LUCKY SIBANDA
Graduate student, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa
Keizersgracht and Tennant Street, Zonnebloem, PO Box 652, Cape Town 8000.
E-mail: ckisto@gmail.com

CHUX GERVASE IWU
Prof Dr., Head, Department of Entrepreneurship and Business Management
 Faculty of Business and Management Sciences
 Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa
Keizersgracht and Tennant Street, Zonnebloem, PO Box 652, Cape Town 8000.
E-mail: iwuc@cput.ac.za

OLUMIDE HENRIE BENEDICT
Dr., Senior Lecturer, School of Accounting Sciences
Faculty of Business and Management Sciences
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa
Keizersgracht and Tennant Street, Zonnebloem, PO Box 652, Cape Town 8000.
E-mail: benedicth@cput.ac.za

FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Considering the increasing reports of high student failure rates as well dropout rates worldwide, this study sought to statistically determine what students perceive as the highly influential academic success and or failure factors. The hope was to uncover these factors so as to provide some direction in terms of intervention. A quantitative approach was followed in pursuing this. The population for the study consisted of second year students because they fit the context within which this study defines success and failure. The findings reveal a mix of factors some of which are consistent with previous research on student academic performance. This study derives its unique-ness from the perspective of the significance of the discipline — entrepreneurship, which has been touted as the major economic force that can deliver the necessary socioeconomic development to a country. The results of this study will not only add to the global literature on student academic performance, but will also provide those in management of higher education with the necessary material for intervening in issues of student academic per-formance. Further research might consider increasing the population size to gain much deeper insights into the perceptions. It may also help to undertake a different research methodology in the form of one-on-one interviews or focus group interviews.

Key words: *Failure factors, Success factors, Perceptions, Tertiary Education, University of Technology, Academic performance*

Лакі Сібанда
аспірант, факультет бізнесу та менеджменту
Технологічний університет Капського півострова, Південна Африка
E-mail: ckisto@gmail.com

Чак Жерваз Іву
проф., канд. наук, зав. кафедри підприємництва та менеджменту
факультет бізнесу і менеджменту
Технологічний університет Капського півострова, Південна Африка
E-mail: iwuc@cput.ac.za

Олумід Генрі Бенедикт
старший викладач, канд. наук, Школа бухгалтерського обліку,
факультет бізнесу і менеджменту
Технологічний університет Капського півострова, Південна Африка
E-mail: benedicth@cput.ac.za

ФАКТОРИ, ЩО ВПЛИВАЮТЬ НА УСПІШНІСТЬ СТУДЕНТІВ УНІВЕРСИТЕТУ

Зважаючи на зростання рівня неуспішності студентів вищих навчальних закладів, а також відсотка відсіву студентів у світі, це дослідження виконане з метою статистично визначити фактори, які, на думку студентів, істотно впливають на їхні академічні успіхи або невдачі. Метою роботи є висвітлення цих факторів для розробки заходів втручання у процес навчання. Дослідження проведено на основі кількісного підходу шляхом опитування студентів другого курсу, (саме вони підходять під контекст, в якому це дослідження визначає успіхи і невдачі). Результати висвітлюють низку факторів, серед них деякі узгоджуються з попередніми результатами дослідження успішності студентів. Ця робота є унікальню з точки зору значущості досліджувальної навчальної дисципліни — підприємництво, яке вважається значним економічним рушієм, що може забезпечити необхідний соціально-економічний розвиток країни. Представлені результати не тільки доповнюють світовий досвід оцінювання академічної успішності студентів, але також можуть використовуватись в управлінні вищою освітою з метою розробки заходів її підвищення. У подальших дослідженнях може бути розглянуто питання про збільшення чисельності опитаних з метою отримання глибших знань про сприйняття навчального процесу. Це також може допомогти провести інші дослідження у вигляді індивідуальних інтерв'ю або опитування фокус-груп.

