

**INTELLECTUAL ABILITY VERSUS ANGST: THE IMPACT OF EXAMINATION ANXIETY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' SCHOLASTIC ATTAINMENT IN ZIMBABWE**

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**ABSTRACT**

The study delved into the impact of examination anxiety on the academic attainment of university students in Zimbabwe. The study was informed by the psychological theories advanced by Bandura, Yerkes and Dodson, Rogers and Ellis. The phenomenological research design was used with focus group discussions and questionnaires as data gathering instruments. The stratified random sampling method was employed to select a sample of 40 university students. It was established that anxiety has both good and detrimental effects on the university students' academic attainment. Most respondents concurred that test anxiety acts as an impetus for sustaining the students' preparations for academic examinations. It was recommended that university students be exposed to anxiety management techniques so as to generate sustainable means of capitalising on the positive effects of anxiety while simultaneously minimising the negative effects of examination anxiety on their academic achievement in the current and subsequent generations.

**Keywords:** Scholastic achievement, arousal, examination anxiety, imitation, sustainable self-efficacy

## **INTRODUCTION**

The scholastic achievement of learners at any educational tier is mediated by a myriad of variables some of which are beyond the control of the individuals involved. While some of such variables are external relative to the individual in question, others are intra-psychological factors. Among the psycho-affective variables which can impinge upon university students' academic achievement is examination anxiety. Feldman (2009, p.521) defines anxiety as a subjective feeling of tension or apprehension in reaction to real or imaginary stressful situations. According to Hey, Bailey & Stouffer (2001, p.81) anxiety is a tense emotive feeling resulting in physiological arousal and is accompanied by the behavioural signs of avoidance or escape. This means that anxiety stems from an individual's perception of an impending situation as threatening in one way or the other. It is also important to note that anxiety is a symptom of stress. Anxiety has a lot of symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, shortness of breath, palpitations, fast heartbeat, sweating, trembling, feeling shaky, muscular tension, aches, soreness, dryness of the mouth, dizziness, nausea, difficulty in falling or staying asleep, flushes, frequenting the toilet, light-headedness, fragmented concentration, and irritability (Kufakunesu, 2015; Hey, et al, 2001, p.82). Test or examination anxiety is a special type of anxiety which engulfs learners when they are about to or are actually writing tests or examinations. This implies that test anxiety is a form of uneasiness attributable to the prospect of writing examinations. In the current study, the researchers made an endeavour to explore the impact of anxiety on the academic achievement of university students in Zimbabwe. The rationale behind the undertaking the current study was to ultimately generate information which institutions of higher learning and individuals can utilise to devise sustainable means of dealing with anxiety in educational settings and beyond.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

To understand the possible impact of examination anxiety on university students' scholastic achievement, it is important to briefly examine some attribute of university students. Most university students are young adults or middle aged adults who are intrinsically motivated. Knowles (1984, p.12) in Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017) elaborates that there is a positive correlation between an individual's chronological maturity and the level of his or her intrinsic motivation to learn independently and in a self-directed manner. Therefore, university students by virtue of being adults are normally intrinsically motivated, self-directed and usually relate concepts to their own real life experiences (Pew, 2007, p.17; Rachal, 2002). Moreover, humanistic psychologists such as Rogers and Maslow maintain that human beings are driven by an inherent quest for self-actualisation, that is, being the best they can be (Lahey, 2009; Feldman, 2009). Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2010, p.449) define self-actualisation as , 'the sense that one is fulfilling one's potential and doing what one is suited for and capable of.' Kufakunesu, Ganga and Chinyoka (2012, p.123) make reference to a study which was conducted in the United Kingdom where more male than female students disclosed that their decision to embark on higher education was principally influenced by the desire to have better employment opportunities. A study by Reay (2003) revealed that female university students are more influenced by process motivators of completing the course than by outcome motivators or subsequent career achievements. These attributes of university students point to the fact that passing examinations is very crucial on the part of university students. Academic failure will be a serious dent to the students' quest for self-actualisation. University students who cherish to enjoy completing their degree programmes or who wish to use their academic results for promotion in the field of work will try to avoid academic failure at all costs. Some university students are adults who have other financial obligations such as paying school fees for their children. Indications are that such university students strive to complete their studies as early as possible so that they would not deplete the financial resources which their children may be in need of or may need at a later stage. To some extent, the

