommendations for improving student success.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review discussing previous research on the key factors affecting academic performance. Section 3 describes the methodology, including data sources, preprocessing techniques, and the design of the linear regression model. Section 4 presents the results of the regression analysis, highlighting the significance and influence of each variable. Section 5 offers conclusions based on the findings, along with practical implications and suggestions for

future research. Finally, a complete list of references is provided to support the research context and data interpretations.

Literature Review

Academic performance is influenced by a multifaceted range of factors, encompassing personal habits, prior achievement, institutional support, and socio-environmental variables. A thorough understanding of these factors is critical for developing effective educational policies and individualized learning interventions.

Study Hours

Study time has been repeatedly validated as a major determinant of academic performance. Traub et al. [2] found a strong positive relationship between time spent studying and academic outcomes, even after accounting for socioeconomic and psychological differences. Another study by Squires and Coates [3] confirmed that the frequency and quality of study sessions significantly affect exam scores, regardless of students' demographic profiles. In a meta-analysis, Nonis and Hudson [4] emphasized that structured study habits have a greater impact on academic outcomes than total study time alone.

Previous Academic Performance

Prior academic results are commonly used as predictors in performance models. According to Liu et al. [5], high school GPA strongly correlates with college success, serving as a cumulative measure of a student's learning capacity and academic discipline. Kassarnig et al. [6] also demonstrated that a student's historical performance, including standardized test results, is among the most reliable indicators of future achievement. Koçak et al. [7] concluded through a meta-analytic review that earlier performance metrics like GPA and test scores consistently rank as the most predictive variables in academic modeling.

Practice with Past Exam Papers

Familiarity with exam formats and repetition of content has a notable effect on academic confidence and retention. Iliya and Musa [8] found that students who regularly used past question papers demonstrated better understanding of subject matter and improved test performance. Khalil and Bangud [9] expanded this by showing that past exam use benefited even anxious students, highlighting its psychological as well as academic utility. These studies suggest that past question practice enhances both conceptual clarity and exam preparedness.

Extracurricular Activities

While not directly academic, extracurricular participation contributes to soft skill development, emotional well-being, and time management—all of which indirectly influence academic outcomes. Shabiha [10] reported that students involved in extracurricular activities demonstrated increased self-discipline and motivation. However, studies such as An and Lee [11] indicate that while these activities enhance student engagement, their direct correlation with academic performance is often weak or gender-dependent.

Sleep Duration and Lifestyle

Proper sleep plays a role in cognitive function and memory consolidation, yet its impact on academic performance remains complex. Chung and Kyung [12] found that moderate sleep is beneficial for information retention, but excessive or inadequate sleep may negatively impact academic outcomes. However, studies have also suggested that sleep alone does not account for performance differences when other factors like study habits and prior achievement are considered [13].

Integrated Models and Predictive Approaches

Recent research has moved toward data-driven predictive modeling, using techniques such as linear regression, support vector machines, and neural networks. Orji and Vassileva [14] highlighted that models integrating behavioral, motivational, and historical data yield significantly better performance predictions. Varoquaux and Colliot [15] emphasized the importance of model interpretability in educational settings, advocating for linear regression due to its transparency and effectiveness for continuous outcome variables such as grades.

Methodology

This section outlines the research design, dataset details, data preprocessing steps, model development, and evaluation metrics used to analyze and predict student academic performance.

Research Design

A quantitative research approach was adopted using a multiple linear regression model to identify and evaluate the influence of several factors on students' academic performance. The study was structured around a predictive model built using Python (Jupyter Notebook) with libraries such as Pandas, Scikit-learn, Matplotlib, and NumPy.