Ключові слова: *фактори неуспішності, фактори успіху, сприйняття, вища освіта, Технологічний університет, академічна успішність.*

Лаки Сибанда
аспирант, факультет бизнеса и менеджмента
Технологический университет Капского полустрова, Южная Африка
E-mail: ckisto@gmail.com

Чак Жерваз Иву
проф., канд. наук, зав. кафедрой предпринимательства и менеджмента
факультет бизнеса и менеджмента
Технологический университет Капского полустрова, Южная Африка
E-mail: iwuc@cput.ac.za

Олумид Генри Бенедикт
старший преподаватель, канд. наук, Школа бухгалтерського учета,
факультет бизнеса и менеджмента
Технологический университет Капского полустрова, Южная Африка
E-mail: benedicth@cput.ac.za

ФАКТОРЫ, ВЛИЯЮЩИЕ НА УСПЕШНОСТЬ СТУДЕНТОВ УНИВЕРСИТЕТА

Учитывая растущий уровень неуспеваемости студентов высших учебных заведений, а также процент отсева студентов в мире, это исследование направлено на то, чтоб статистически определить факторы, которые, по мнению студентов, значительно влияют на их академические успехи или неудачи. Цель работы — освещение этих факторов для разработки мер вмешательства в процесс обучения. Исследование проведено на основе количественного подхода путем опросов студентов второго курса, (они подходят под контекст, в котором это исследование определяет успехи и неудачи). Результаты определили ряд факторов, некоторые из них согласуются с предыдущими оценками успеваемости студентов. Это исследование уникально с точки зрения значимости рассмотренной учебной дисциплины — предпринимательство, которое считается значительным экономическим механизмом, обеспечивающим необходимое социально-экономическое развитие страны. Представленные результаты не только дополняют мировой опыт исследования академической успеваемости студентов, они могут быть использованы в управлении высшим образованием с целью разработки мероприятий по повышению студенческой успеваемости. В дальнейших исследованиях целесообразно рассмотреть вопрос об увеличении численности опрошенных с целью получения более глубоких знаний о восприятии учебного процесса. Это также может помочь провести другие исследования в виде индивидуальных интервью или опроса фокус-групп.

Ключевые слова: *факторы неуспеваемости, факторы успеха, восприятие, высшее образование, Технологический университет, академическая успеваемость.*

Introduction and background. This study trails a previous study (Sibanda, Iwu & Benedict, in press) which simply identified the factors that lead to success and or failure amongst second year students of Entrepreneurship in a university of technology (UoT) in South Africa. That study aimed at identifying the factors so as to generate discussions that could possibly bring about interventions for failure as well as suggestions to improve success. Institutions of higher learning in South Africa and a number of others worldwide have reported high rates of student failure and dropout which have heaped severe burdens on management of these institutions especially considering that most of the institutions are public funded. Following the pressure from government for the institutions to arrest this malaise, there has been increased clamor for workable interventions. This is perhaps why several studies have been undertaken in recent years to try to unearth the factors that influence student failure and or success. In Trinidad and Tobago for instance, Mlambo (2011) reported that chronic high failure rates had warranted a surge of studies intentioned to unravel the reasons for suboptimal academic performance. Also, in the United States of America, Benford and Gess-Newsome (2006) decried what they called 'moderate or low levels of success in college'. According to Morgan (2001: 234) information on students' success and failure factors provide both academic and support staff with data to assist with intervention where necessary. Therefore, a need to identify the factors and avail them to both students and lecturers would possibly result in improved student performance. Killen, Marais and Loedoiff (2003:157) conclude that «the provision of an effective educational programme relies, in part, on both the providers and receivers of that programme being adequately aware of the factors that are likely to influence the success and failure of students in that programme».

While the previous study (referred to earlier) was basically exploratory, this paper reports an effort to quantitatively interrogate those factors which were identified during the first exploratory study. Therefore, this study serves to confirm some of the top listed factors in the first study. Essentially, this study attempts to understand the factors that influence academic success/failure at a university of technology so as to provide some form of «guidelines for helping students to reflect on their perceptions and expectations of university study so that they could gain more control over their learning and approach their university studies in ways that enhance their success» (Killen, et al., 2003:147).

A preliminary investigation which provided the impetus for this study was earlier conducted by one of the authors in an academic department at a university in South Africa. It involved monitoring enrolment (cohort) pattern on one of the major modules for a group of students over a minimum study period − i.e. three years. The findings revealed that, out of approximately 150 students who registered for a National Diploma programme in 2010, only 68 of them graduated within the minimum study period of three years.

McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) in Killen et al. (2003:147) however assert that the «high attrition rates» problem is not unique to South Africa as countries that have shifted the focus of higher education from elitism to mass opportunity experience this trend. Nonetheless, Killen, et al., (2003:147) suggest that «higher education institutions should be proactive in attempting to improve the success rates of their students at the same time as they strive to maintain or improve their academic standards». The foregoing inspired this case study which sought to answer the following research question: what do students perceive as the highly influential academic success and or failure factors? The hope was to quantitatively reveal the relevant variables that influence academic performance. According to Yin (2003, cited in Napier and Makura, 2013:4), case studies are viewed as producing «soft data», which are considered more effective (Baxter & Jack, 2008) for capturing relevant variables in an investigation.

This study's objective was to statistically determine what students perceive as the highly influential academic success and or failure factors. This study is unique in the sense that this is the first study to examine − using statistical software − student academic performance factors in a department of Entrepreneurship in a South African UoT. Moreover the discipline of entrepreneurship has begun to gain traction in recent times perhaps prompted by the increasing need for socioeconomic development − job creation, poverty reduction and increased self employment. These are the touted benefits of entrepreneurship.

The next section reviews pertinent literature associated with the research objective. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study are also discussed. This is followed by section on research methods. Thereafter the results are presented and discussed. We however conclude with some recommendations afterwards.

Literature review. In line with the Revised Strategic Plan (2010−2015) of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (2011) as cited in Iwu and Xesha (2011:88), South African colleges and universities still experience poor pass rates despite the numerous studies by experts which have sought to identify academic performance factors. Killen, et al. (2003:148) suggest that universities need to be reasonably confident that students enrolled for programmes will be capable of completing the programme in which they enrol. This is supported by Fraser and Killen (2005:26) who commented that «there is no point in universities admitting students if there is no reasonable probability that those students will succeed in the courses they are enrolled». Chances are high that pass rates would significantly improve if tertiary institutions admitted only students who have the potential to succeed. This would have a positive bearing on the pass rates. However, in justifying the enrolment of academically promising students by institutions, support should also be given to those students who show low chances of success (Potgieter, Ackermann & Fletcher, 2009).

Killen, et al. (2003:148) found that some post enrolment factors that strongly influence success include motivation; students' approach to studying; cultural expectations; psychological factors; student's academic literacy; students' time management skills; peer culture; the quality of teaching; students' belief in their own ability and student support structures offered by the university.

Tait, Van Eeden and Tait (2002) citing Killen, et al. (2003:148), are of the notion that students' approach to study seems to be strongly influenced by their perceptions of what will enhance their chances of success or diminish their chances of failure at university even when those perceptions are misguided. Killen (2003) had indicated that lecturers' perceptions of the factors that contribute to student success appear to influence their approach to teaching and their relationship with students. This study will be crucial to the current case (the department of entrepreneurship) as both students and lecturers might adjust their approaches towards the outcome of their objectives so as to enhance pass rate.

Theoretical framework. Two theoretical frameworks are relied upon to provide substance to the study's objective which is to determine what students perceive as the highly influential academic success and or failure factors. This objective is premised on the need to continuously investigate reasons for poor pass rates as well as dropout rates. The frameworks are Tinto's model of student attrition and the Goal theory.

Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition is identified by Zulu (2008) as a framework that could be regarded for many studies using pre-enrolment and post-enrolment factors to predict student success and failure. Our study partially relies on this framework. Ditcher and Tetley (1999) are of the opinion that suggestions exist in Ramsden (1992) as well as Laurillard's (1993) works that many factors influence students' success in higher education. Examples suggested are the learning context, teaching strategies, student motivation and students' understanding of course requirements.

This study also attaches significance to Goal theory, which Martin and Dowson (2009) avow focuses on the meaning students attach to achievement situations and the purpose of their actions. The Goal theory thus suggests that students tend to be in a better position in making sense of their engagement at university once they are aware of the varying factors that influence their academic performance.

Research methodology. This section presents information about the research design, the data collection methodology, the sample population and the ethical considerations that guided the study. To give context to the meanings of the major variables — success and failure — in this study, we have a sub section that clarifies our contextual definitions.

Design. This study was quantitative in nature; utilizing a questionnaire with a list of factors (success and failure). These factors were ranked on a four point Likert type questionnaire requiring participants to rank each factor from a range of «not influential» to «very influential».

