

**FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS ENROLLED AT A ZIMBABWEAN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING**

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**Abstract:** *The research sought to assess the factors that determine the academic success of non-traditional enrolled at Zimbabwean institutions of Higher Learning. The study employed qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. A phenomenological research design was adopted to explore the factors that determine academic pathways of non-traditional students. The study made use of self-administered semi structured interview questions. A sample of non-traditional students was employed and a thematic content analysis was used to analyze data from a captive population of non-traditional students. The purposive sampling was to select the captive respondents of masters' students at MSU. The study found out that, the multiple roles faced by non-traditional students caused them to face the countless challenges to academic factors. The factors that determines that academic pathway includes self-motivation, group discussion, and hardworking, linking knowledge with experience. The study noted that factors which can hamper success include accommodation, financial constraint and lack of network form family members and this was mainly lopsided to affect women than men. The study recommends that all programs designed for no-traditional students should be conducted in focal points such as big town like Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare and many more. The department should make sure that accommodation of non-traditional students is readily available every time non-traditional students visited the campus.*

**Key Words:** Success, Factors, Academic Success Factors, Non-traditional students, Obstacles

**Research Area:** Social Science

**Paper Type:** Research Paper

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide including Zimbabwe, the appetite for further education has forced adults of various ages to throng institutions of higher learning seeking opportunities for career advancement in order to enhance upward mobility. It is therefore, a common practice internationally for traditional universities to enrol adult students on postgraduate degree programmes on block release. Students on block release are routinely released for short periods of time by their work organisations to attend lectures and return to work after these lectures. Such students are commonly referred to as non-traditional students.

Academic success is the measurement used to associate positive outcomes assessed for students. To be successful in academics means to take charge of learning by working hard at academic courses. Student success can also be defined using traditional measures of academic achievement, such as scores on standardized college entry exams, college grades, and credit hours earned in consecutive terms, which represent progress toward the degree.

Non-traditional university student's academic journey is shaped by various factors that determine their academic success. The factors that influence academic success of non-

traditional students go beyond cognitive ability. These factors can be categorised as institutional, academic, socio-economic or personal in nature. Non-traditional student is characterised by a delay in enrolment, attending college on part time bases, work full time while enrolled, has family responsibilities such as a spouse or dependents, is a single parent and is considered financially independent (Baptista, 2013). Wild (2014) argues that non-traditional students have to balance academic, family and work roles in a way to deal with life stressors and persist for graduation. Learning from experience is certainly something the adult learner brings to the table. They tend to connect what they are learning to previous experiences and possible future situations.

In spite of the challenges, many non-traditional students are successful in college. The chief reason for this is the high level of motivation exhibited by maturity. Adults view their experience in college as a purposeful choice for a new and different future, a future of hope and possibilities (Kasworm, 2008). Non-traditional students view enrolment in college as a gateway to a better life (Compton, Cox, &Laanan, 2006; Pusser et al., 2007). A second reason for their success is the life experiences adult students bring to the classroom. These experiences form a framework which enables adult students to process and assimilate new information and situations (Compton et al., 2006; Donaldson and Graham, 1999). In addition, adults' life experiences can foster a determination to overcome obstacles in their lives (Carmichael & Taylor, 2005). Non-traditional students are more likely to report a high level of satisfaction with their studies than traditional students (Kasworm et al., 2002). Non-traditional students who persist in their studies often have college GPAs comparable to traditional-age students (Graham et al., 2000)

Benshoff (1993) posits many non-traditional students decided to come back to school so as to complete educational pursuits they started years before as atypical students. There are so many reasons that have caused them to drop out of education which includes financial considerations, competing responsibilities, and lack of focus, motivation, and maturity. Other major reasons that non-traditional students return to college include family life transitions (marriage, divorce, and death), changes in leisure patterns, and self-fulfilment (Benshoff, 1993).

There are so many prime factors that determine the academic success of non-traditional students. Academic success is a pertinent issue in the field of psychology. In today's current economic constraints, acquiring a university certificate is a paramount steppingstone for individual achievement and future success (Pritchard &Wilson, 2003). According to Egerter et al. (2009), obtaining university degree enables an individual to have better opportunities to improve one's quality of life. For example, one can get a higher social status, increased sense of control, and more social support. This enables non-traditional students to work hard to acquire their degree despite the thorn steps on their way. Egerter et al. (2009) argue that academic mobility improves one's work conditions, subjective social status, professional mobility, and ability to handle life stressors.

