

Economic Challenges and Students' Persistence at Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU) in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Using Vincent Tinto's persistence framework and human agency perspective, we ask how economic challenges impact students' sense of self-efficacy, their sense of belonging and students' perception of the curriculum. In times of economic difficulties, the importance students attach to education often declines, as they fear to be examples of graduates without jobs. Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University's (ZEGU) unique Christian outlook is discussed as somewhat stifling the students' sense of belonging. Despite their initial motivation and desire to complete their university education, financial difficulties are resulting in some students deferring their studies whereas other students are balancing education and survival strategies. As agentic beings, students are strategically calculating and showing resilience to cope with the challenges through being "prisoners of hope," transactional relationships and entrepreneurial activities.

Keywords: Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University; ZEGU; persistence; economic challenges; students

Introduction

Zimbabwe has witnessed phenomenal growth in terms of institutions of higher learning (Shizha and Kariwo 2011). From one university at independence (Garwe and Maganga 2015; Kanyenze et al. 2011), Zimbabwe currently boasts well over 14 universities. This growth has been followed by the growth of university entrants, with the enrolment rate standing at 8.48% of the population (Times Higher Education 2019). Several studies identify persistence as one of the challenges faced by university students. In our study, we link economic challenges to persistence problems. More specifically, we ask how economic challenges affect the ability of students to persist with university education. We view a lack of persistence as reflected by student dropouts, students' deferment of studies and poor academic performance.

Our study focuses on Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU). ZEGU is located in Bindura, a town in Mashonaland Central Province approximately 90 kilometres from the capital city, Harare. The university was established by Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Forward in Faith. The founder and chancellor of the university, Ezekiel Handinawangu Guti, claims that he received a dream to establish a university in 1972 (Muyambo and Machingura 2014). The dream came to fruition in 2012 when the university opened its doors to its first 12 students at Africa Multination for Christ College (AMFCC), the church's Bible college, before moving to the university campus in Bindura (Muyambo and Machingura 2014). The university currently has four faculties, which are the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Business, Economics and Accounting, the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Health, Science and Technology. Current statistics show that the university has over 1600 students.

Our focus on ZEGU seeks to extend the frontiers of knowledge on persistence and economic challenges. There seem to be scant and limited studies on students' persistence in Zimbabwe. A search of studies that deal with comparisons of enrolment rates versus graduation rates will yield little response. Only a few scholarly studies (see, for example, Garwe 2014) show a mismatch between rates for enrolments and graduation. Thus many students are dropping out along the way without completing their studies. This study attempts to link economic challenges to students' persistence.

Zimbabwe's Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Tertiary Students in the Post-2008 Period

The period from 2000–2008 marks the annihilation of the Zimbabwean economy, as revealed in several studies (Chitando, Nyakudya, and Phiri 2016; Makochekana 2016; Shumba 2017), though the post-2008 era was characterised by economic recovery. Biti (2015) claims that there is anecdotal evidence that the adoption of a multi-currency regime commonly referred to as dollarisation brought about economic stability to an

economy that experienced a sustained period of hyperinflation. The stabilisation was a product of the signing of the Global Political Agreement (GPA) that brought ZANU PF (Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front) and the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) together. Soon after the signing of the GPA, the economy was dollarised, marking the death of the infamous Zimbabwean dollar (Biti 2015).

Despite the dollarisation that occurred, unemployment remains high in Zimbabwe. The decline from 80% to 75% in 2015 was marginal (see Biti 2015). Unemployed parents are finding it difficult to cater to the needs of their children in tertiary institutions. Thus the majority of students, including ZEGU students, are sent to university with inadequate requirements. Unemployment will remain high because industries that closed during the “Zimbabwe Crisis” are yet to reopen and those operating are doing so below capacity (Shumba 2017).