Quantitative methods assist with careful and systematic collection, ordering, description and interpretation of data. Kitto, Chesters and Grbich (2008) support the idea of quantitative research because it explores the behaviour, processes of interaction, meanings, values and experiences of purposefully sampled individuals and groups in their natural context. Simply explained, quantitative research involves the use of numerical values, which are used to count or measure variables derived from questionnaires. Questionnaires are reliable tools for quantitative studies (Lloyd et al., 2012). They help in concealing identities of participants as well as assist in rounding up a large number of subjects unlike the interview method that takes a long time and expense to conduct (Rao, 2010).

Population.There is a large body of knowledge that seeks to identify the factors that are perceived as contributors to students' academic success or failure. These studies mostly focus on the perceptions of first years (Ditcher & Tetley, 1999; Fraser & Killen, 2003; Zulu, 2008; Steenkamp, Baard & Frick, 2009), albeit there are some studies that sought to understand the success/failure factors from a broader view by including senior students apart from first year students (Ditcher & Tetley, 1999; Fraser & Killen, 2005; Zhang & Aasheim, 2011).

The population for this study comprised second year Diploma in Entrepreneurship students of a South African UoT. The Diploma in Entrepreneurship is a three year programme. It has two major subjects namely Financial Management and Small Business Management. Anyone enrolled in the programme must pass the major subjects in the first attempt for them to proceed to the next level and then stand the chance of graduating within the minimum duration (Lancia, Petrucci, Giorgi, Dante & Cifone, 2013). Considering the objective and nature (as in a case study) of this study, it made sense to utilise a population that had gone beyond the first year. The assumption in this case was that first year students would not fit the contextual definitions of «success» and «failure» in this study. Furthermore, first year students may not fit in well with the practical understanding of the meaning of success or failure at university given that they would not have completed a full year of study (i.e. participated in all summative assessments). This was the basis for choosing second year students as the population for this study. This choice is consistent with the objectives of Zhang and Aasheim's (2011) study which set out to capture the perceptions of students on academic success.

Sampling and instrument description. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for this study in order to ensure that the researchers could access a particular subset of people (Trochim, 2006), who would participate meaningfully in the survey (Adler & Clark, 2007), so as to gain better control of the research process (Keegan, 2009).

A questionnaire with two factor categories (success and failure) was distributed to the target population. These factors were identified by the students in the first phase of Killen's (1994) study. The questionnaire used in this study forms a second phase of Killen's 1994 study on the success/failure factors that influence academic performance hence this validates the instrument used. Previous studies (such as Fraser & Killen, 2003, 2005; Zhang & Aasheim 2011; Ndlovu, 2011) also utilized this questionnaire. Essentially the utility of a quantitative research is justified in the use of numerical values to count or measure variables.

Aside from demographic elements, the questionnaire consisted of thirty eight academic success factors and forty one academic failure factors, which were presented in a Likert format thus: NI = not influential; SI = slightly influential; FI = fairly influential; and VI = very influential. Questionnaires were distributed during one of the lectures, while collection of the questionnaires was reserved for the following week during lecture time. Ninety six questionnaires were received from the students with only two of those invalid.

Ethical consideration. Ethics protocols were observed firstly by obtaining permission to conduct the study by the UoT's Ethics Committee. A meeting was subsequently held between the researchers and the Financial Management lecturer to inform him about the study and to obtain his consent. Dates were suggested by the lecturer for the researchers to visit his class and inform the students about the study. Essentially, these protocols were observed with the intention of obtaining informed consent both from the lecturer and the population. Informed consent is crucial in ensuring that participants understand their position in the research (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). The anonymity of participants was protected as their details were concealed. Participants were informed that they will receive feedback on research results upon the completion of the study.

Defining academic success and failure. The specific contextual definitions of these terms, in this study, are presented below:

Success refers to:

i. A student graduating within the minimum duration of the Diploma in Entrepreneurship at a UoT; and
ii. Obtaining at least a 50 % mark in all assessments (formative or summative).

However, the term «failure» refers to the following in this study:

i. graduate student not graduating within the minimum duration of the Diploma in Entrepreneurship at a UoT; and

ii. Obtaining less than 50 % mark in all assessments (formative or summative). This will result in the student repeating some of the subjects for the whole year or dropping out of the system before completion.