The students' age is a contributing factor to academic performance, though studies are inconclusive on whether age has an effect on a student's academic performance. According to Zikhali et al. (2015) non-traditional students are above 25 years of age. Newman- Ford et al. (2009) argue that younger students tend to perform better than older students because older and mature students thought to lack basic skills required for effective study or to be disturbed by age-related deficits. Richardson (1994) argues that older and mature students tend to be more focused and committed to their studies. Richardson (1994) asserts that non-traditional

students seek a deeper research on their academic work. This enables the non-traditional students who are a bit older than the undergraduate students to be successful to their academic work.

The journey of academic progression of non-traditional students is characterized with opulence and asperity. According to Wyatt (2011), non-traditional students are a diverse group of people that are growing faster than any other population in higher education. Non-traditional students experience wide-ranging academic, personal, financial, and social needs from traditional college student life setting. The obstacles faced by non-traditional students emanate from the definition of the matter which attracts a topical face in research. It is in this regard that age has not been spare as a determining factor. Schmidt (2015) supports that the interference of family and employment responsibilities, life circumstances with educational goals and degree attainment, as well as other variables such as residing off-campus, working full-time rather than part-time.

The research of 305 non-traditional students conducted by McCann, Graves, and Dillon (2012) reveal questions on academic advising effectiveness, academic services, admissions and financial aid effectiveness, campus climate, instructional effectiveness, registration effectiveness, safety and security, and service excellence. The findings of this study revealed that non-traditional students were motivated by strong faculty engagement, with cognitive stimulation and interest being the most dominant predictor of adult learner persistence.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS**

Motivation is a process that drives students toward completion of set activities (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Motivation encompasses factors that include a person's needs, interests, and goal-directed behavior (DeLamater & Myers, 2011). Baptista (2013) posits that there are three motivational artifacts which influence students to attend higher education these encompasses personal, professional, and social. Personal motives of non-traditional students with children believe that their college enrolment helps to foster children's pride to have interest in education (Austin, 2006). Professional motivations for nontraditional students includes a wish to improve work performance, gain knowledge and insight into new professional demands and standards, and many want to pursue a degree to add to their professional work value. Many studies show that college enrolment for non-traditional students provide them with better opportunities for employment as well as better careers. These motivations allow students to coax for higher educational gains.

The other motive in higher qualification for non-traditional student is the social fulfilment. DeLamater and Myers, (2011) indicate that some non-traditional students have a desire and commitment to educate society and enhance their own citizenship. Some of these students are life-long learners who wish to improve themselves and believe that education is a right for everyone.

Self-efficacy is motivational factor that influences learners' academic success. Self-efficacy, for purposes of this study, is a term that describes the level of belief and confidence students hold in their ability to effectively complete a task or accomplish a goal. Self-efficacy is a pinnacle concept to consider in the field of education since it provides clues of academic abilities. Students with high-efficacy can feel confident in their ability to continue their pursuit towards a degree while adjusting to their college or university (Bean & Eaton, 2000). University students need to evaluate their abilities and skills in order to be successful.

Therefore university students set higher goals and are more committed to achieving set targets when they exhibit high levels of self-efficacy (Xiang, 2015). A student with high self-efficacy envisions success while low self-efficacy provides a vision of failure and possible roadblocks besetting success.

According to Alderman (2008) motivational factors such as learners' belief about effort, competences and goals pronounce student's academic achievement. Research studies also showed that motivational constructs reciprocally interweave with academic achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). Learners with high self-efficacy beliefs, learning goal orientation, intrinsic motivation, and task value, are more likely to display a deeper learning approach and better performance (Pintrich & Garcia, 1998).

Several theorists have specifically identified academic performance as an important determinant of global self-esteem. Academic self-esteem is operationally defined as the evaluative appraisal of the experience of being capable of meeting academic challenges and being worthy of happiness. In this case self-esteem can be the spirit level which can be used to align social demands and academic expectations so as to enhance success. Academic self-concept or academic self-esteem can be broadly considered to be powerful factors that constitute academic success.

The relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement has been well documented in the literature. Different studies have reached the conclusion that academic achievement and self-esteem are positively correlated (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Lockett & Harrell, 2003; Schmidt & Padilla, 2003).