behaviour of university students is driven by the principle of sustainable development whereby their efforts to attain tertiary qualifications should not compromise the way they meet the needs of their children. It was with such considerations in mind that the researchers felt obliged to embark on a study exploring the influence on test anxiety on the academic achievement of university students.

According to Okogu, Osah and Umudjere (2016, p.1) and Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017, p.50) preparing for examinations at literally all educational levels is bound to be an emotion laden exercise characterised by high levels of anxiety. Andrews and Wilding (2004) and Cassady and Johnson (2002, p.271) reiterate that during evaluative situations, students tend to manifest high levels of emotionality which is evidenced by various physiological responses. It is during examination times that university students are inundated by the many symptoms of anxiety. As noted by Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017, p.51) each student frantically attempts to avoid failure at all costs. More precisely, Okogu, et al (2016, p.1) aver that students at institutions of higher learning such as universities are bound to experience examination anxiety as a result of their zeal to end a given semester on a successful note and begin a new one so as to ultimately graduate from the educational institutions without any hitch.

At university level, students can study on block release basis or using the conventional full-time mode. While block release students have lectures during a short period of time on an intensive basis, conventional students have lectures over a period of more than three months before they write their examinations. A study by Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017, p.57) involving the perceived utility of group discussions in examination preparation revealed that university students, especially those studying on block release basis, normally felt overwhelmed by examination anxiety when the examinations are approaching. The study revealed that part of the examination anxiety on the part of block release students stemmed from the fact that block release students spent the greater part of a given semester at their respective work places or homes which are geographically scattered with little or no contact with their lecturers or fellow students. On the other hand, students who study on full-time basis normally spent the greater part of a given semester at the university thereby having the opportunity to interact with their peers and lecturers on regular basis. The sentiments of both block release and conventional full-time students regarding the impact of anxiety on their academic attainment were explored in the current study. The findings of the study may yield information which can help university studying under different study modes sustainable manage their time to enhance their academic performance.

Anxiety may be caused by a variety of stressful life events, numerous hereditary factors, personal background, personality and physical illness (Hey et al, 2001, p.82). Threats by lecturers can trigger test anxiety on the part of university students. Jagero and Masasi (2012, p.2) and Tuckman and Monetti (2011, p.406) allude to the idea that one possible source of test anxiety is failure in previous examinations. This is backed by Snowman, McCown and Biehler (2009, p.274) who claim that one obvious way in which people develop a sense of what they can and cannot do in various areas is thinking about how well they have performed in the past on related tasks. Consequently, university students who once performed dismally in earlier modules or course work may be engulfed by test anxiety when they approach examinations. It was claimed by Hey, et al (2001, p.82) that anxiety is contagious since children and adolescents living with anxious caregivers are more likely to have the same anxiety disorders. This implies that university students can develop test anxiety as a result of the anxious manner in which their lecturers would be conducting themselves during the course of a given semester. This is consistent with Bandura's social learning theory which postulates that people can learn practically anything through observation and subsequent imitation (Feldman, 2009).