Results and discussion. Results of this study consist of demographic representation of the sample and descriptive statistics of some variables. Cronbach's Alpha was computed to test for reliability of the collected data while the entire data had a Coefficient Alpha of 0.955. The section on success (39 factors) returned a Cronbach Alpha of 0.927 while the section on failure (41 factors) was 0.952. According to Chen, Yang, Shiau and Wang (2006), all these coefficients indicate acceptable level of reliability.

The results are presented in a mix of tables and histograms.

Demographic information. Table 1 below depicts a summary of the demography of the sample. There are equal female and male students. Almost two thirds of the students are between 21 to 25 years with more than a third below. South African students were five times more than the international students.

Factors influencing student academic success. A list of thirty nine factors was presented to the participants in a Likert-type format. The participants had to indicate how they perceive these factors. The range of the scale was from 1 (not influential) to 4 (very influential). Apart from regular study, regular attendance at lecture and hard work, commitment and dedication were considered to be very influential towards student success (see Table 2 below). This confirms that students perceive regular study and class attendance as very influential towards their success. Zhang and Aasheim (2011) had 'study' and 'attend class' ranking the first and second. Other factors which appear in the top six on both studies are hard work, commitment and dedication as well as assignment completion and submission.

The first five factors in the table above were further interrogated statistically producing the data below, which are presented in histograms.

Regular study. Majority of the participants indicated that regular study was a very influential success factor. This finding is somewhat consistent with Steenkamp et al's (2009) study which found that regular attendance at lecture complemented by study effort and long hours spent studying accounted for student's success. Steenkamp et al also indicated that there was a positive correlation between achievement and effort. See Figure 1 below.

Table 1. **Demographic data of respondents**

Variable	Values	Count	%
Gender	Male	45	47.9
	Female	49	52.1
Age	20 years and below	33	35.1
	21 − 25 years	58	61.7
	26 − 30 years	3	3.2
Nationality	South African	75	79.8
	Non-South African	19	20.2

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Table 2. **Ranking of factors influencing student success (Top 11)**

Success Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rankings
Regular study	3.60	0.693	1
Regular attendance at lecture	3.57	0.711	2
Hard work, commitment and dedication	3.55	0.742	3
Self-motivation to become successful in future	3.51	0.715	4
Self-confidence to make presentations in class	3.49	0.684	5
Assignment completion and submission	3.49	0.758	6
Motivated lecturers	3.40	0.738	7
Having own resources e.g. text books	3.40	0.807	8
Lecturers to communicate exam dates allowing time for preparation	3.40	0.752	9
Timely and regular examination preparation	3.39	0.751	10
Easy access of lecturers' notes and slides via blackboard learning	3.39	0.765	11

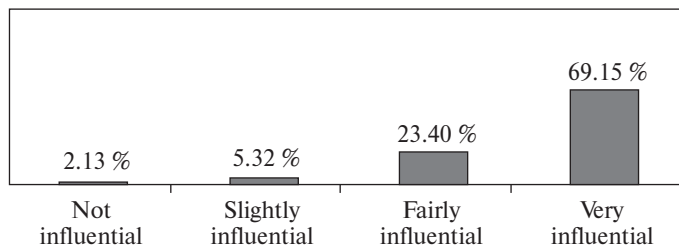*Source:* Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Fig 1. **Regular study**
Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Regular attendance at lectures. We found regular attendance at lecture to be a highly influential (68.09%) success factor. Interestingly, Steenkamp et al (2009) identified class attendance as a top ranking success factor. The need for class attendance could be linked to formative assessments which are essential for student progress. According to Steenkamp et al, class attendance can be linked to motivation to do well at school thus strengthening the Goal theory which assumes that the need for achievement could serve as a powerful allure to regularly attend lectures. This argument supports the study by Fraser and Killen (2003). See Figure 2 below.

Self-motivation to become successful in future. Fraser and Killen (2005) identify "dedication to a career goal" as crucial towards student success. More than sixty percent of the respondents perceive this factor to be highly influential towards success.

The least ranking factors are listed below in Table 3. However, it can be observed that they are fairly influential as indicated by the mean of the last ranked factor being almost between 2 and 3 – slightly influential and fairly influential towards success. This could possibly mean that most listed success factors have significant influence towards academic success. In a

study by Zhang and Aasheim (2011), tutors were ranked among the factors which had low influence towards student success. Surprisingly, in a study by Steenkamp et al (2009), class attendance and tutorial class (facilitated by tutors) were identified as significant factors for student success although they are perceived differently in this study.

