

# Students Perceptions on Factors that affect their Academic Performance: The Case of Great Zimbabwe University (GZU)

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## Abstract

Some educators argue that entry standards are the most important determinants of successful completion of a university programme; others maintain that non-academic factors must also be considered. In this study we sought to investigate open and distance learning students' perceptions of the factors affecting academic performance and successful completion of programmes at Great Zimbabwe University (GZU). We sampled fifty final year students from the Faculty of Social Sciences to respond freely to the question: What factors have, according to you, the most important influence on your academic performance and completion of your programme at the university? These participants identified university support services; student personal characteristics; the socio-economic environment; and funding as the most important determinants of their performance and completion of the programme.

**Key words:** academic performance, programme completion, factors, students, perceptions.

## 1. Introduction

Student success is a critical issue facing higher education today. Some educators argue that entry standards are the most important determinants of success at university; others maintain that non-academic factors must also be considered. There is need to work together for the common good; the good of our profession, our institutions and most importantly the students we teach. In the past few years, the US president, Barrack Obama indicated his reservations to the American Federation of Teachers. He observed that the gap in college – student success among various racial and ethnic groups was unacceptably large. It is against this background that in this study we investigate factors that influence university students' success or failure using Great Zimbabwe University (GZU) as case study.

## 2. Orientation

Many studies that have investigated university students' success have taken the approach of measuring factors that were thought to be related to academic success and correlating them with Grade Point Average (GPA) or some other measure of actual success. For example, the study by McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) investigated 13 such correlations. Another category of studies has investigated lecturers' and students' perceptions of the likelihood that various factors might influence students' academic success (Killen, 1994). The rationale for such studies is that students' perceptions about what will enhance their chances of success at university are likely to have a strong influence on the behaviours of students regardless of the actual influence of those factors. If students believe that attending lectures contributes to success, they will probably attend regularly and thus increase their chances of being successful. However, if a student believes that success can be achieved without attending lectures that student will probably not attend lectures on a regular basis. This may diminish their chances of success. Likewise, lecturers' perception of what factors contribute to student success will probably influence their behaviours. If a lecturer believes that attendance at lectures is a requirement for success, that lecturer may provide information in lectures that is not available from any other source, an obvious disadvantage to students who do not attend.

## 3. Statement of the Problem

Admitting students to universities implies that the students are capable of successfully completing the programmes in which they are permitted to enroll. Fraser and Killen (2003: 254) observe that, "To knowingly admit students who, for whatever reason, have no chance of academic success would be immoral. Therefore, it is necessary to have entry requirements that permit valid student selection decisions to be made". In Zimbabwe, this would translate to the assumption that learners who have achieved a certain number of points in their Advanced Level examinations, or passed Ordinary Level Certificate in the case of mature entry students, will succeed at university. Experience has however, shown that there is no guarantee that these students will eventually satisfy the requirements for graduation. GZU enrolls a diversity of students with entry qualifications ranging from Ordinary Level Certificate for mature entry students, through Advanced Level Certificate for conventional school leavers, to college certificates and diplomas special entry students. The university also enrolls students from the region and beyond with equivalent qualifications (e.g. matriculation from South

Africa). This diversity of students' backgrounds and entry qualifications is likely to pose some problems in students' performance and completion of their programmes.

This study is designed to measure students' perceptions on factors that they feel enhance or diminish their academic performance and completion of their programmes at GZU. The purpose of the study is to identify and categorise the post-enrolment factors that students see as having important influences on their success and completion of programmes at GZU.

#### **4. Significance of the Study**

Identifying factors influencing students' performance and completion of programmes at GZU has the potential to:

- provide a basis for helping students to reflect on their perceptions and expectations of university study in order to gain more control over their learning and approach university studies in a way that will maximise their chances of success;
- provide a basis for helping lecturers reflect on their expectations of and about students so that they will be better informed about ways in which they can facilitate student learning, enhance the influence of positive factors and minimise the influence of negative factors on student success; and
- be used by university administrators to help them provide a learning environment that will maximise the chances that students will be successful.