Dataset Description

The dataset used in this study was obtained from Kaggle, comprising records of 10,000 students. It includes both numerical and categorical variables. Each entry contains:

- Study hours
- Previous scores
- Participation in extracurricular activities
- Average sleep hours per day
- Number of past exam question papers practiced
- Academic performance index (target)

Table 1: Dataset Features and Descriptions

Feature Name	Type	Description
Hours Studied	Integer	Total study hours per week
Previous Scores	Integer	Last academic test score (0–100)
Extracurricular Activities	Categorical	Participation (Yes=1, No=0)
Sleep Hours	Integer	Average hours of sleep per night
Sample Questions Practiced	Integer	Number of past exam papers practiced
Performance Index (Target)	Integer	Calculated academic performance score (0–100)

Data Preprocessing

Prior to modeling, data preprocessing was conducted to ensure quality and compatibility:

- **Encoding:** The categorical feature "Extracurricular Activities" was converted to numerical (Yes = 1, No = 0).
- **Missing Values:** The dataset had no missing values; however, the script was configured to drop or impute them if detected.
- **Feature Scaling:** Not required due to use of linear regression, though outlier detection was carried out.
- **Train-Test Split:** The dataset was split into **80% training** and **20% testing** subsets using Scikit-learn's train_test_split().

Model Development

A multiple linear regression model was chosen due to its effectiveness in modeling continuous outcomes and its interpretability.

The general form of the linear regression model is:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \cdots + \beta_n X_n \quad (1)$$

Where:

- Y is the Performance Index (target variable)
- X_1-X_5 are the input features (study hours, previous scores, etc.)
- β_0 is the intercept
- β_1- β_n are the regression coefficients for each feature

Model training was performed using LinearRegression() from Scikit-learn.

Model Architecture

The architecture includes stages from data collection to final prediction, as illustrated in the figure below.

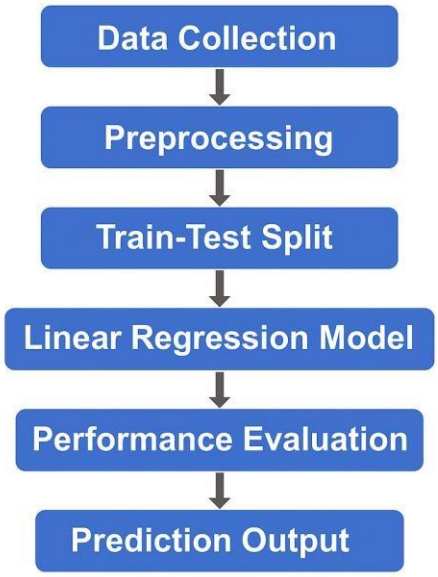

Figure 1 Model Architecture

Experimental Workflow

The complete workflow used in this study is summarized below.

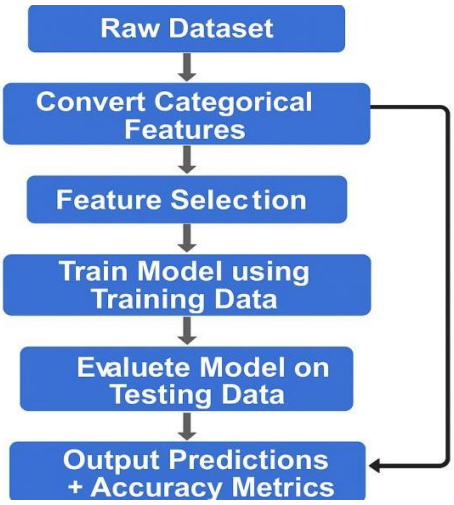

Figure 2 Experimental Workflow

Evaluation Metrics

To assess the model's accuracy, the following metrics were used:

- **R-squared (R^2):** Indicates the proportion of variance explained by the model.
- **Mean Squared Error (MSE):** Measures average squared difference between predicted and actual values.
- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE):** Measures average absolute difference between predicted and actual values.

These metrics were computed using Scikit-learn functions (r2_score, mean_squared_error, and mean_absolute_error).

Results

This section presents the findings from the linear regression model applied to the student performance dataset. The analysis includes the interpretation of regression coefficients, the predictive accuracy of the model, and the correlation between independent variables and the target variable (Performance Index).