Around 2016, the cash crisis emerged and the phenomenon persists hitherto. Obtaining cash from banks is a colossal task in Zimbabwe. Banks imposed withdrawal limits; these limits were as little as \$10 (bond currency) a day from 2016 to 2018. Various explanations are provided on why the country is facing a cash (liquidity) crisis. Some analysts argue that the cash crisis is a result of more imports than exports. Whatever the reasons are, the crisis resulted in the introduction of the bond currency—a surrogate currency. Although the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe claimed that the bond currency was 1:1 with the US dollar, until the recent devaluation, the reality on the ground was that the bond currency lost value immediately after its introduction. The impacts on students and the universities were and continue to be monumental. Students and parents cannot access cash from the banks to finance their day-to-day livelihoods. Universities themselves are finding it difficult to access finances and ensure the smooth running of the universities. An earlier study by Hove (2012) shows the economic crisis of 2000 to 2008 significantly affected the delivery of services to university students in Zimbabwe. Around 2008 when Zimbabwe was reeling under its worst economic challenges, the oldest and largest university in Zimbabwe, the University of Zimbabwe, had to close, resulting in students moving out of the halls of residences (Hove 2012). Before that, the university could not afford to provide decent accommodation, water, food, and electricity to its students. It is no wonder one student described living at the University of Zimbabwe as akin to living in a jail (Hove 2012). Poor service delivery more than anything else affects students’ sense of belonging at any institution.

Soon after the elections held on 30 July 2018 that were won by ZANU PF—and whose results were of course contested at the Supreme Court—Zimbabwe witnessed a sudden surge in inflation. Basic goods disappeared from shop shelves in the same way that they did in 2008—the climax of the “Zimbabwean Crisis” (Bond 2019). The bond currency exchange rate shot to 1:50. A three-tier pricing system has illegally intensified. Goods and services are priced in US dollars, bond currency and mobile money popularly

known as Ecocash. Of note has been the insistence on US dollars as a form of payment in a society where a few elites have access to US dollars. The effects have been horrendous, particularly for institutions who are paid in bond currency by students who are yet to receive goods and services that institutions are supposed to pay for in US dollars.

Surviving in the current period is a difficult if not monumental task. With high inflation, students face challenges such as food shortages and an inability to pay their tuition fees and accommodation. We accept the view of Gukurume (2011, 178) that the economic challenges have significantly impacted the lives of university students and at times students are becoming “paupers and vagabonds on University campus.” Universities are equally affected by the economic problems that are damning prospects of high-quality service provision to students. In addition to these economic challenges, universities continue to face an incredible brain drain with experienced lecturers and administrators migrating from Zimbabwe to countries within the region, another factor that is reminiscent of the crisis period of 2008 (see Hungwe 2011; Kanyenze et al. 2011). This is exacerbating the manpower gaps that were inherited in the tertiary sector (Majoni 2014). Indigenous literature is silent on how economic challenges have affected students, particularly from a persistence perspective.

The Concept of Persisting

Our study utilises Vincent Tinto’s (2017b) concept of persistence. Persistence is another way of talking about motivation (Tinto 2017a). Persistence is the determination to continue in pursuit of specific goals despite challenges. In the context of the study, the student should want to persist to degree completion despite economic challenges.

There are several key elements that determine students’ ability to persist in higher education and these are *self-efficacy*, *sense of belonging* and *the curriculum*. These elements determine the ability of the university students to persist to degree completion despite the severe economic challenges facing them in Zimbabwe.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1977) shows that self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief in their ability to succeed in a specific task. It is a function of past experiences, particularly how students perceive their capacity to deal with or control their environment. Self-efficacy is not inherited but a product of social interaction. Self-efficacy varies with situations—a person may feel capable of succeeding in one situation but may not feel the same in another situation. Self-efficacy has implications for goal attainment. A person with a strong sense of self-efficacy has high chances of goal attainment whereas a person with a weaker sense of self-efficacy has weaker chances of goal attainment. This is because the person with a stronger sense of self-efficacy expends more effort on the goals while

the one with a weaker sense of self-efficacy is likely to withdraw in the face of adversity. Students with a high sense of self-efficacy are more likely to persist despite economic challenges whereas the student with a low sense of self-efficacy is likely to drop out from the university in the face of economic challenges.