## **2.2 PERSONALITY AND SUCCESS**

Personality is a collection of emotional, thought and behavioral patterns that are unique to each person and relatively stable over time. Researchers have turned to personality variables in an attempt to predict academic success as well as academic failure. Personality determines the individual's unique adjustment to the world. Smith and Nelson (1993) view that ability; discipline and effort are the components of personality that also determine academic success for university students. Discipline entails a student to be able to budget time in order to avoid the temptation of socialize during academic time. Time management helps the students to avoid putting course requirement off.

Ability is the noble factor that influences non-traditional students' academic achievement. Ability is the main factor that distinguishes successful students from being failure among students. Therefore successful non-traditional are students who are academically gifted.

### **2.2.1 Self-regulation as an indicator to success**

The other component that enhances academic performance and success is self-regulation. Xiang (2015) points that self-regulation has three components which are behavioural that is actively control student resources such as time, study environment, use of peers and faculty resources. Self-regulated learning is a cyclical process where the student sets a goal or learning outcome, develops and implements strategies to achieve the desired outcome, monitors progress, and modifies strategies to maximize effect (Alderman, 2008). Self-regulation is an innate deliberate approach to university students which requires goals setting, strategic planning, and self-monitoring. According to Xiang (2015) the extent to which a student self-regulates dependent on motivational factors such as commitment to

goals and personal beliefs of student's capability to perform at expected levels and achieve the desired outcome.

According to Zimmerman (1989), self-regulation exists when students are wholeheartedly engaged in their own learning process. Research has shown that self-regulation is an essential element for the learning process (Jarvela & Jarvenoja, 2011). Students can use many different types of self-regulation strategies to achieve goals and evaluate their own progress to meet their goals. Students who use the self-regulation cycle are more likely to adapt and continue their self-regulation behavior with learning.

### **2.3 INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS**

Zikhali et al. (2015) observes that the class size is one of the factors that help non-traditional students to perform better. At MSU most non-traditional class have a total enrolment which is less than thirty students hence the lecturer – student ratio is very friendly. This would enhance a healthy interaction between the student and the lecturer which largely shapes the academic success factor for non-traditional student. The culture of a student department has a positive impact to the performance of non-traditional students. The relationship between students and supporting staff such as lecturers, librarians, bursar and many more determine student achievement (Zikhali et al., 2015). The introduction of technology such as e-learning and e-library cannot be spared to the performance of non-traditional students.

In addition, nontraditional students are not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution and the institution's academic offering is their primary concern (Bean & Metzner, 1985). According to Brooke (2012) the nurturing environment at the community college largely influences a student's perception of their new academic environment; which in turn potentially influences their subsequent academic performance. Staff needs to also understand non-traditional student factors and barriers in order to provide the resources necessary to assist this population.

Programs and services will need to attract and appeal to non-traditional students by being family friendly and focused on their needs and ways to assist them with their many barriers (Wild, 2014).

### **2.4 AIM OF STUDY**

To explore the factors that can determine the academic success for non-traditional students.

### **2.5 PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING**

This study involved non-traditional students on block release at MSU. The target population sample of non-traditional students was be used until information has been exhausted in this study. An equal representation of gender was employed. The researcher collected the information from a smaller group or subset of the population in such a way that the knowledge gained is a representative of the population. According to Detwiler (2011), the sample represents the characteristics of the population fairly and accurately. Purposive sampling was to select the captive respondents of non-traditional students at MSU. To elicit in-depth information, knowledge of the topic under study was used to choose respondents who were willing to share their experiences at university (McMillan & Schumacher 1993).

## **2.6 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A phenomenological design was used in this research to explore the factors which can determine academic success factors of students. Phenomenology is an effective research tool for revealing the qualitative aspects of success factors (Mudhovozi, 2012). This design was used to describe essential factors that constitute non-traditional academic experience. Phenomenology seeks to gain understanding of the essential “truths” of the lived experience (Byrne, 2011). The research used phenomenology to gather the academic success factors of students.

## **2.7 DATA COLLECTION**

The researcher conducted face-to-face individual interviews with the respondents. Interviews were carried out on the captive population of respondents who were comfortable and convenient. The respondents were invited to speak of their coping experiences, which determine their academic success in an open-ended manner, which is flexible. The interview sessions was recorded verbatim and transcribed. Field notes and interview conversations was recorded. Mudhovozi (2012) indicates that credibility of the data enhances by the richness of the study.