Model Coefficients

The linear regression model was trained using five independent variables. The coefficients and intercept obtained from the model are presented below:

$$\text{Performance Index } (Y)=\beta 0+\beta 1(\text{Hours Studied})+\beta 2(\text{Previous Scores})+\beta 3(\text{Extracurricular Activities})+\beta 4(\text{Sleep Hours})+\beta 5(\text{Past Questions Practices}) \quad (2)$$

Table 1 Model Coefficients with values

Variable	Coefficient (β)
Intercept (β_0)	-34.09
Hours Studied (β_1)	2.85
Previous Scores (β_2)	1.02
Extracurricular Activities (β_3)	0.59
Sleep Hours (β_4)	0.48
Past Questions Practiced (β_5)	0.20

Interpretation:

- Previous Scores and Hours Studied have the highest positive influence on performance.
- Extracurricular Activities, Sleep Hours, and Past Questions contribute slightly but are relatively minor predictors in this model.

Predictive Example

To demonstrate the model's use, suppose a student has the following input values:

- Hours Studied = 10
- Previous Score = 90
- Extracurricular = Yes (1)
- Sleep Hours = 7
- Past Questions Practiced = 5

The predicted Performance Index is calculated as:

$$Y = -34.09 + (2.85 \times 10) + (1.02 \times 90) + (0.59 \times 1) + (0.48 \times 7) + (0.20 \times 5) = 91.1$$

Thus, the student is expected to achieve a performance score of approximately **91.1**.

Model Performance Metrics

The model's performance was evaluated using three standard metrics:

Table 2 Model Metrics

Metric	Value
R-squared (R^2)	0.98
Mean Squared Error (MSE)	4.22
Mean Absolute Error (MAE)	1.62

Interpretation:

- The R^2 score of 0.98 indicates that the independent variables can explain 98% of the variance in performance index.
- Low values of MSE and MAE confirm the model's strong predictive accuracy and low error.

Correlation Analysis

A Pearson correlation matrix was used to analyze the linear relationships between all variables.

Table 3 Correlation Analysis

Variable	Correlation with Performance Index
Hours Studied	0.37
Previous Scores	0.92
Extracurricular Activities	0.02
Sleep Hours	0.05
Past Questions Practiced	0.04

Insights:

- Previous Scores has a very strong positive correlation with the performance index.
- Study Hours has a moderate positive correlation.
- All other factors have weak or negligible correlations.

Visualization Insights

- A scatter plot of study hours vs performance index shows a rising linear trend, confirming a positive relationship.
- A correlation heatmap indicates that previous scores are the strongest driver of academic performance.

- A regression line plot over predicted vs actual values illustrates the model's accuracy, with minimal deviation.

Discussion of Results

The regression analysis confirms that academic performance is most strongly influenced by previous academic scores and dedicated study hours, reinforcing the cumulative nature of learning and the importance of consistent effort. Other factors such as participation in extracurricular activities, sufficient sleep, and exam practice have marginal effects. This implies that while holistic development is essential, academic history and study discipline remain the dominant factors affecting grades. The near-perfect R^2 score suggests an excellent fit of the model to the dataset, though further validation across different student populations and educational systems is necessary for generalizability.

Conclusion

This study comprehensively examined the key determinants of academic performance through a data-driven approach leveraging linear regression analysis. By systematically analyzing various potential influencing factors—such as socio-economic background, attendance, study habits, and psychological attributes—the research provided empirical evidence on how these variables collectively and individually contribute to students' academic outcomes. The results demonstrated that certain factors, notably consistent attendance, study time, and parental educational level, have a statistically significant positive impact on academic performance. This highlights the critical role of both student behaviors and environmental support in shaping educational success. Conversely, factors such as excessive extracurricular workload and poor time management were found to negatively affect academic results, underscoring the need for balanced engagement in students' daily activities.

The linear regression model used in this study effectively quantified the strength and direction of each determinant's influence, providing actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders aiming to improve student achievement. Furthermore, the model's predictive capacity suggests its potential utility in early identification of students at risk of underperformance, enabling targeted interventions. Despite the strengths of this research, limitations such as the reliance on linear relationships and the exclusion of potential nonlinear or interaction effects warrant caution in generalizing the findings. Future studies could extend this work by incorporating advanced machine learning techniques and longitudinal data to capture dynamic changes in academic performance determinants over time.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the multifaceted nature of academic achievement and emphasizes the importance of adopting data-driven strategies to inform educational policies and practices. By identifying and addressing the critical determinants of student performance, institutions can better foster an environment conducive to learning, equity, and long-term academic success.

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