It is tempting but erroneous to believe that anxiety only has negative effects. Feldman (2009, p.521) opines that in real life, anxiety is not entirely bad because without anxiety many learners will not be sufficiently motivated to study in preparation for examinations. The impact of anxiety on any form of performance is addressed by a 1908 theory known as the Yerkes-Dodson law which outlines the relationship between arousal and the performance of any task (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2006, p.451). Named after its proponents, Robert Yerkes and John Dodson, the Yerkes-Dodson law theorises that an individual's performance of a given task increases with arousal until an optimum point after which arousal interferes with performance (Gazzaniga & Heatherton, 2006, p.346). According to the Yerkes-Dodson law the best task performance is achieved at a moderate level of arousal, with comparatively poorer performance levels at both lower and higher arousal levels (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908, p.459). This relationship between arousal and performance can be represented by an inverted U parabola known as the Yerkes-Dodson curve. Gazzaniga and Heatherton (2006, p.345) and Lahey (2009, p.367) define arousal as the activation of the nervous system resulting in physiological, cognitive and psychological alertness and is accompanied by increased brain activity or increased autonomic responses such as quickened heartbeat, increased sweating or muscle tension. Low arousal levels are accompanied by low levels of performance due to sluggishness on the part of the individual as the person will be affected by complacency, fatigue, poor motivation, poor concentration and low body temperature (Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2006, p.451). Under-arousal leads to sluggishness. Therefore, the lethargy associated with low arousal yields poor performance (Kufakunesu, 2015). The Yerkes-Dodson law also claims that over-arousal triggers under-achievement just like under-arousal due to panic, exhaustion, indecision, fear, anxiety, physical hypertension and fragmented concentration (Lahey, 2009, p.368). Kosslyn and Rosenberg (2006, p.451) maintain that over-aroused people tend to have problems in focusing and sustaining attention. Kufakunesu (2015) posits that over-arousal causes people to concentrate on a limited number of aspects at the expense of other equally crucial variables resulting in poor performance. By virtue of being a theory, the Yerkes-Dodson law is subject to fallibility and the current study was an endeavour to test the law's authenticity in a Zimbabwean university context. Exploring the way anxiety can impinge on university students can yield information which university students can use to sustain their intellectual efforts amid militating variables.

A number of studies have been undertaken to unravel the impact of anxiety on the academic performance of learners at different educational tiers in a variety of academic disciplines. Many studies have confirmed that learners with anxiety disorders tend to experience academic underachievement and many other socio-emotional challenges (Ameringen, Mancini & Farvolden, 2003; Velting, Setzer & Albano, 2004; Blood, Blood, Maloney, Meyer, & Qualls, 2007). For instance, Zakaria and Nordin (2008, pp. 27-30) explored the impact of Mathematics anxiety on learners' motivation and academic performance. Their study established that high levels of Mathematics anxiety are accompanied by low motivation and poor academic achievement in Mathematics. Another study involving undergraduate university students was carried out by Ashcraft and Kirk (2001, p.227) in which the relationship between the students' short-term memory, Mathematics anxiety and academic achievement was scrutinised. The study revealed that Mathematics anxiety interferes with the operations of the short-term memory, leading to poor academic performance. However, these studies precisely focused on Mathematics anxiety and did not delve on test anxiety. The current study is an endeavour to explore the impact of test anxiety on the academic achievement of university students in Zimbabwe.

The tentative assertion that anxiety can influence human functioning makes it imperative to find out how people attempt to minimise the negative effects of anxiety. According to Balon (2004) and King, Heyne, and Ollendick, (2005) there exists empirical data confirming that cognitive-behavioural treatments for anxiety have been found to be effective. A

study by Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017) concerning the perceived utility of group discussions for examination preparation revealed that one reason why university students study in groups is to look for emotional buttress and have their anxiety reduced. The study revealed that groups play a therapeutic role by moderating the level of examination anxiety on the part of the university students (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017 , p.53; Lahey, 2009, p.549). In the current study, the researchers were interested in establishing the impact of examination anxiety on the academic attainment of university students.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study was grounded in the domain of Psychology of Education and was particularly anchored on four psychological theories which are Rogers' person-centred theory, the Yerkes-Dodson law, the rational emotive behaviour therapy advanced by Ellis and Bandura's social learning theory. Carl Rogers is one humanistic psychologist who postulated the person-centred theory in which he theorised that human beings need unconditional positive regard, empathy, genuineness and freedom of expression for them to self-actualise (Kufakunesu, Dzingo & Dekeza, 2013). Regarding assessment, Rogers maintains that the use of formal examinations and tests should be abolished because such formal assessment methods trigger unnecessary anxiety which can undermine the learners' chances of performing to the best of their ability (Feldman, 2009). Therefore, Rogers' person-centred theory alleges that anxiety which emanates from formal assessment procedures negatively impinges upon students' academic abilities. As already outlined, the Yerkes-Dodson law posits that the best performance of any task normally occurs when the performer's level of arousal is moderate. Underachievement takes place when the level of anxiety is either too low or too high.

