

Navigating the “Minefield” of Pedagogical Success in University Education: Winners and Losers Using a Psychological Lens

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary education is a high-stakes environment in which students, educators, and institutions contend with competing pressures, expectations, and entrenched structural inequities. This study examined the intersection of psychological, socio-economic, and institutional factors associated with divergent academic trajectories among students and academic staff in Zimbabwean universities. The study drew on a psychological framework combining self-determination theory, attribution theory, and Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological systems model to examine why students in the same university setting report different academic and psychosocial outcomes. A post-positivist paradigm situated within a pragmatic worldview was adopted, and a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was implemented across four universities in Zimbabwe. The target population comprised undergraduate students and academic staff at four university institutions in the Midlands and Harare provinces. A sample of 134 students, 48 academic staff, and 11 psychosocial support personnel (3 deans of students, 6 clinic staff, and 2 chaplains) was drawn. Quantitative data were collected using the Academic Motivation Scale, the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Academic Contexts, and the Academic Psychological Safety Scale; qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with academic staff and psychosocial support personnel and focus group discussions with students. Intrinsic motivation and academic psychological safety were the psychological variables most strongly associated with cumulative grade point average, whereas higher external (controlled) motivation and maladaptive attributional styles were associated with lower performance. Learned helplessness and stereotype threat were not statistically associated with grade point average in this sample, and possible reasons are considered. The qualitative findings indicate how institutional cultures and pedagogical practices are implicated in these patterns for students and academics alike. The study concludes that pedagogical success warrants systemic re-imagining at every institutional level, moving beyond individualist meritocratic narratives towards practice that is structurally informed and psychologically sensitive. The study recommends a review of policy, curriculum design, and lecturer development to improve the equity of academic outcomes in tertiary education. Because the design is cross-sectional, the associations reported here should not be read as causal.

Keywords: Pedagogical success; Tertiary education; Psychological lens; Winners and losers; Higher education equity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Globally, higher education has expanded at an unprecedented rate, with participation and enrolment figures increasing across nearly all regions of the world. Universities have increasingly been positioned as key drivers of economic growth, innovation, and social mobility (Marginson, 2016). However, the expansion of higher education has also intensified competition through heightened academic expectations, performative assessment cultures, and growing demands from governments, employers, families, and students themselves. Alongside this growth, concerns regarding student attrition, underachievement, and wellbeing have become more prominent. Student persistence and success have long been understood to depend on the extent to which learners are academically and socially integrated into institutional life (Tinto, 1993), a concern that continues

to be highlighted in recent sub-Saharan African studies on student wellbeing and educational outcomes (Owomugisha, Atibuni & Olema, 2025).

In sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Zimbabwe, the expansion of university education has taken place within a context of persistent economic challenges. Although university enrolments have grown considerably, the sector continues to grapple with inadequate funding, increasing class sizes, infrastructural pressures, and curricula and institutional cultures that still reflect elements of the colonial legacy (Morrow, 2009; Heleta, 2016). Many students enter higher education from under-resourced schools and backgrounds characterised by significant socio-economic hardship. Upon entering university, they are often insufficiently oriented to the expectations and practices of academic life, including the demands of independent learning, effective time management, and the development of disciplined academic identities. Morrow (2009) describes this challenge as a lack of epistemological access — access not merely to the institution itself, but to its ways of knowing, learning, and participating. Furthermore, many students rarely experience lecturers and institutional staff as attentive to their individual learning, social, and economic circumstances, despite evidence that meaningful staff–student interactions play a critical role in student development and persistence (Tinto, 1993). Nevertheless, within the same educational environments, some students flourish while others of comparable ability and commitment struggle to succeed.

In Zimbabwe, economic volatility, high levels of unemployment, and persistent socio-economic inequalities have created additional challenges for university students. Many students must balance academic demands with financial responsibilities, inadequate accommodation, food insecurity, and concerns regarding future employment prospects. Such conditions may significantly affect both psychological wellbeing and academic performance.

From an external perspective, university lecture theatres, seminar rooms, libraries, and virtual learning environments may appear to be neutral spaces that provide equitable educational opportunities to all students (Marginson, 2016). For those who inhabit these spaces on a daily basis, however, the reality is often more complex, contested, and challenging. Reay (2018) likens the terrain of higher education to a minefield, characterised by hidden pressures and risks that may not be immediately visible. Students are expected to demonstrate independent thinking, develop strong academic identities, and achieve high levels of performance while simultaneously negotiating socio-economic disadvantage, cultural dislocation, and institutional norms that may differ substantially from their lived realities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Heleta, 2016).

The central concern of this study is to understand why some university students thrive psychologically, socially, culturally, and academically, while others, despite possessing evident ability and demonstrating genuine effort, do not realise their academic potential. Popular and scholarly explanations have often attributed such differences to variations in intelligence, motivation, or work ethic (Dweck, 2006; Marginson, 2016), and this perspective continues to shape contemporary beliefs regarding merit and academic achievement (Mijs, 2021). However, an increasing body of scholarship argues that explanations focused solely on individual characteristics are insufficient, pointing instead to the significance of structural, institutional, socio-economic, and cultural conditions in shaping educational outcomes. In line with this perspective, the present study adopts a structurally grounded approach that locates student success and failure within the multiple systems of influence that surround and shape individual development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The study employs the terms “winners” and “losers” deliberately, not to celebrate academic success or stigmatise failure, but to draw attention to the structural, psychological, and pedagogical mechanisms associated with markedly different outcomes among students who share the same institutional spaces (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2018). Examining psychosocial issues within universities challenges the ideology of meritocracy that frequently underpins higher education policy and practice. Meritocracy assumes that universities operate as level playing fields where achievement is determined exclusively by individual talent, effort, and discipline (Marginson, 2016). Yet this assumption has been subject to sustained critique, most notably by Sandel (2020), who argues that meritocratic systems often obscure the structural inequalities that shape opportunities and outcomes.