Sense of Belonging

Tinto (2017b) argues that while self-efficacy is important to student persistence in university, there is also a need for a sense of belonging. Students must see themselves as a member of a community of other students, academics and professional staff who value their membership (Chryssikos, Ahmed, and Ward 2017; Pascale 2018; Tsevi 2018; Yorke 2004). For Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski (2011), university life is not only about going to classes without being involved in other campus activities. A number of factors affect students' sense of belonging. These include students' interaction with other students, professional staff, academics and also extra-curricular activities (Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski 2011). Chryssikos, Ahmed, and Ward (2017) posit that students' interaction with staff and faculty members outside class hours can have a positive effect on student retention. Students with a stronger sense of belonging are bound to a group or community even in the face of adversities or challenges.

A sense of belonging is built by students' association with other students who share the same interests (e.g. sports or student politics), associating with students doing the same degree, and interacting with students with the same background (Chryssikos, Ahmed, and Ward 2017; Pascale 2018; Purdue University 2007; Tinto 2017a). Tinto (2017b) argues that "students who perceive themselves belonging to a specific group or the institution generally are more likely to persist because it leads not only to enhanced motivation but also a willingness to become involved with others in ways that further promote persistence." Tinto (2017b) further argues that the opposite—a sense of not belonging—leads a student to withdraw from contact with others, further undermining the motivation to persist. Walton and Cohen (2007) confirm that the feeling by a student that she or he does not belong to the class or broadly to the programme leads to withdrawal from learning activities. This is the basis for poor academic performance. The study interrogates the intersectionality of belonging and economic challenges.

The Curriculum

Students attach value to the material they are told to learn. The ability of the students to persist is dependent on the value that they attach to the curriculum. The student should perceive the material to be of sufficient quality and relevant to the matters that concern them now and in the future. Lizzio and William (2004) attest that a curriculum and teaching practices that are viewed as unhelpful and low quality elicit less or no motivation.

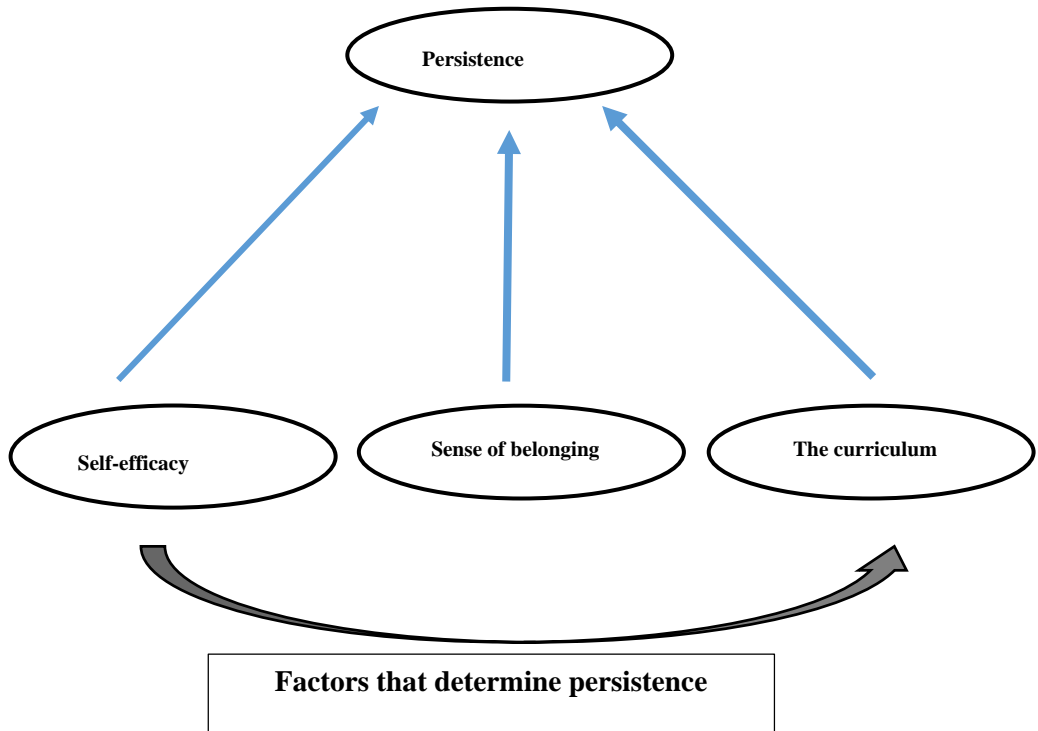


Figure 1: Components of persistence (Tinto 2017b)