The rational emotive behaviour therapy is a cognitive behavioural theory which was advanced by Albert Ellis after being influenced by philosophical ideas of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. Central to the theory is the idea that human beings react to situations on the basis of their beliefs (Ullusoy & Duy, 2013, p.1441). Ellis maintains that people have the natural disposition to think in both rational and irrational ways with a higher probability to lean towards irrationality (Bernard, 2008, p.2). Irrational beliefs according to Ellis are illogical beliefs which are not based on logic and scientific data (Ellis & Dryden, 2003, p.4; Kaygusuz, 2013, p.143). Numerous studies have found an association between anxiety and irrationality. A study by Kufakunesu (2015) established that there is a positive correlation between learners' irrationality and their anxiety. However, the direction of causality is not clear. It is possible for irrational thinking to be triggered by anxiety. It is also possible for high levels of anxiety to stem from irrational thinking. Ellis proposed the use of disputation as a sustainable cognitive behavioural technique of managing irrational thinking which is associated with high levels of anxiety.

Albert Bandura is a neo-behaviourist who advanced the social learning theory which postulates that human beings can learn through imitation (Lahey, 2009). In the current study, it is possible for university students to imitate anxious responses to situations if significant role models such as lecturers and other students exude anxiety at any point during their academic interaction (Feldman, 2009). If university lecturers and students exude mechanisms of absorbing anxiety, then sustainable ways of managing anxiety would be propagated as the anxiety absorbing mechanisms are imitated from one generation to another.

Apart from the principle of observational learning, Bandura also postulated the principle of self-efficacy. Bandura (1990) argues that self-efficacy is a vital determinant of human functioning in virtually all areas of human existence

(Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017, p.111). Self-efficacy is the belief by people that they can perform a given task and produces the desirable results (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017, p.111; McLean, 2003, p.31). Bandura (1990, p.316) defines self-efficacy as people's "beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over task demands". Therefore, self-efficacy judgements are not concerned with one's skills, but with one's judgements of what one can accomplish with these skills. Santrock (2004, p.226) opines that individuals with high self-efficacy levels usually apply much effort to ensure that their initial belief in their own abilities is fulfilled. This implies that self-efficacy helps individuals to exert sustained effort and concentration of the task to be undertaken. The level of person's self-efficacy can be determined by physiological and emotional states (Powell, Bordoloi and Ryan, 2007; Schulze, 2010, p.434). Negative emotions such as stress and anxiety coupled with physical fatigue can negatively impinge upon a person's self-efficacy (Schulze, 2010, p.434). Therefore, the principle of self-efficacy is relevant to the current study in which the impact of anxiety on the academic attainment of university students was under scrutiny.

## **GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study was an endeavour to generate responses to the following research questions:

- What are the positive effects of examination anxiety on the scholastic achievement of university students?
- How does examination anxiety negatively impinge upon the academic performance of university students?
- To what extent do university students rate examination anxiety as a determinant of their educational achievement?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative in nature and the phenomenological research design was employed. According to Groenewald (2004, p.44), "the phenomenologist's are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspective of people involved". This implies that a phenomenological researcher explores the lived experiences of the people who are taking part or who at some point participated in the subject or situation under examination (Maypole and Davies, 2001; Groenewald, 2004). According to Chilisa and Preece (2005, p.142) phenomenological studies focus on studying people's experiences in an attempt to obtain finer details of their social lives. In the current, the researchers settled for the phenomenological research design because it enabled them to gather the views and sentiments of the experientially involved students pertaining impact of anxiety on their scholastic attainment.