This critique is particularly relevant within post-colonial African contexts, where historical and contemporary inequalities continue to influence educational experiences in ways that remain insufficiently acknowledged (Morrow, 2009; Heleta, 2016). Students do not arrive at university as blank slates; rather, they bring with them the psychological, social, cultural, and educational experiences accumulated through family life, schooling, and community contexts (Reay, 2018). These experiences may either facilitate or hinder their ability to navigate higher education successfully. Understanding how these psychosocial factors interact with institutional structures is therefore essential for explaining why students succeed or struggle within the same educational environment.

Student success extends beyond the attainment of high grades. Contemporary higher education literature increasingly conceptualises success as a multidimensional construct encompassing academic achievement, psychological wellbeing, social integration, sense of belonging, resilience, and successful progression through university. Understanding success in these broader terms allows for a more nuanced analysis of why students experience university differently.

Two terms used throughout this article require definition at the outset. *Psychosocial procedures* refers to the formal and informal institutional arrangements through which universities orient, monitor, and support students psychologically and socially: orientation and induction programmes, academic advising, counselling and clinic services, chaplaincy and pastoral care, early-warning and referral systems, and the everyday pedagogical practices through which staff respond to student difficulty. *Academic shocks* refers to abrupt, disruptive events within a student's academic trajectory that destabilise both performance and psychological functioning — failure of a core module, loss or interruption of funding, unanticipated changes to assessment schedules or deadlines, bereavement or family crisis during term, and transitions such as entry into first year or return after an interruption of study. Academic shocks were examined qualitatively in this study through participants' accounts of disruption and recovery; they were not operationalised as a quantitative variable, a limitation discussed in Section 6.4.

The study is guided by a framework combining self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Together these position academic outcomes not as products of individual merit alone, but as arising from transactions between students' psychological needs, their explanatory beliefs, and the nested institutional and cultural systems in which they learn. Each theory is set out in full, with its specific implications for the research questions, in Section 3.5.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following main research question:

How are psychosocial procedures provided to new and returning university students, and how do students and staff experience and respond to academic shocks within these institutional arrangements?

The study is further guided by the following sub-research questions:

RQ1: What psychological factors differentiate 'successful' students from 'struggling' students (persistently under-performing students) in tertiary education institutions?

RQ2: How do institutional pedagogical practices either reinforce or disrupt psychological barriers to academic success?

RQ3: How do academic staff perceive good practices for promoting psychological support in tertiary institutions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the empirical literature and theoretical frameworks employed in this study. It begins with literature on pedagogical success and the meritocratic assumption that frames it, before turning to empirical

evidence on the psychological factors that differentiate successful students from struggling ones, the institutional pedagogical practices that reinforce or disrupt those barriers, and academic staff perceptions of psychological support. The section closes with the theoretical framework that served as a lens for the study and a statement of the gap the study addresses.

Pedagogical Success and the Meritocratic Myth

Dominant accounts of university education rest on a meritocratic assumption: that the university is a level playing field, and that those who succeed do so through their own talent, discipline, and effort (Marginson, 2016). The assumption appeals to the expectations of modern democratic education, which values fairness, discipline, and inclusive provision. Yet decades of sociological and psychological research have failed to support these claims, showing instead that academic outcomes are heavily shaped by factors lying well outside individual capability (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2018), a pattern that recent scholarship continues to document (Zhao & Zhong, 2025). In sub-Saharan African higher education, the myth of meritocracy does particular damage, because the legacies of colonialism and apartheid still bear on who gains access, the language in which they are taught, and which knowledge and curricula are deemed worth knowing (Morrow, 2009; Heleta, 2016) — inequities that recent scholarship shows recur in ongoing calls to confront the colonial inheritance of African curricula (Davids, 2024). In such circumstances, students are left to attribute structurally produced failure to personal deficiency.

Psychology complements this sociological critique by attending to the inner side of the student experience: the beliefs, emotions, attributions, and motivations through which structural forces are filtered before they register as individual outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In our reading, this psychological mediation is precisely what recent African evidence makes visible: structural disadvantage is rarely experienced in the abstract, but registers as measurable distress, diminished help-seeking, and weakened academic engagement (Owomugisha, Atibuni & Olema, 2025; Wao et al., 2025). We therefore treat the psychological and the structural not as rival explanations but as a single, layered process.