Methods and Materials

The article is based on a qualitative study of students’ persistence in the wake of economic challenges and relies mostly on non-numeric data in the form of words and includes textual analysis (Jackson, Drummond, and Camara 2007). The approach we used, comprising multiple data collection methods, allowed the phenomenon to be interrogated from the perspective of students, academics and non-academic staff.

We used the non-probability sampling technique in the form of judgmental sampling and as such the researchers had direct control over the elements included in the study (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2015). To that end, we focused on students with perceived persistence challenges. A total of 15 students and five university staff were selected. In our sample we included students who had at some point deferred their studies, students with performance challenges and others with perceived general persistence challenges. We found judgemental sampling enabled rich elements to inform the data. Judgmental sampling was also used to select academic and non-academic staff at ZEGU.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews also called narrative interviews (Stuckey 2013). We were aware of the need to understand the social world from students' and academics' points of view, which is why we relied on in-depth interviews (Adhabhi and Anozie 2017) to capture how the economic challenges were affecting persistence. Consequently, we interviewed 15 students and five members of staff at ZEGU. The flexibility of the in-depth interviews allowed probing on areas requiring clarity.

The corpus of data gathered through interviews was analysed using thematic content analysis. The process started with the transcription of interviews followed by reading the transcriptions to identify the main themes inherent in the data. The main themes are presented in the discussion of the findings. The advantage of using thematic content analysis is that it allows the separation of major themes from minor themes.

Results

The Effects of Economic Challenges on Students at ZEGU

Students at ZEGU are affected in several ways by economic challenges. Due to the ever-increasing prices of basic commodities and services, the university is failing to keep up with the inflationary environment, resulting in the university increasing its fees. The recent fees increase has resulted in many students owing the university tuition fees, and several students are not sure whether they will be able to service their debt, as explained by one student:

Many students have accumulated fees arrears because of the inability to pay their fees. The situation has been worsened by the recent fees increase. The recent fees increase also shows how the general economic conditions of the country are also affecting institutions.

In the worst cases, financial difficulties amongst students have resulted in some students dropping out of the university. Dropping out of university more than anything else shows the immediate impact of economic challenges on students' persistence. A similar study at the University of Zimbabwe confirmed the effects of economic challenges on students' persistence (Tigere and Museveni 2008). This finding aligns with the findings of other studies (see Bakewell 2008; Bennett 2003; Bozick 2007). Speaking about dropping out, an interviewed student said:

The immediate impact of financial difficulties has been dropping out of students from university. I know of students who have dropped out of university, citing financial difficulties.

Economic challenges have also affected the students socially and psychologically. Many students highlighted that they are facing food insecurity as they lack adequate funds to finance their meals at the university dining hall. This finding confirms Tigere

and Musevenzi's (2008) finding that economic distress exposes students to food insecurity. Even those who live outside the campus are similarly affected by a lack of finances contributing to their food insecurity. Faced with food insecurity students have responded using a strategy called Zero Zero One, which is explained by one student in the following manner:

The majority of students have resorted to having no meal in the morning, no meal in the afternoon and then one meal in the evening. This is in the bid to save the meagre finances that they have.