## **2.8 DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. The researcher grouped all the response transcripts into interesting phrases and themes. Data familiarization is a key to thematic analysis as it is used for qualitative methods. Howitt and Cramer (2010) describe that the process vary according to circumstances including the researcher’s expectations about the direction in which the analysis proceed. The researcher made codes after every two or three lines of text but there were no rules about this. This method proved to be useful in a qualitative study because it consists of reading transcript, identifying possible themes from the interviews to be conducted. In this study, the academic success factors of non-traditional students were analysed using content analysis. This study was based on addressing the four strategies of dependability, conformability, transformability and credibility in a way to present a convincing case that this study is academically sound.

## **2.9 RESULTS**

The following themes emerged from the participants’ responses:

- Self-motivation
- Group discussion and assistance from lecturers
- Hardworking
- Linking knowledge with experience
- Commitment

## **3. SELF-MOTIVATION**

The respondents revealed that self-motivation as the other factors which determine their academic success. They consistently state that despite the challenges they encounter they built resilience through self-motivation. Furthermore, all the participants described the biggest reason they continued enrolment was because of self-motivation, which is gained through excitement of acquiring a university degree. Each of the nine participants had different reasons for their self-motivation, but comments surfaced throughout the interviews indicated it was up to them to motivate themselves, as well as their responsibility to show up

to class. These participants reiterated that it was not someone else's obligation to keep them motivated. One participant shared:

I'm being motivated by the amount of money that I put forward as my school fees especially these days of economic constraints. The social role that I have given me power to work extra hard hence being successful.

This is in line with DeLamater and Myer (2011) who indicated that self-motivation encompass factors of personal needs, interest and goal directed behaviour. This entails that some non-traditional students work hard to be successful so that they add value to their professional workplaces.

I'm being motivated so that I can be promoted at work after completing my degree.

There the after benefit of attaining the degree self-motivates non-traditional students who are already at work. This is a different to traditional students who are having a low motivation of being employed after completion of their degree due to high unemployment rate in Zimbabwe. The respondents also revealed that they are motivated so as to be community role model hence academic success

#### **4. GROUP DISCUSSION AND ASSISTANCE FROM LECTURERS**

Academic success is determined by peer support through group discussion. Some of the respondents indicated that they seek consultation from academic friends when they had faced academic challenges and very few of the respondents revealed that they usually seek assistance from the college lecturers. The above findings is in consistency with the findings of Mudhovozi (2013) who presented that students achieve in the examination as a result of helping from other peers. Therefore group discussion is a key that enables most non-traditional students to achieve on their examination. In line with this Zikhali (2015) noted that the relationship between students and supporting staff such as lecturers, librarians, bursar determine student achievement. One non-traditional respondent indicated that group discussion and experiential learning helps them to grasp certain concept hence enabling them to be successful. Other studies revealed that non-traditional students indicate multiple responsibilities as a noble factor on study progress and success (Strauss, 2001). The four major challenges that postgraduate students experience include relationships with supervisors, the importance of support structures.

One respondent had credited his success to the university's support services as helpful in finding acceptance, establishing an identity and acknowledging the additional responsibilities that non-traditional students enter college with. Regarding this response is shows that supporting staff such as lecturers, librarians and ancillary staff seemed to care to students as they are enrolled at the university and help them to find their way around.

#### **5. HARDWORKING**

All of the respondents informed that hardworking is the chief factor which determines their academic success in spite of having multiple responsibilities. One respondent said that in order to balance work, social and academic responsibilities he would work after hours. This is a big sign of hardworking. Hardworking is a sign of commitment which enables students to achieve in their examination since all of the participants reported that they had never failed any examination since they begin their course. In support to the above findings one respondent notes that

In order for me to pass all of my examination, it's because i was always committed and determine to my college work. This commitment came through researching and making extensive reading after hours after fulfilling all of my social responsibility to my family.

The above statement hardworking is a push factor for non-traditional students as they work extra hard in order not to create conflict to their social life especially to those students who used to be supported by their spouses. This shows that failing a course would cause conflict especially to the married individuals. Failing would be evaluated as a sign of laziness. This is in par with the findings of Alderman (2008) who posit that little effort and less competence pronounce the level of student's academic achievement. Hardworking is an element of personality. Therefore from the finding stated above academic success is coated with personality of learners. One respondent pointed that hardworking is pushed by the pain of paying school fees since most of the respondents had indicated that they pay for their own college fees. There the performance of non-traditional students is determined by understanding the value of money paid as school fees.