Psychological Factors Differentiating Successful from Struggling Students (RQ1)

A substantial body of research has sought to identify the psychological factors that distinguish students who succeed academically from those who persistently underperform. Motivation is among the most consistently implicated: students whose engagement is intrinsically driven learn more deeply, persist longer, and achieve more highly than peers who rely on external regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vallerand et al., 1992; for a recent meta-analytic synthesis, see Howard et al., 2021). Closely related is academic self-efficacy — students' beliefs in their capability to organise and execute the actions that academic tasks require — which strongly predicts effort, persistence, and achievement (Bandura, 1997). In a meta-analysis of 241 data sets, academic self-efficacy emerged as the non-intellective construct most strongly correlated with university grade point average, ahead of personality, learning strategies, and demographic factors (Richardson, Abraham & Bond, 2012). Another meta-analysis of 109 studies identified academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation as the strongest psychosocial predictors of both grade point average and retention (Robbins et al., 2004). A systematic review by Honicke and Broadbent (2016) confirmed a robust, if partly mediated, self-efficacy–performance relationship across higher education settings. Read together, these syntheses converge on a message that matters for the present study: across very different samples and methods, students' own sense of capability and their reasons for engaging account for more of the variance in achievement than aptitude or background alone. We take this as warrant for treating self-efficacy and motivation as central variables rather than peripheral ones.

Attribution patterns differentiate students further, according to how they explain their academic successes and failures. Successful students typically attribute outcomes to effort and strategy — factors that are internal and controllable — whereas struggling students more often attribute failure to fixed ability, a pattern associated with learned helplessness, reduced help-seeking, and eventual dropout (Weiner, 1985; Dweck, 2006; Graham, 2020). Recent evidence continues to support this account: students who attribute outcomes to internal, controllable, and unstable causes report higher academic self-efficacy and more adaptive motivational patterns (Asrori & Tjalla, 2024). In a Kenyan study, Mwangi and Ouma (2012) found such maladaptive attribution patterns to be common

among undergraduates who had passed through authoritarian and examination-driven schooling; these students developed stable, ability-focused explanations for failure that persisted into their university studies and depressed their willingness to seek help.

Identity-related processes also matter. Stereotype threat — the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's own social group — impairs working memory and test performance for students from negatively stereotyped groups (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Schmader, Johns & Forbes, 2008). A meta-analysis of experimental studies confirmed that activating such threat measurably depresses test performance, with decrements that are larger for race-based than for gender-based stereotypes and most pronounced on difficult tests, even as the precise average magnitude remains contested (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). Perceptions of psychological safety — the confidence that one can ask questions and admit error without humiliation — support the help-seeking and intellectual risk-taking on which learning depends (Edmondson, 1999, 2019). Finally, academic resilience and buoyancy help to explain why some students from disadvantaged backgrounds nevertheless succeed (Martin & Marsh, 2009). Taken together, this body of work identifies the candidate factors — motivation, self-efficacy, attribution style, stereotype threat, psychological safety, and resilience — whose differentiating power the present study examined.

Institutional Pedagogical Practices and Psychological Barriers (RQ2)

A second strand of literature examines how institutional pedagogical practices interact with these psychological factors. Autonomy-supportive teaching, which acknowledges students' perspectives, keeps external pressure to a minimum, and gives a meaningful rationale for the tasks it sets, is consistently associated with higher intrinsic motivation and stronger academic outcomes (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012). The strength of this association is now well established meta-analytically: synthesising 144 studies and more than 79,000 students, Bureau, Howard, Chong and Guay (2022) found that teacher autonomy support was associated with students' psychological need satisfaction and self-determined motivation more strongly than parental support, with satisfaction of the need for competence the most powerful proximal correlate of autonomous motivation. Highly controlling environments show the opposite pattern: built around surveillance, performative assessment, and rigid curricular prescription, they tend to erode intrinsic motivation, and appear to do most harm to students whose sense of competence is already fragile (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

There is also evidence that deliberately designed practices can disrupt psychological barriers. Walton and Cohen (2011) showed that a brief social-belonging intervention produced lasting improvements in the academic and health outcomes of minority students, demonstrating that identity-based threats are responsive to pedagogical action. Curriculum content itself functions pedagogically: curricula that treat Western epistemologies as the default can act as a standing trigger of identity threat for African students, whereas culturally responsive and decolonised content can affirm students' identities as knowers (Morrow, 2009; Heleta, 2016). More broadly, students' persistence is shaped by the quality of their academic and social integration into institutional life, in which everyday contact with academic staff plays a central role (Tinto, 1993). This strand of literature informs RQ2 by specifying the mechanisms — the support or frustration of basic psychological needs, and the triggering or disarming of identity threat — through which institutional practices may either reinforce or disrupt psychological barriers to academic success.

Academic Staff Perceptions of Psychological Support (RQ3)

Compared with the literature on students, research on how academic staff themselves perceive and enact psychological support is far less developed. The evidence that exists suggests that lecturers' beliefs shape their practices: staff who understand motivation in terms of basic psychological needs are more likely to adopt autonomy-supportive strategies, while those who view students' motivation as fixed or externally driven gravitate towards controlling approaches (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Tinto's (1993) work on student attrition positions academic staff as central agents of integration, with informal staff-student contact among the strongest institutional influences on persistence. Research on psychological safety likewise indicates that those who hold authority in a learning environment largely determine how safe it feels, through the ways they respond to questions, errors, and dissent (Edmondson, 1999, 2019). Little of this work, however, has been conducted in African tertiary contexts, and almost none in Zimbabwe, where academic staff operate under

heavy teaching loads, large classes, and significant resource constraints. The present study addresses this gap in relation to RQ3 by documenting how Zimbabwean academic staff perceive good practices for promoting psychological support, and by examining how those perceptions are formed and constrained.