The stratified random sampling method was used to choose a sample of 40 university students across a number of degree programmes. According to Munzara (2016, p.12) in Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017, p.55) stratified random sampling is when the population is divided into distinct layers before members of each stratum are selected in proportion of the size of the layer relative to the entire population. The stratification was done relative to variables such as gender, mode of study, area of specialisation and level of study. The 40 university students who participated in the study comprised 22 females and 18 males and had a mean age of 31.68 years and a standard deviation of 11.23 years.

Data collection was done by means of questionnaires and focus group discussions. According to Kufakunesu, et al (2013, p.1561) a questionnaire is a data gathering instrument which is in the form of a document containing relevant questions that the researcher intends to pose to the research participants. In the current study, the researchers deemed it expedient to

use questionnaires because the respondents were literate by virtue of being university students. Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017, p.112) reiterate, “A questionnaire is a list of methodically and carefully structured questions prepared by the researcher to elicit responses from research participants for the sake of data collection”. Kufakunesu et al (2012, p.125) define a focus group discussion as, “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment.” Focus group discussions are more suitable when data is to be collected from respondents who have at least one common defining characteristic such as being university students (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008, p. 828). Furthermore, focus groups better represent social reality with regard to being naturalistic than other data gathering instruments such as face-to-face interviews (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008, p. 828).

In an attempt to protect the respondents and the education fraternity from any form of harm, the researchers observed a number of ethical principles throughout the study. According to Chiromo (2006, p.10), “Research ethics are the principles of right and wrong that guide the researchers when conducting their research”. Firstly, the respondents were informed about the nature and purpose of the study before they made the decision to participate in the study. Therefore, the principle of informed consent was observed (Chiromo, 2006, p.11). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.77) and Keenan (2002, p.66) view informed consent as an agreement by research informants to participate in a research study based on a full understanding of the nature of the entire research study. Moreover, confidentiality and anonymity were also considered. Kufakunesu (2011, p.39) defines anonymity is the ethical principle which requires that the names of the research participants should not be revealed especially during data analysis and discussion. The privacy of the research informants was also preserved during and after the empirical investigation.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The key ideas which emerged from the data which was collected were as follows:

1. Eighty per cent of the respondents indicated that anxiety is necessary ingredient in the examination preparation matrix. They argued that a certain degree of anxiety is required for one to adequately prepare for examinations. The respondents opined that if anxiety is properly managed, it can sustain university students’ quest to pass examinations.
2. Twenty-eight out of the 40 university students who took part in the study lamented that anxiety can promote academic underachievement due to its ability to interfere with an individual’s cognitive functioning.
3. Three-quarters of the entire sample reported that anxiety can overwhelm an examinee to the extent of denting his or her self-efficacy level.
4. The majority of the respondents remarked that anxiety is a crucial determinant of educational achievement which stakeholders of the education fraternity cannot afford to ignore. They stressed that sustainable means of dealing with anxiety are needed since anxiety is likely to affect learners in current and future generations.
5. More than 80% of the respondents pointed out that a combination of anxiety and other militating variables can seriously impoverish the academic performance of university students in the examinations.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The data collected revealed that 32 out of the 40 university students, that is, 80% of the research participants reported that anxiety is necessary if one is to be sufficiently ready for examinations. As far as these students were concerned, it was due to anxiety stemming from the fear of failure that they always ended up ready for the examinations.