## **6. LINKING KNOWLEDGE WITH EXPERIENCE**

Three respondents revealed that they easily understand what they had learnt due to linking their knowledge with their daily work. Therefore from the above response it shows that experience is a very good teacher. This indicates that marrying experience and learning would help non-traditional students to quickly grasp the concept hence pronouncing academic success.

## **7. COMMITMENT**

The research finds the most of the respondents had indicated they managed to pass all of their examinations due to commitment. Two respondents lamented that they are committed to their set goals of acquiring their masters' certificate so that they could have professional upgrading at their workplace, being role model in the community, to be promoted at work and setting a good pace for their children. Commitment is a subset of hardworking. In support to the above one respondent said: I passed all my courses as a result of commitment. In to the above stated Xiang (2015) extent that student self-regulation dependent on motivational factors such as commitment to goals and personal beliefs of student's capability to perform at expected levels and achieve the desired outcome.

## **8. FAMILY SUPPORT**

Other participants used a more patchwork of support from spouses and partners. The family provide with financial and emotional support which is the complicated influence of degree attainment. A big number of respondents indicated that their spouses were their biggest help. This was a reaction to a question "what kind of support did you get and from who? Several female non-traditional students credited to get support fro8.6 m their husbands who were in the form of buying textbooks, editing written assignments and pay for the school fees.

## **9. DISCUSSION**

The factors which determine academic success in this study had emerged with mixed lens as factors vary from self-motivation, group discussion and assistance from lectures, hardworking, commitment and linking knowledge with experience. These thematic variables were not proportionally grouped in gender representation as the perceptions of males and females might differ at some time due to gender cultural roles. The participants reported that



their success is being triggered by the amount of support they get from the family members such as spouse and children. In this regards the non-traditional students who are mostly have dependents that also go to school self-motivates themselves in a way to be role model to their children to work hard at school. The findings out that self-motivation is geared by the goal of getting an upright mobility of being promoted at work, getting a better job and to get good degree class so that their PHD applications cannot be affected by a lower degree class. This was in line with DeLamater and Myer (2011) who opine that personal needs, interest and goals motivate students to be successful academically.

Only three participants indicated that group discussion was not beneficial to their success but attributed their success to support given by institutional supporting structures such as lecturers, librarians and ancillary staff. These participants were employed on campus hence they enjoyed all sorts of institutional benefits designed for traditional students. The view of the above respondents echo those of Cermak and Filkins (2004) who indicated that non-traditional students employed at the campus receive best institutional services hence determining their success. Although the rest of the participants acknowledged the role played by lecturers in supporting their academic working, much of the respect was given to group discussions especially towards examination. This view was supported by Zikhali et al. (2015) who pointed out that the relationship between students and supporting staff such as lecturers, librarians, bursar and many more determines student achievement. Parsonson (2011) suggested that university academic staff need to pass on research skills, methods and applications and develop appropriate writing and dissemination skills. Several researches show that social support is a central factor in the successful adjustment of first year students to university and for academic persistence. Therefore group discussion is an essential determinant of academic success. Other participants fenced that they struggled as a result of poor relationships with lecturers resulting in lack of support structures, study isolation and confusion. This finding is agreement with the work of (Johnston & Broda, 1996 in Mudhovozi, 2011).

Despite the multiple challenges faced by non-traditional students all the respondents reported that academic success is the product of hardworking and commitment. The finding is consistent with the previous studies which found that the achievement of postgraduate students is coated around commitment and hardworking (Wild, 2014). Therefore commitment is a subset of hardworking. The study notes that hardworking constitutes the personality of learners. This finding is consistent with Smith and Nelson (1993) who views that ability, discipline and effort are the components of personality that also determine academic success for university students. Three participants lamented that their academic success is caused by linking work experience with academic work. This means that academic work would become easy hence success. Family support was also reported to add value in determining the success of non-traditional students. The support included paying for the school fees, encouragement, providing with material things such as buying text books. The findings give credence to Benshoff (1993) who highlights that financial and family concerns are two of the biggest considerations that impact on the adult student academic achievement.

## **10. CONCLUSION**

It emerged from the present study that the majority of non-traditional students encountered factors which can determine their achievements as commitment, hardworking, group discussion, assistance from lecturers, linking and knowledge with experience. In has been noted that negative relationship between the lecturer and the student caused the student

to lack foresight and concentration with academic work. These factors were noted that they are interconnected which means one factor can determine the other.

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