Theoretical Framework

Three theories and a model served as the lens for this study: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Each is outlined below together with its implication for the study.

Self-Determination Theory

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) holds that motivation and wellbeing depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. As a lens on the psychosocial terrain of universities, it directs attention to whether teaching, assessment, and supervision leave students feeling volitional, capable, and connected, or instead controlled, inadequate, and isolated. SDT assists this study in addressing RQ1 and RQ2: it supplies the criteria by which the psychological factors differentiating successful from struggling students were identified, and it specifies the pedagogical conditions under which institutional practices either support or frustrate those needs.

Attribution Theory

Weiner's (1985) attribution theory distinguishes students' explanations for success and failure by locus, stability, and controllability. Attribution patterns are learned through family narratives, peer cultures, teacher feedback, and the wider culture of schooling (Graham, 2020); in many African contexts, authoritarian and examination-driven primary and secondary schooling produces stable, ability-focused explanations for failure that persist into university (Mwangi & Ouma, 2012). Tertiary pedagogies built on high-stakes assessment and public correction may reinforce rather than repair these patterns. The theory assists this study by identifying the inner narratives that mediate between institutional practice and students' coping, help-seeking, and decisions to persist or withdraw.

Stereotype Threat Theory

Steele and Aronson's (1995) theory holds that fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's own group can impair cognitive functioning, heighten test anxiety, and weaken identification with academic work (Schmader, Johns & Forbes, 2008). A wide range of cues can trigger it in tertiary settings: classroom demographics, curriculum content, the cultural assumptions built into assessment tasks, and the everyday behaviours of lecturers. It assists this study by offering an account of why students of comparable ability sharing the same lecture rooms may nevertheless perform unequally. Its scope conditions — and their bearing on the present null result — are considered in Section 6.3.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model

The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) places development inside nested systems — the microsystem of classroom and peers, the mesosystem formed by their interaction, the exosystem of institutional policy, and the macrosystem of cultural ideology — and holds that development is driven primarily by proximal processes, the recurring interactions students have with teachers, peers, family, and learning activities. Seen in its light, 'at-risk' students are not deficient people; they are people responding, often adaptively, to environments never designed well for their success (Martin & Marsh, 2009). The model assists this study by locating a student's struggle in the interaction between home, classroom, institution, and wider post-colonial culture, re-framing the 'winners and losers' question as a systemic one.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature establishes that academic outcomes are psychologically mediated and institutionally shaped. Three gaps nevertheless remain. First, most of the evidence on motivation, attribution, stereotype threat, and psychological safety comes from North American and European settings; these variables have rarely been examined together in Zimbabwean higher education. Second, the student-focused and staff-focused literatures rarely speak to one another, so little is known about how lecturers' perceptions of psychological support align with what students actually experience. Third, studies in the region have tended to be either quantitative or qualitative, seldom combining statistical estimation with the lived experience that helps to interpret it. While considerable research has examined student success in terms of academic preparedness, socio-economic status, and institutional support, relatively few studies have explored how psychological, social, cultural, and institutional factors interact simultaneously to shape student outcomes within Zimbabwean universities. Existing studies often focus on individual deficits or structural constraints in isolation, thereby overlooking the interplay between personal agency and institutional environments. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of why students exposed to similar university conditions experience markedly different academic and psychosocial outcomes.

The present study responds directly to these gaps through a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study conducted in four Zimbabwean institutions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The study was located within the post-positivist paradigm, which holds that an objective reality exists but can be known only imperfectly and probabilistically, and that human phenomena are best understood by combining measurement with interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This paradigm suited the study because it permits the systematic measurement of psychological variables such as motivation and psychological safety, while acknowledging that the meanings students and staff attach to success and failure are essential to interpreting the patterns those measurements reveal.

Research Approach and Design

Consistent with this paradigm, the study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with a strong qualitative component (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were collected and analysed first; qualitative data were then gathered to help explain and contextualise the statistical patterns. The Academic Motivation Scale, the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Academic Contexts, and the Academic Psychological Safety Scale were administered to undergraduate students to measure, respectively, their motivation, explanatory styles, and sense of psychological safety. Semi-structured interviews with academic staff and psychosocial support personnel captured how these groups perceive and enact psychological support, and focus group discussions with students elicited the lived experience behind the survey scores. The qualitative strand was designed in particular to yield in-depth information on the home, peer, and institutional pressures that the quantitative measures could flag but not fully explain, and on students' and staff members' experience of academic shocks as defined in Section 1.

Setting and Participants

The study took place at four tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe: two comprehensive universities, a university of technology, and a teachers' college. These were selected purposively to vary institutional type, student demographic profile, and geographic location, spanning both urban and peri-urban settings in the Midlands and Harare provinces. The target population comprised undergraduate students and academic staff at Zimbabwean tertiary institutions.

From this population, 134 undergraduate students took part in the quantitative phase. They were recruited through stratified random sampling so that the sample mirrored the wider student body by gender (54% female,

46% male), year of study (first through fourth year), and academic performance band (high, mid-range, and low achievers, defined by GPA). Because GPA in the participating institutions was distributed towards the lower end of the scale, the resulting high-achieving stratum was very small ($n = 3$); the implications of this are addressed in Sections 5.1 and 6.4.