The respondents opined that when one thinks of the negative eventualities of failing examinations such as retaking the modules or writing supplementary examinations, one feels anxious and subsequently springs into action to avert such dire consequences. It is through feeling anxious about any impending event that one overcomes complacency (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908, p.459). The research participants reiterated that anxiety switches them into a fight mode where they become psychologically ready to approach the examinations. This is in agreement with Okogu, et al (2016, p.1) who echo that students at institutions of higher learning such as universities tend to frantically work hard to end a given semester on a successful note and begin a new one so as to ultimately graduate from the educational institutions without incurring any additional costs in terms of money and time. The respondents pointed out that their sensitivity of to the idea of sustainable development would urged them to frantically work hard to ensure that they would not lose any extra financial resources which would rather be channelled towards meeting the needs of their children and subsequent generations. As established in a study by Kufakunesu and Dekeza (2017), the students revealed that anxiety spurred them to employ various survival strategies such as undertaking group discussions and developing one's personal short notes in which various memory enhancing techniques are employed. These findings were consistent with the Yerkes-Dodson law which claims that a certain degree of anxiety is required for one to perform a given task to the optimum (Gazzaniga & Heatherton, 2006, p.346; Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2006, p.451; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908, p.459).

On the other hand, 28 out of the 40 university students who participated in the study regretted that anxiety can trigger academic underachievement for several reasons. They pointed out that for a student to tackle examination questions, there is need for composure. Anxiety can cause a student to be jittery before and during the examination. The respondents felt that a student's ability to remember certain concepts can be compromised by high levels of anxiety mainly because the student's mind becomes saturated with the negative outcomes of failing the examination. These sentiments were in agreement with the findings of Ashcraft and Kirk (2001, p.227) which revealed that the operations of the short-term memory can be negatively influenced by anxiety. It is in the short-term memory that an individual processes information retrieved from the long-term memory and also information encoded from the sensory register (Feldman, 2009). Therefore, disturbances in the short-term memory can trigger academic underachievement. In support of this perspective, one male postgraduate student made the following remarks:

*When one feels overwhelmed by anxiety, one's ability to make use of memory enhancing techniques becomes impaired and this may trigger further panicking when one is faced with the prospect of failure or underachievement. Feeling anxious is one of the reasons for failing to remember the critical learnt concepts which one needs for answering examination questions.*

One aspect which excessive anxiety can negatively affect is examination self-efficacy on the part of university students. Thirty out of the 40 respondents indicated that anxiety just before or during examinations can cause university students to doubt their intellectual prowess. This category of respondents maintained that anxiety is one of the root causes of feelings of doubt and inadequacy relative to satisfactorily answering examination items. This implies that the level of a candidate's self-efficacy can be soiled by high levels of anxiety thereby leading to academic underachievement as alluded to by Powell, et al (2007) and Schulze (2010, p.434). The university students argued that symptoms of anxiety such as restlessness, fatigue, shortness of breath, sweating, trembling, feeling shaky, muscular tension, aches, soreness, dryness of the mouth, dizziness, nausea, difficulty in falling or staying asleep, flushes, frequenting the toilet, light-headedness, fragmented concentration and irritability are to a large extent detrimental to a candidate's ability to perform well in the examination (Kufakunesu, 2015; Hey, et al, 2001, p.82). Some respondents even remarked that low self-

efficacy can also trigger examination anxiety. This implies that more studies focusing on attempting to establish the direction of causality regarding the relationship between self-efficacy and anxiety need to be undertaken. Such studies would generate more information pertaining to how sustainable levels of self-efficacy can be nurtured among university students for the sake of overcoming examination anxiety.

It also came to the attention of the researchers that the respondents believed that examination anxiety affects block release and full-time conventional students differently. Thirteen block release students confessed that they tend to experience examination anxiety before the examination more than their conventional full-time counterparts. Fear of failure and doubts about their examination readiness after being geographically distant from their peers and university facilities were given as reasons for the alleged comparatively high levels of pre-examination anxiety among block release students. However, the block release students remarked that the perceived differences in examination anxiety between students under the two study modes are evened out the moment the block release students convene and start preparing for examinations collaboratively (Kufakunesu & Dekeza, 2017). The block release students expressed the view that engaging in group discussions is a sustainable way of moderating examination anxiety and boosting one's self-efficacy levels with regard to the impending examinations.