The Implications of Economic Challenges for Self-Efficacy

The economic difficulties experienced by students at ZEGU have implications for their self-efficacy. Various interviewed students highlighted that they are demotivated and lack the will power and the desire they had when they started university education. Students are not sure whether they will be able to write their exams given accumulated debts. Serido et al. (2014) found that such financial stress interferes with students' ability to complete their studies. Those who manage to clear their financial arrears are concerned with the threat of worsening economic difficulties. Explaining the demotivation one respondent said:

I cannot concentrate with my studies. I am haunted by the possibility of [being] unable to write my exams given the accumulated fees. I cannot read well, in as much I cannot participate well in class. ... My energy and motivation are sapped out.

The possibility of students deferring their studies due to financial problems has affected students' motivation. To many students, it makes no sense to study hard and pay too much attention to their studies when it is abundantly clear that deferring studies is a huge possibility. The respondents highlighted that many students are holding on until reality dawns on them. Words such as "anxiety," "restless," and "demotivation" capture the quandary of many students who are not sure what the future holds for them.

Paradoxically, some students were motivated to continue despite the draining economic problems, as shown by remarks such as the following:

What is keeping me going is I do not have an option. I need to continue and finish my degree. Am in my second year going for attachment now next semester. I cannot give up; I am almost there.

The Implications of Economic Challenges for a Sense of Belonging

ZEGU has established various ways that help students to feel at home. Students commended the university for establishing various sporting activities. Participation in sporting activities such as soccer, basketball, netball and athletics has helped students

to feel at home and wanted as part of the ZEGU family. Apart from the sporting activities, some other co-curricular activities and initiatives have helped students to blend into the ZEGU family. One such initiative is ZAOGA On Campus (ZOC), a Christian membership group available at the institution. Interviewed students highlighted that ZOC has been a source of support amidst the challenges affecting them. This is because ZOC students have garnered spiritual support through prayers and spiritual upliftment. Through membership in ZOC, the students have made friends and broadened their social support base. The study confirms the findings of Law (2007) that friends made on campus are a source of support in times of economic difficulties. An earlier study by Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013) reveals clubs and student groups allow mentoring by peer students and faculty members and provide the necessary support to overcome barriers militating against students' persistence.

While ZOC has acted as a source of inclusion, other ZEGU Christian practices have acted as a source of exclusion. While religion and faith can be vital in ensuring a sense of belonging at a university, as shown in a study by Sawir et al. (2008), our findings agree with Muyambo and Machingura (2014) that ZEGU Christian requirements have militated against students' sense of belonging. For instance, the university demands that students attend morning devotions before lectures. As reported by interviewees, a number of students resent this requirement because not all ZEGU students are "ZAOGIANS" or belong to the Christian religion. Students who do not belong to Christianity feel that they do not belong to the institution. The restrictions at ZEGU as a Christian institution are somewhat downgrading students' sense of belonging, as explained by one respondent:

As students we need entertainment, particularly in the form of gigs by secular musicians. These are what makes university experience. We need these as students to help us de-stress in these prevailing economic challenges.

The Implications of Economic Challenges for Perceptions of the Curriculum

The economic difficulties students encounter affect their perception of the curriculum. Some of the interviewed students submitted that the value that students attach to their education has been diminishing because of economic challenges. This aligns with Mutambara and Veni's (2012) finding that the value people attach to education diminishes during economic difficulties, which affects the persistence of many students with low self-efficacy. With many graduates without jobs, the value of formal education has diminished amongst students. Students are clouded with anxiety and uncertainties concerning employment after graduation. Some of the students fear to be examples of graduates without jobs. As one of the interviewed students revealed:

I am not sure about the future. I fear to be an example of those graduates without a job. I believe this fear is not mine only but a lot of students also have the same fear.

We found that while economic challenges are diminishing the value that students attach to the curriculum, education has remained important to some students. Some students still feel that their education remains important despite an avalanche of challenges that affect them. The students believe that one day things are going to change and those with qualifications will go on to the top again. As “prisoners of hope” the economic challenges have hardened the students to push even harder. This is reflected in the narrative of one of the respondents, quoted below:

The economic-induced challenges have made us students to even push harder. As for myself am coming back to do my master’s here at ZEGU. We are living in a knowledge economy; I want to be prepared given that the country will not remain in this mess.