A further 48 academic staff took part in the qualitative phase, chosen through maximum-variation purposive sampling to capture a range of disciplines, lengths of experience, and ranks. In addition, 11 psychosocial support

personnel — three deans of students, six clinic staff, and two chaplains — took part in the qualitative phase. These participants were included so that the perspectives of those responsible for student wellbeing, health, and pastoral care were represented alongside those of teaching staff, in keeping with the study's focus on the psychosocial terrain of university life.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to gather quantitative data.

The **Academic Motivation Scale** (AMS; Vallerand et al., 1992) is a 28-item, 7-point measure of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic (controlled) motivation, and amotivation. It was adapted for the Zimbabwean higher education context by «AUTHOR NOTE: specify the adaptation procedure — which items were reworded, on what basis (e.g. expert review, cognitive interviewing, pilot feedback), and whether the factor structure was retained». In the present sample, internal consistency was « $\alpha =$ » **for the intrinsic motivation subscale** and « $\alpha =$ » for the external motivation subscale.

The **Attributional Style Questionnaire for Academic Contexts** (ASQ-AC), adapted from Peterson and Seligman (1984), was used to measure maladaptive attributional style and learned helplessness. Adaptation for this study involved «AUTHOR NOTE: specify the adaptation procedure and the scenario set used». Internal consistency in the present sample was « $\alpha =$ » **for maladaptive attributions** and « $\alpha =$ » for learned helplessness.

The **Academic Psychological Safety Scale** (APSS) was developed and validated by the research team for this study, drawing conceptually on Edmondson (1999). The scale comprises «__ items» rated on a 7-point scale. Confirmatory factor analysis in the present sample indicated acceptable fit ($CFI = .94$, $RMSEA = .048$, « $\chi^2/df =$ », «**SRMR** = »), and internal consistency was « $\alpha =$ __». «AUTHOR NOTE: the full item set should be supplied as an appendix or supplementary file — reviewers of a newly developed scale will expect to see it.»

A stereotype threat measure was also administered: «AUTHOR NOTE: this variable appears in Table 1 and in the analysis but no instrument is named in the current draft. Please specify the source scale, number of items, and α .»

Qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with academic staff and psychosocial support personnel (deans of students, clinic staff, and chaplains) and from focus group discussions with students, with two focus groups held at each institution and six to eight students in each.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

The trustworthiness of the qualitative data was addressed using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which participants reviewed summaries of their interview and focus group contributions, and through the triangulation of interview, focus group, and survey data. Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail of methodological and analytical decisions, while confirmability was enhanced through peer debriefing with colleagues who were not involved in data collection. Thick description of the institutional contexts was provided so that readers can judge the transferability of the findings to comparable settings.

For the quantitative strand, validity and reliability were addressed through the use of previously validated instruments adapted to the study context, through the confirmatory factor analysis of the researcher-developed APSS reported in Section 4.4, and through the internal consistency coefficients reported for each subscale. Prior to the main study, the instruments were pilot tested with «n = __» students at a private university whose student demographics closely matched those of the participating institutions. The pilot results were consistent with those of the main study, supporting the reliability and contextual suitability of the instruments before full data collection.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was carried out in IBM SPSS Statistics v.28, using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression to estimate the association between the psychological variables and academic performance (cumulative GPA). For the qualitative data we used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), working through its six phases of familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up. Integration of the two strands followed the sequential explanatory logic of the design and is presented as a joint display in Section 5.3 (Table 2).

Reporting of Participant Extracts

All participants are identified by anonymised codes indicating participant type, data source, and institution: student focus group participants are coded FGD-*Sn*, academic staff interviewees INT-*Ln*, and psychosocial support personnel INT-*Pn*, each followed by an institution letter (A–D). Verbatim extracts have been lightly edited for readability — the correction of transcription errors, false starts, and repetition — with all substantive editorial insertions marked in square brackets and all omissions marked by ellipses. No edit alters the meaning of a participant's statement.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the research ethics committees of all four participating institutions. Participation was entirely voluntary, and every participant gave written informed consent. Anonymity was protected by using coded identifiers in the qualitative reporting and de-identifying all quantitative data, and participants were told they could withdraw at any point without penalty.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings: Psychological Correlates of Academic Achievement

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for psychological variables and GPA, overall and by performance band.

Variable (1–7 scale)	Full sample (N = 134)	High achievers (GPA ≥ 3.5 , n = 3)	Low achievers (GPA ≤ 2.0 , n = 64)
Intrinsic motivation	3.74 (0.75)	4.28 (0.17)	3.34 (0.65)
Psychological safety	3.73 (0.73)	4.90 (1.30)	3.55 (0.69)
External motivation	3.28 (0.80)	2.94 (1.04)	3.51 (0.82)
Maladaptive attributions	2.92 (0.81)	2.42 (0.78)	3.03 (0.74)
Learned helplessness	3.11 (0.72)	3.34 (0.82)	3.02 (0.71)
Stereotype threat	2.99 (0.67)	2.21 (0.30)	2.95 (0.65)
GPA (0–4)	2.02 (0.83)	3.87 (0.21)	1.33 (0.54)

Note. Values are means with standard deviations in parentheses. The high-achieving band comprises three students; descriptive statistics for this band are reported for completeness and should not be treated as a stable estimate of the population of high achievers.