#### **5. Literature Review**

The practice of using high school results as the primary determinant for university entrance is common in many countries. Although there is research support for this practice (e.g. McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001), the ability of these techniques to predict student success has been limited (Riggs and Riggs, 1990; Graham, 1991). Manning et al. (1993: 40) suggests that "selection of cut-off points is more related to supply and demand than it is to predictive validity in terms of potential success". Similar conclusions about the limited predictive value of school academic performance were also established by Chase and Jacobs (1989), Johnes (1990), and Larose and Roy (1991).

Existing literature on teaching and learning suggests that factors such as teaching strategies (Bartz and Miller, 1991), the students' motivation (Talbot, 1990), the students' approach to studying (Meyer, 1990), the interaction between students and the academic and the social systems of the university (Tinto, 1975), cultural expectations (Ginsburg, 1992), psychosocial factors (McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001) and numerous other factors (Watkins, 1984; Logan, 1990; Jacobi, 1991; Keef, 1992; Minnaert and Janssen, 1992) have great influence on students' success at university. It is therefore, argued that single measures per se, like previous academic success, are not strong predictors of success at university. Multiple measures, used in combination, can be more predictive than each of the measures used individually (Solomon, Vancouver, Reinhardt and Haf, 1989).

Yet, even the multiple measures approach has limited potential when all the predictors are pre-enrolment measures (measures of characteristics or achievements that occur prior to the student commencing the programme in which success is being predicted). For Killen (1994), it does not matter how carefully they are constructed, school examinations and special university entrance examinations are not strong predictors of success at university as they do not measure non-intellective factors related to important influences on success encountered by students after enrolment at university, especially for adult learners and open and distance learners who have a lot of other responsibilities.

Given the complexity of university education, it seems unlikely that there is much value in trying to find simple pre-enrolment predictors of success at university. Rather, it might be more useful to focus on post-enrolment factors. Studies that have taken this approach have identified a limited number of factors that appear to have a strong influence on academic success. For example, Killen (1994) concluded that some of the most significant factors in students' academic success at university were interest in the course, motivation, self-discipline and effort (none of which can be predicted directly from high school results). Student effort was also prominent in students' explanations of success and failure in a study by Schmelzer et al (1987). They found that persistent and active study was the most common reason that college students gave for their academic success. Setting appropriate goals, a good study environment, and effective time management were also considered important. Academic failure was attributed primarily to lack of study, poor time management, and inadequate goal setting. Student self-efficacy also features prominently in attempts to explain student success (Kleemann, 1994; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001).

#### **6. Methodology and Participants**

This study was a qualitative baseline study that simply sought to measure what students felt about their university in preparation of a wider and deeper research to be carried out by the researchers in the university during the course of the year. The baseline research is meant to guide the researchers in formulating and

designing research instruments for the pending research. Respondents were asked to freely respond to the following question: What factors have, according to you, the most important influence on your academic performance and completion of your programme at the university? Since this question elicits their feelings and perceptions, the baseline study was thus a qualitative study.

On 31 March 2015, a total of fifty (25 female and 25 male) final year students in the Faculty of Social Sciences at GZU main campus were randomly selected for the study. The students were asked to respond freely to the question: What factors have, according to you, the most important influence on your academic performance and completion of your programme at the university? Their responses were categorised into themes as discussed below.

## **7. Findings of the Study**

Participants identified university support services; student personal characteristics; the macro socio-economic environment; and funding as the most important determinants of their performance and completion of the programme.

### **7.1 University support services**

In this study, university support services are the total experiences got by the student in all her/his contact with the university. They include the total university environment as viewed by the student. These experiences, viewed as a total package, determine whether the student will successfully go through her/his programme within the timeframe prescribed for the programme.

Students were not happy with the service they get from the university. They cited poor library facilities; weak Internet services; scarce and outdated books; scarce accommodation resulting in students arranging their own accommodation out of campus; scarce and poor lecture rooms; mass lectures; and overloaded lecturers as some of the areas of concern. All respondents felt that these university environmental issues compromised their academic performance resulting in some of them failing programme modules and taking longer than the normal period to complete the programme.