Students’ Agency to Survive Economic Challenges

The study found that students are mostly relying on their agency to survive the difficult milieu they find themselves in. By agency, we mean the capability, innovativeness and tenacity of the students to go beyond their challenges and persist with their studies (Barker 2005). The students are strategic, calculating and innovative in response to the stimulus from the external environment (Gukurume 2011). Students possess the ability to manoeuvre the structures that constrict their livelihoods.

Zero Zero One Strategy

Our findings reveal food insecurity ranks high amongst other challenges faced by students. Students on campus are unable to afford the cost of meals charged at the dining hall, whereas out-of-campus students cannot afford groceries and rentals. The prices of groceries and rentals continue to increase, further compounding the plight of many university students at ZEGU. This reality has resulted in students showing their resilience by adopting the strategy of having at least one meal per day. Though painful, the students viewed the strategy as helping them to persist with tertiary education. One student explained:

What has helped us is to skip some of the meals, in most cases students indulge in zero, zero, one strategy meaning no meal in the morning and afternoon and then one meal in the evening.

“Prisoners of Hope”

Many students at ZEGU are prisoners of hope. As “prisoners of hope” many students are struggling and persisting with their education despite economic challenges. Students believe that despite the challenges affecting them, someday things will change and they will study in a conducive environment. Others think that although they are struggling at the moment, by the time they finish their education things will have normalised and they

will be able to achieve their dreams of securing high-paying jobs. This is keeping most students going towards goal attainment at ZEGU. A student revealed:

These challenges are transient and will be over soon. Things are going to change; there is no need to slack in my studies. When the turnaround comes, Zimbabwe will need educated people; therefore as students we have no option but to hang on and strive for success.

When Cornered, Students Innovate to Survive

Apart from the use of drugs to escape reality, another phenomenon antithetical to the Christian values taught at ZEGU has been the emergence of transactional relationships to cope with economic difficulties. Students, particularly females, are involving themselves with so-called “blessers”—old men or women with financial resources. These old men or women are the ones now responsible for providing financial resources while in turn benefiting sexually from the relationships. Our study reveals the majority of the “blessers” are artisanal gold miners who pounce on economically disadvantaged students for sexual gratification. This phenomenon is explained by one of the interviewed students in the following way:

In order to survive as students we can do anything and everything including transactional relationships with the cash-loaded artisanal gold miners. Gold panners love students; as students we are benefitting financially.

Unlike Masvawure (2010) who argued that students do not enter into transactional relations only for financial rewards, our study shows the relations were for financial gains. In this regard, we agree with Gukurume’s (2011) view of “the politics of the belly” as underlying the transactional relations, as do many other earlier studies (Muparamoto and Chingwenya 2009; Muzvidziwa 2002).

Some of the students are becoming innovative and industrious to survive the challenges. On weekends students take on piece jobs such as doing laundry to earn extra dollars. Others are selling second-hand clothes during weekends to earn extra dollars. This exhibition of industriousness and entrepreneurship is a reflection of the students’ agency and the contribution of the university curriculum. This was confirmed by one of the students:

Here at ZEGU we are taught to be entrepreneurial, particularly in this environment where the formal economy is crumbling.

Our finding concurs with a Zimbabwean study by Tigere and Musevenzi (2008) who argue that ravaged by economic difficulties students usually rely on cross-border trading, buying and selling, and petty trading in consumable goods and non-consumable goods. Our study went further to reveal that the entrepreneurial activities except

transactional relationships are heavily influenced by the curriculum. Adoption of entrepreneurial activities may be considered proactive behaviour to promote future goals (Serido et al. 2014).

Conclusion

Using Tinto's persistence framework, the study examined how the economic challenges are affecting students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy and perception of the curriculum. When students are aware of the many graduates without jobs, the importance attached to education declines. Economic challenges crystallised in tuition fees and the increase of cost of living have left many students unsure about the possibility of completing their education. As agentic beings, students are involved in entrepreneurial activities, transactional relationships and reactive behaviour such as cutting the number of meals consumed each day.

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