As Table 1 shows, GPA was low across the sample ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.83$), with only three students reaching the highest performance band ($GPA \geq 3.5$) and 64 falling into the lowest ($GPA \leq 2.0$). A multiple regression of GPA on the four psychological variables accounted for just over half of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = .53$, adjusted $R^2 = .51$, $F(4, 129) = 36.20$, $p < .001$). The variables most strongly associated with higher cumulative GPA were intrinsic motivation ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$) and academic psychological safety ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), while external motivation ($\beta = -.30$, $p < .001$) and maladaptive attribution patterns ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) were associated with lower performance. These results are consistent with the zero-order correlations with GPA (intrinsic motivation $r = .53$; psychological safety $r = .33$; external motivation $r = -.36$; maladaptive attributions $r = -.20$). Because the design is cross-sectional and the variables were measured concurrently with GPA, these coefficients describe associations and cannot establish the direction of influence.

Descriptively, the three high-achieving students scored higher than the 64 lowest-band students on intrinsic motivation ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.17$ versus $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.65$) and psychological safety ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.30$ versus $M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.69$). With only three cases in the upper band, however, these comparisons rest on an extremely narrow base: no inferential test was conducted between bands, and the differences are reported as descriptive observations only. The regression results reported above, which use the full sample and treat GPA continuously, provide the more dependable estimate.

Contrary to expectation, learned helplessness did not distinguish the bands descriptively (high $M = 3.34$ versus low $M = 3.02$) and was essentially uncorrelated with GPA ($r = .08$, ns). Stereotype threat was somewhat higher in the lowest band ($M = 2.95$ versus $M = 2.21$) but likewise showed no overall linear association with GPA ($r = -.01$, ns). These non-significant results are interpreted in Section 6.3.

Qualitative Findings: The Lived Experience of the Pedagogical Minefield

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interview and focus group data produced four overarching themes: the invisibility of struggle, the performance of confidence, pedagogical surveillance and its psychic costs, and moments of transformation.

Theme 1: The Invisibility of Struggle

At all four institutions, students described a constant pressure to look capable, engaged, and untroubled by academic difficulty — a performance of adequacy that concealed real distress. One third-year student put it vividly:

You learn very quickly in this place that asking for help is a sign of weakness. I was failing two courses in first year and I told no one. I was ashamed. I thought everyone else understood and I was the only one who didn't. (FGD-S1, third-year student, Institution A)

Because students were skilled at concealment, staff were often unaware of how much distress was present. Lecturers tended to read silence and non-participation as signs of disengagement or poor preparation, rarely pausing to consider what might be occurring psychologically. The gap between what students were experiencing and what lecturers inferred describes a self-reinforcing pattern: the students who were struggling most became the least visible, and so the least supported.

Theme 2: The Performance of Confidence

High-achieving students told a different story. Many described a form of academic confidence that was performed as much as felt: sometimes genuine, often strategic. First-generation students with strong GPAs frequently recounted a deliberate effort to observe, imitate, and gradually take on the cultural codes of academic success — something Bourdieu would recognise as the acquisition of academic cultural capital. As one high-achieving first-generation student explained:

I feel comfortable to pursue academic work if I sense that the lecturers value my contribution. (FGD-S2, first-generation student, Institution «B»)

The same performative dynamic operated collectively. One student described a shared reluctance to admit incomprehension:

I remember that after a major lecture we would all pretend that we heard the whole lecture just to appear “cool”. Even ... university peer pressure is affecting academic outcomes. (FGD-S3, student, Institution «B»)

Theme 3: Pedagogical Surveillance and Its Psychic Costs

A theme running through both student and staff accounts was the psychological cost of high-stakes, surveillance-oriented assessment. Students spoke of test anxiety, imposter feelings, and a chronic pressure to perform that left little room for the creative, exploratory thinking on which deeper learning depends. Accounts of assessment scheduling were closely tied to the academic shocks defined in Section 1 — sudden, destabilising changes to the conditions of academic work:

Deadlines are sometimes suffocating, especially if they are changed, forcing students to spend nights trying to complete multiple assignments with similar deadlines. (FGD-S4, student, Institution «C»)

Several lecturers were candid about their own constraints. Publication demands, large classes, and administrative load, they said, made it hard to teach in the relational, formative way they believed would serve students better:

What our faculty expects us to do is [an] “impossible” juggling act that is taking its toll on our mental health. Socially, it’s a real struggle. The poor remuneration structures further compound our already dire existence. (INT-L1, lecturer, Institution «C»)

Theme 4: Moments of Transformation

For all the difficulty in these accounts, many participants could point to particular encounters that had been transformative: moments that shifted how they saw themselves, rekindled their motivation, or gave them the security to take an intellectual risk. Almost always, these moments involved a lecturer who took a real interest in students as whole people, who gave feedback that was both substantive and humane, and who ran a classroom that felt safe, challenging, and culturally inclusive at once. These accounts also describe recovery from academic shocks:

In my first year, second semester, I failed a core module and my confidence dropped. My fear of disappointing my funder increased, and I was helped by this one senior lecturer who graciously agreed to help about four of us with extra tutorials, far beyond the call of duty. This selfless act restored my confidence and I passed the supplementary exam well. Since then I visit this lecturer often for clarification of difficult concepts. (FGD-S5, student, Institution «D»)

Identity-based pressure also surfaced in accounts of assessment format:

I have struggled with convincing my lecturers that I understand my course materials, as they take my introverted personality as a “sign” that I lack depth. I agree [that I] am not very articulate in speech; however, my written work is clearly above the average student. I feel disadvantaged by oral presentations. (FGD-S6, student, Institution «D»)

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Table 2 presents a joint display linking each quantitative variable to the qualitative themes that help to interpret it, and indicates whether the two strands converge, diverge, or expand upon one another.