Factors influencing student academic failure. Noisy lecturing environment and not finishing and doing assignments rank the first and second very influential factors for academic failure respectively. The mean of the top eight factors is slightly above 3 which indicate that they are fairly influential towards academic failure. Other factors confirmed in a previous study (Sibanda et al. in press) are lack of attendance to lecture and insufficient effort — studying. See Table 4 below.
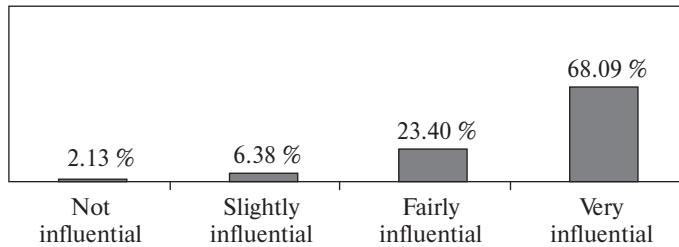

Fig 2. **Regular attendance at lecture**

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)
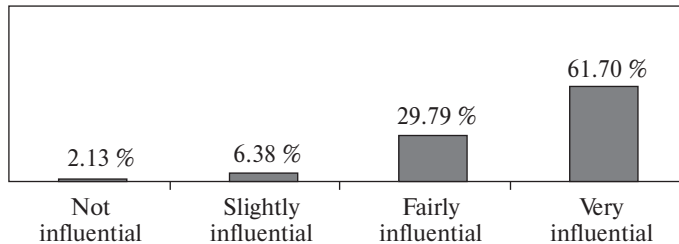

Fig 3. **Self-motivation to become successful**

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Table 3. **Ranking of factors influencing student success (Bottom 6)**

| Success Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rankings
Lecturer and student relationship	3.00	0.962	34
Quiet and comfortable lecture rooms	3.00	0.916	35
Awareness of the available support services e.g. tutors	2.98	0.961	36
Tutorials	2.96	1.004	37
Information if class is cancelled	2.88	1.115	38
Assignments given by all lecturers at the same time	2.66	1.169	39

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Table 4. **Ranking of factors influencing student failure (Top 8)**

| Failure factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rankings
Noisy lecturing environment	3.27	0.986	1
Not finishing or doing assignments	3.17	1.064	2
Insufficient effort − studying	3.17	1.023	3
Lack of communication between student and lecturer	3.14	0.957	4
Lack of attendance at lectures	3.12	1.014	5
Lack of dedication and commitment	3.11	1.031	6
Laziness	3.10	1.058	7
Lack of interest in the course	3.10	1.098	8

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Noisy lecturing environment. Almost sixty percent of the respondents perceive a noisy environment as very influential towards student failure. This could mean that despite students attending lectures, they miss out on most of what the lecturer would have said. This is further depicted in Fig 4 below.

Not finishing or doing assignments. In most subjects, assignments form part of formative assessment in preparation for summative assessment. Partially completing or not doing an assignment highly influences the final mark of the student, in a negative way. See Fig 5 below.
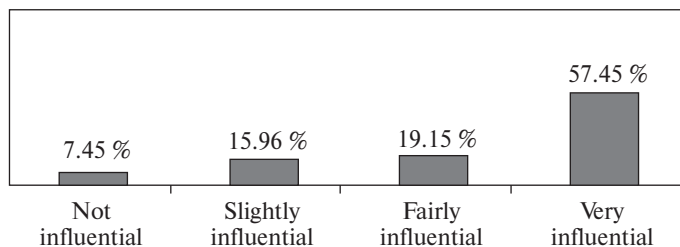
Fig 4. **Noisy lecturing environment**
Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)
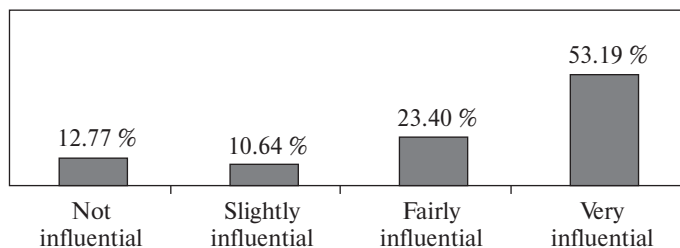
Fig 5. **Not finishing or doing assignments**
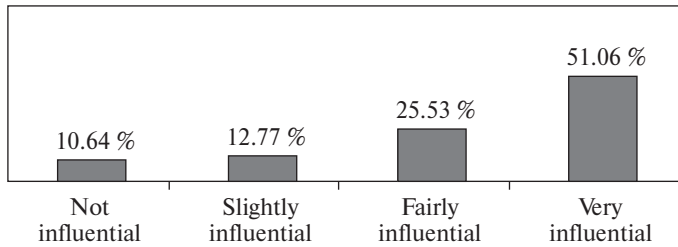*Source:* Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Fig 6. **Insufficient effort − studying**