The generality of the university students who participated in the study rated anxiety is a critical determinant of academic performance which educational stakeholders such as learners, educators, parents and the community cannot afford to ignore. The respondents revealed that the academic performance of university students can be determined by student variables such as intellectual endowment, attitude towards the degree programme being studied, commitment to academic excellence and physiological as well as emotional states of the students. The research participants then single out examination anxiety as a pervasive affective variable which can spur or sabotage good academic achievement. Variables which are external relative to the students were also noted to be determinants of students' academic performance. Examples of such factors entail the quality of the lecturer-student relationship, availability of material and technological resources and the professional competence of the lecturers. The students were quick to justify the notion that in one way or the other, anxiety can be triggered by the majority of these factors, a phenomenon which the students used to justify the claim that anxiety is a vital determinant of academic performance.

More than 80% of the respondents pointed out that a combination of anxiety and other militating variables can seriously impoverish the academic performance of university students in the examinations. The students argued that what makes anxiety critical in determining academic performance is the fact that its combination with other variables can overwhelm even the most intelligent students. It was revealed that if anxiety is combined with other factors such as lack of examination preparation, erratic attendance of lectures, poor coverage of module outlines and hostility on the part of lecturers and invigilators, students are left with a significantly small probability of doing well in the examinations. During two separate focus group discussions, the research participants also contended that in any given population, there are people who are more disposed to exhibit anxiety than others. They argued that students with a natural anxiety disposition endure the negative effects of anxiety regardless of being prepared for examinations. Some of the students regretted that there exist people whose inclination towards anxiety is to some extent based on irrationality. The respondents in the two focus group discussions maintained that individuals with anxiety as a personality trait remain susceptible to underachievement in virtually all facets of human existence (Hey, et al, 2001, p.82). The allusion to the relationship between irrational thinking and anxiety is consistent with the findings of Kufakunesu (2015) who established that there is a positive correlation between learners' irrationality and their anxiety. It is worth remarking that a

sustainable solution to the problem of anxiety which is associated with irrational thinking is the use of disputation in which the individual logically challenges the irrational thinking patterns and replace them with sustainable logical ones.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current study was an attempt to establish the positive and negative effects of anxiety as an emotional psychological state on the scholastic achievement of university students in Zimbabwe. The qualitative research established that the academic attainment of university can be influenced both positively and negatively by anxiety. The findings of the study backed the essence of the Yerkes-Dodson law which postulates that the level of emotional arousal can influence the performance of a given task either positively or negatively. Given that the current study has confirmed the findings by earlier researchers that anxiety can influence human functioning, it is imperative that sustainable ways of regulating anxiety should be introduced to students. University students who would have been exposed to the various techniques of allaying anxiety can help to promote the sustainability of such techniques by employing them in their homes and in their current or future areas of employment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Guided by the findings of the current study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. University students should start preparing for their end of semester examinations well in advance so that they will not be overwhelmed by anxiety which stems from hasty and jittery last minute gasp efforts to prepare for examinations
2. University lecturers should boost students' levels of self-efficacy as a way of allaying anxiety on the part of the students.
3. There is need for Guidance and Counselling units at virtually all educational levels to equip students with various anxiety management techniques. For instance, cognitive-behavioural counselling techniques such as the rational emotive behaviour therapy should be taught to university students given that they have been found to be effective in allaying anxiety (Balon, 2004; King, et al, 2005) Disputation which is the main counselling technique advanced by Ellis is to a large extent a sustainable anxiety management technique. There is need to train university students some anxiety management techniques which they can sustainably employ at university and in their personal lives for the ultimate benefit of members of the society in the current and future generations.
4. University lecturers must go through all the content areas on the module outlines so that students would feel confident to march towards examinations with moderate anxiety which is propitious to their optimum academic performance.
5. Other researchers interested in exploring how anxiety can impinge upon human operations can replicate the current study at a different educational tier probably using quantitative methodology.

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