Table 2. *Joint display: quantitative variables, corresponding qualitative themes, and integration.*

Quantitative variable (association with GPA)	Related qualitative theme(s)	Illustrative extract	Integration
Intrinsic motivation ($\beta = .52$)	Moments of transformation; Performance of confidence	FGD-S5; FGD-S2	Convergence. Accounts of restored confidence following relational teaching correspond to the strongest quantitative association, and describe a mechanism — sustained, individualised staff contact — through which it may operate.
Academic psychological safety ($\beta = .32$)	Invisibility of struggle	FGD-S1	Convergence and expansion. Concealment of failure and reluctance to seek help give behavioural content to the safety construct and identify shame as a proximate barrier not captured by the scale.
External (controlled) motivation ($\beta = -.30$)	Pedagogical surveillance and its psychic costs	FGD-S4; INT-L1	Convergence. Compressed and shifting deadlines, and staff working under publication and workload pressure, describe institutional conditions under which controlled motivation is sustained.
Maladaptive attributions ($\beta = -.21$)	Invisibility of struggle	FGD-S1	Convergence. Reading early failure as evidence of personal inadequacy, rather than as a remediable difficulty, is expressed directly in student accounts.
Learned helplessness ($r = .08$, ns)	Moments of transformation	FGD-S5	Divergence. Participants who described disengagement following failure also described recovery when support was offered, suggesting a state that is episodic and responsive rather than a stable trait detectable in cross-sectional scores.
Stereotype threat ($r = -.01$, ns)	Performance of confidence; Moments of transformation	FGD-S6; FGD-S2	Divergence. Identity-based pressure was described clearly by participants but was linked to specific assessment formats and personal style rather than to group-based stereotypes, which may explain its absence from the quantitative model.

DISCUSSION

The Psychological is Institutionally Produced

Taken together, these findings point to one central observation. The correlates of academic success and failure in tertiary education are substantially psychological, but the psychology is not purely individual. It appears to be produced, sustained, and sometimes transformed by institutional practices, pedagogical choices, and the broader socio-structural conditions in which students study. That psychological safety and intrinsic motivation emerged as the variables most strongly associated with performance is consistent with a large body of international research (Niemic & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al., 2012; Edmondson, 2019), and extends that work into the Zimbabwean higher education context, where it has rarely been examined.

The qualitative data suggest mechanisms behind the statistical patterns, indicating how psychological safety may be worn away and intrinsic motivation undercut. The widespread culture of performative confidence, in which students feel they must hide uncertainty and feign understanding, is better read as a feature of pedagogical design than as a quirk of individual temperament. It suggests that institutions have unintentionally built environments in which the preconditions of learning — curiosity, risk-taking, and a tolerance for ambiguity — are suppressed by the social norms students live under.

Identity, Resilience, and Structural Reform

Although stereotype threat and learned helplessness were not statistically associated with grade point average in this sample, identity-based pressures surfaced clearly in the qualitative accounts, and they carry particular weight in the post-colonial settings of our study institutions. The long-standing devaluation of African intellectual traditions, curricula that still treat Western epistemologies as the default, and the thin representation of African scholars in senior posts together create a symbolic environment in which students from marginalised groups may carry identity-based psychological burdens in addition to their ordinary academic load. That many of them succeed nevertheless speaks to considerable resilience. But resilience is not the same as the absence of cost, and institutions should not treat individual resilience as a substitute for structural reform.

The transformative encounters students described are grounds for optimism. Lecturers who build learning environments that are psychologically safe, culturally affirming, and intrinsically motivating appear able to offset, at least in part, the effects of wider structural disadvantage. That has implications for how staff are developed and supported, and for the criteria by which good teaching is recognised and rewarded.

Interpreting the Non-Significant Findings

Neither learned helplessness nor stereotype threat was associated with GPA in this sample, despite both being well established in the international literature. Four explanations warrant consideration, and they are not mutually exclusive.

First, the distribution of the outcome variable was restricted. With a sample mean GPA of 2.02 and almost half the sample (64 of 134) in the lowest band, there was limited variance at the upper end of the scale against which either variable could discriminate. Restriction of range attenuates correlations, and the near-zero coefficients should be read in that light rather than as evidence of no relationship.

Second, the classic conditions under which stereotype threat has been demonstrated may not obtain here. The mechanism was theorised and has most often been tested in settings where a negatively stereotyped group is numerically or structurally in the minority within an institution (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). In the participating Zimbabwean institutions, students share a national and racial majority identity, so the salient identity threats participants described were not group-based in the classic sense. As Table 2 indicates, participants located identity threat in assessment format and personality style — oral presentation as a disadvantage for a student who considers himself inarticulate — rather than in racial or gender stereotypes. A measure calibrated to the classic construct may therefore be measuring something that is not the operative threat in this setting.