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

Insufficient effort − studying. Over fifty percent of the respondents indicated insufficient effort as a very influential factor for student failure.

Lack of attendance at lectures. It is interesting to observe that lack of attendance at lectures ranked 5th (see Table 4) in the list of factors that influence student failure, whereas in the list of factors that influence success (please see Table 2), attendance at lectures ranked 2nd. Steenkamp et al (2009) and Fraser and Killen (2003) nonetheless discussed lack of attendance as crucial as it can prevent student failure. This would imply that students who do not attend classes are not aware of the tips which are given in class hence they may not be able to provide correct answers during formative assessments. Also, lack of attendance is associated with missing formative assessments.

The least ranking factors were upfront cash payment to tutors by students and low self esteem. However, their means are above 2 meaning that they have some sort of influence. See Table 5 below.

There seems to be a relationship between the top ranking factors appearing in both the success and failure factors. For example, regular study is perceived as the top influential factor towards success which could be linked to hard work, commitment and dedication. Regular study, regular attendance and assignment completion and submission are outcomes of hard work, commitment and dedication. It is perceived that the lack of these is highly influential to failure such as insufficient study effort, lack of dedication and commitment, not finishing or doing assignments. The study shows that even if students have regular attendance, regular study among the key influential elements, a noisy lecture environment is perceived as highly influential. This means that it is essential to have a noise free lecture environment for the other factors to be effective. Students largely miss most of what is taught in a noisy lecture

Table 5. **Ranking of factors influencing student failure (Bottom 6)**

Failure factors	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rankings
Lack of self-confidence	2.74	1.026	36
Little usage of the library	2.73	0.986	37
Poor first year foundation	2.69	1.088	38
Not given the opportunity to explore own business ideas	2.64	0.971	39
Low self esteem	2.64	1.106	40
Upfront cash payments to tutors by students	2.48	1.085	41

Source: Fieldwork (Researchers' computation using SPSS)

 environment which could render them similar to not attending the lecture. Our previous research (Sibanda et al. in press) as well as (Steenkamp et al, 2009) ranked not paying enough attention in class as one of the top failure factors. This could justify the argument that if some students are not paying attention, they create a noisy lecture environment. Among the top ranking influential failure factors, lack of dedication and commitment is evident in lack of attendance at lectures; insufficient study and not finishing or doing assignments.

Conclusion and recommendations. This study's main intention was to quantitatively identify factors that are responsible for student's academic success or failure. The reason for this was to realise from the findings, possible interventions for the reasons for failure so as to try to improve the factors that lead to success.

The researchers made use of second year students specifically because they fit the context within which this study defines success and failure. Moreover, given previous studies, utilizing second year students was a better option because they would have completed a year of study in higher education.

The study has found a number of factors responsible for success and failure respectively. Among the highly influential factors for success are regular study, regular attendance and assignment completion, which are regarded as products of hard work, commitment and dedication. With regard to failure, factors such as lack of effort, lack of dedication and commitment, not finishing or doing assignments ranked highly.

The results of this study will not only add to the literature on student academic performance, but will also provide those in management of higher education with the necessary suggestions for intervening in issues of student academic performance.

An option for further research would be to increase the population size to gain much deeper insights into the perceptions from all the levels. Also, another angle is finding avenues for integrating the research findings with the approach used by lecturers to improve performance which we think would be ideal to research on. To gain a deeper understanding, one-on-one interviews or focus group interviews are recommended.

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