In recent years universities worldwide have been harnessing strategies that help them cut costs. Some of such strategies have been diminishing the proportion of full-time tenured academic teaching staff positions in favour of part-timers. In these circumstances, part-time teaching staff have been accorded poor pay and limited professional support with very few or no benefits at all. In addition part-time lecturers have little or no job security. GZU has also embraced the strategy. Students at GZU have complained of mass lectures conducted by these part time lecturers who have been overloaded with modules to teach. This arrangement, while it may appear attractive to institutions, is detrimental to student success especially those students who need consistent assistance in their studies. Such students could include those with learning disabilities, the disadvantaged and other vulnerable students.

Thus, all participating students felt that service provision at GZU was poor and this contributed to some of them failing some of the modules. It is thus concluded that the university did not offer a good and conducive learning environment as perceived by the students.

### **7.2 Student personal characteristics**

Also most respondents felt that there were some personal attributes that determined academic performance and whether the student would complete the programme in the prescribed time frame or not. Things to do with student internal motivation as observed by Talbot (1990); the overall student approach to studying as established by Meyer (1990); including self-discipline, goal setting and time management as concluded by Schmelzer et al (1987), make great contributions to students' performance and completion of the programme within the prescribed time frame. These issues focus on current behaviour patterns of the student rather than some past behaviour patterns.

### **7.3 The macro socio-economic environment**

Students also observed that the harsh economic environment made some of their colleagues drop out. At the peak of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008, universities almost closed down as the majority of their students stopped coming to university. Students observed that the harsh economic environment meant that most of the adult students' attention would be divided between the academic work and other demands. The poor performing economy resulted in students failing some of their modules as their minds could not concentrate due to other pressing problems emanating from the poor macro socio-economic environment.

### **7.4 Adequate funding**

Traditionally university students' tuition has been funded by the government and other public institutions and the private sector through grants, scholarships and soft loans. Today this funding is hard to come

by in Zimbabwe. Students felt that as long as their minds were disturbed by funding issues their academic concentration would be weak resulting in not only poor performance, but failure to complete the programme.

Students were of the opinion that universities need to secure adequate funding levels to subsidise students' fees. In addition they will need to target this funding towards instruction and support services that help students to advance in their goals. In this regard affordability has to be ensured through keeping tuition fees down. This can best be achieved by examining and reexamining administrative costs so that they are in tandem with student success and reality on the ground.

## 8. Conclusion

In this study none of the participating students mentioned entry academic qualifications / points as one of the determinants of their academic performance and completion of their degree programmes at GZU. Rather, they felt that university systems, the general macro-economic environment, student disposition and funding were the major determinants of performance and completion of programmes at GZU. This does not mean that academic entry standards have no bearing on performance. Their impact is very minimal when compared to these other factors. In fact a follow-up discussion with some of the respondents revealed that students with high grades at entry point are not the ones who graduate with first class at the end of the programme. What this tells us is that there is more to university education performance than past academic grades. University students are already adults whose minds are full of many issues that may enhance or diminish the academic performance of students and completion of programmes at university. Simply taking their past performance as determinant of present and future performance is not only erroneous, but also inconsistent with principles governing adult human life. Our final conclusion is that environmental factors like the university itself, general macro-environment, student motivation and disposition, and a multitude of other related factors have more impact on university students' academic performance and completion of programmes than their high school results or past performance.

## 9. Recommendations

Using the above discussion and conclusion as point of reference, we make the following recommendations for improving students' performance, retention and completion of programmes at university

- **Existing for the customer:** The University should improve its student services to ensure service delivery is user-friendly and motivates students to work towards excellence. The university may also introduce a students' services office where students get counselling and help on both their academic and social problems.
- **Public funding:** The government has its obligations on student success. One of these obligations being that there is need for adequate public funding to support operations. This has traditionally been a state responsibility to enable college life to be affordable for students.
- **Staffing levels:** The state must also ensure and guarantee proper staffing levels in universities. There is need to strengthen academic staffing levels possibly through strong policy frameworks and legislation, research, communication and collective bargaining.
- **Supervision:** Government must also ensure that universities fulfill their mandate of high quality educational programmes for students. Before the advent of ZIMCHE, universities were regarded as highly autonomous with self-regulatory powers. Self regulation has its own challenges.
- **Further studies:** This study was a baseline study. A broader and deeper study in the university or other universities in the country is therefore recommended.

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