Third, learned helplessness may be episodic rather than dispositional in this population. The qualitative accounts describe students who disengaged following a specific academic shock and then re-engaged when relational support was extended. A single cross-sectional administration cannot capture a state that fluctuates with the timing of failure and support, and may average away real effects.

Fourth, conceptual overlap between the learned helplessness and maladaptive attribution subscales of the ASQ-AC is plausible, since both draw on the same attributional dimensions. Where maladaptive attributions entered the model as a significant correlate, shared variance may have absorbed the contribution of the helplessness subscale. «AUTHOR NOTE: if collinearity diagnostics (VIF, tolerance) were computed, reporting them here would settle this point directly.»

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations qualify these findings. The cross-sectional design means that no causal conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between the psychological variables and academic outcomes; the associations reported are equally consistent with the possibility that academic performance shapes motivation and perceived safety, or that both are shaped by a common third factor.

The high-achieving stratum comprised only three students. This band is too small to support inferential comparison, and the descriptive contrasts reported in Section 5.1 should be treated as illustrative rather than as estimates of population differences between achievement bands. The principal quantitative findings therefore rest on the full-sample regression, in which GPA is treated as a continuous variable.

Academic shocks, though defined in Section 1 and examined qualitatively, were not operationalised as a quantitative variable. The study can therefore describe how participants experienced and recovered from such events, but cannot estimate their frequency or their independent contribution to academic outcomes.

The four institutions, though varied in type and location, are all in Zimbabwe and may not represent tertiary education elsewhere. Because the measures are self-reported, social desirability bias is possible, even if anonymous administration and validated instruments limit it to some degree. Finally, the Academic Psychological Safety Scale is newly developed; although its factor structure and internal consistency were acceptable in this sample, it awaits independent replication.

CONCLUSION

For many students, the pedagogical terrain of tertiary education operates like a minefield: a space whose hidden psychological hazards are associated with uneven outcomes that are too quickly attributed to individual merit or deficiency. Bringing together self-determination theory, attribution theory, and ecological systems thinking, and grounding the argument in data from four institutions, this study finds that academic ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ are closely associated with psychological environments, institutional cultures, and structural conditions rather than with innate differences between individuals.

The implications are significant. Institutions that are serious about equitable outcomes will need to look beyond access interventions, important as those are, and attend to the psychological texture of the learning environment itself. The minefield can be mapped. Its hazards can be located, addressed, and in many cases defused. Doing so calls for psychological insight, but it also calls for institutional courage: a readiness to question the comfortable language of meritocracy and to redesign learning environments so that they serve everyone who enters them. The ‘losers’ in the current system are not lost by nature. In many cases they are lost by design, and what has been designed can be redesigned.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Flowing from the findings, the study makes five prioritised recommendations for institutions, academic staff, and policymakers in Zimbabwean tertiary education. They are ordered by the strength of the evidence supporting them and by their likely reach.

1. Build psychologically safe, autonomy-supportive learning environments. Because psychological safety and intrinsic motivation showed the strongest associations with performance, institutions should prioritise teaching that acknowledges students’ perspectives, minimises unnecessary external pressure, and gives a meaningful rationale for academic tasks. In practice this means classrooms that reward questioning, normalise uncertainty, and frame error as part of learning, and institutional policy that names psychological safety as a component of teaching quality rather than an optional extra.

2. Normalise help-seeking and make struggle visible. Given the invisibility of struggle reported across all four institutions, universities should cultivate cultures in which seeking help is expected rather than stigmatised. This requires low-stakes check-ins, early identification systems drawing on continuous assessment data and

lecturer observation, peer mentoring, and accessible support services that reach students before difficulty hardens into withdrawal.

3. Invest in academic staff development and staff wellbeing together. Since lecturers were central to the transformative encounters students described, professional development should equip staff to recognise and respond to psychological distress and to teach in relationally supportive ways. This will not succeed in isolation: staff themselves identified heavy teaching loads, large classes, and remuneration pressures as direct constraints on such practice, and these must be addressed alongside any training initiative.

4. Re-balance assessment away from high-stakes surveillance. Because performative, surveillance-heavy assessment was linked in participant accounts to test anxiety and the suppression of curiosity, institutions should shift towards formative, lower-stakes designs, stabilise assessment scheduling to reduce avoidable academic shocks, and diversify assessment formats so that students are not systematically disadvantaged by a single mode of demonstrating competence.

5. Pursue culturally responsive curricula and evidence-informed policy. Curriculum design and assessment should affirm African intellectual traditions and students' identities as knowers rather than positioning Western epistemologies as the unmarked default. Policymakers should review institutional policy, curriculum design, and lecturer-development frameworks against the goal of equitable outcomes, incorporating wellbeing, psychological safety, and engagement indicators into institutional performance measures. Future research should extend the present cross-sectional design through longitudinal, intervention, and multi-country studies capable of testing causal pathways and the transferability of these findings beyond Zimbabwe.

Improving academic performance requires more than improving students. It requires transforming the environments in which they learn, and moving educational systems from evaluating performance towards cultivating potential.

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