ONLINE LEARNING SELF-EFFICACY, PERCEIVED COURSE VALUE, AND DISTANCE LEARNERS' PERSISTENCEAT AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

[1]Maruff Akinwale Oladejo &[2]Abidemi Omotayo Oladeji
[1]Department of Educational Management
University of Lagos, Nigeria
maoladejo@unilag.edu.ng
[2]Department of Educational Management & LIS
Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Nigeria

Abstract

Academic persistence has emerged as a critical challenge in contemporary Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme, particularly as institutions increasingly rely on virtual modes of delivery to expand access and flexibility. This study therefore examined Online Learning Self-Efficacy, Perceived Course Value, and Academic Persistence Among Distance Learners at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The study was guided by one research question and two null hypotheses. The descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population comprised 4,211 distance learners, from which 395 participants were selected through Convenience Sampling Technique. Data were collected using a structured self-designed questionnaire titled "Online Learning Self-Efficacy, Perceived Course Value and Academic Persistence Questionnaire (OLSEPCVAPQ)". Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to test the two hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings showed that Online Learning Self-Efficacy ($r = 0.81$, $p = 0.00$) and Perceived Course Value ($r = 0.89$, $p = 0.00$) showed a positive, strong, and significant relationship with Academic Persistence. The study concluded that both technological self-efficacy and motivational value constructs are critical determinants of academic persistence in distance education. It is therefore recommended among other things that ODL Institutions should strengthen digital literacy initiatives, enhance access to academic resources, and design curricula that emphasise relevance and practical application.

Keywords: Academic Persistence, Online Learning Self-Efficacy, Perceived Course Value, Distance Learning.

Background to the study

In a rapidly evolving society where continuous learning is essential, online education has become a vital component of lifelong learning, particularly for adult learners. This group typically comprises individuals balancing academic pursuits with employment, family responsibilities, and social commitments. Online learning has become an increasingly popular due to its flexibility, affordability, and global accessibility, allowing learners to access coursework from any location and often on a self-determined schedule. Despite these advantages, online learning is not without challenges. Learners frequently encounter obstacles such as technical difficulties, poor time management, feelings of isolation, reduced motivation, limited interaction with instructors and peers, and inconsistencies in course quality (Oladejo, 2025). These challenges can negatively affect learners' engagement and persistence in online programmes.

Academic persistence has therefore emerged as a critical challenge in contemporary online and distance education, particularly as institutions increasingly rely on virtual modes of delivery to expand access and flexibility. Academic persistence refers to learners' sustained commitment to continue, engage with, and complete their academic programmes despite academic, technological,

and personal challenges. In online learning environments, persistence is frequently undermined by limited face-to-face interaction, feelings of isolation, competing life responsibilities, and reduced external regulation of learning activities. Empirical evidence indicates that attrition rates in online programmes remain significantly higher than in conventional face-to-face settings, underscoring persistence as a central problem in distance education (Tinto, 2017; Hart, 2012). When learners fail to persist, the consequences extend beyond individual academic failure to include wasted institutional resources, reduced programme credibility, and unmet educational goals. Addressing the factors that influence academic persistence is therefore essential to improving the effectiveness and sustainability of online learning systems.

In educational contexts, self-efficacy is often operationalised as academic self-efficacy (ASE), which denotes learners' beliefs in their ability to complete academic tasks and achieve learning objectives successfully. Students' expectations of success strongly influence their motivation, engagement, and academic performance. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that ASE is a significant predictor of academic success (Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018; Honicke & Broadbent, 2016). Online and distance learners are required to engage in a high degree of independent learning, often relying on digital libraries, online journals, and web-based academic resources. One important factor linked to academic persistence therefore is online learning self-efficacy. Online learning environments place heavy technological demands on learners, requiring them to access materials, submit assignments, communicate virtually, and troubleshoot basic technical problems independently. Empirical studies (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016; Bello & Oladejo, 2017) have shown that learners with low online learning self-efficacy often experience anxiety, frustration, and avoidance behaviours, which negatively affect engagement and increase the likelihood of withdrawal from online programmes. Conversely, higher levels of online learning self-efficacy have been found to significantly predict continued participation and course completion in distance learning contexts (Alqurashi, 2019). Empirical research has demonstrated that online learning self-efficacy is positively associated with learning engagement, academic performance, and persistence in online courses (Tsai & Tsai, 2003; Kuo et al., 2014). Learners who perceive themselves as competent in online learning are more likely to remain motivated, manage academic challenges effectively, and persist in completing their programmes.

Another significant determinant of academic persistence is perceived course value. Perceived course value plays a crucial role in shaping students' motivation, engagement, and continuous persistence. Often described as utility value or relevance, perceived course value reflects the extent to which learners consider course content meaningful, useful, and aligned with their personal or professional goals. It also refers to learners' subjective evaluation of the relevance, importance, and meaningfulness of course content in relation to their academic or professional goals. In online learning contexts, where learners often balance education with work and family responsibilities, decisions to persist are frequently shaped by cost–benefit considerations. When students perceive high value in their course, they are more likely to demonstrate increased motivation, engagement, and persistence (Jung & Lee, 2018). Empirical evidence indicates that students are more likely to sustain effort and remain enrolled when they perceive their courses as valuable and worthwhile. Hart (2012) found that perceived course value was one of the strongest predictors of retention in online programmes. Empirical studies have further shown that when learners understand how course content aligns with their future aspirations, they demonstrate higher levels of motivation, effort, and persistence. Hulleman et al. (2017) found that emphasising the practical relevance of coursework significantly increased students' intention to continue their studies.

Self-efficacy and perceived course value are closely interrelated and exert reciprocal effects on one another. Students who perceive greater value in their coursework are more likely to invest effort and develop stronger self-efficacy beliefs, while higher self-efficacy can, in turn, enhance perceptions of course value. When both factors are favourable, academic persistence is typically enhanced. Despite

the growing body of global literature on these constructs, notable gaps remain, particularly in relation to distance learners in developing countries. Contextual factors such as limited technological infrastructure, inconsistent internet access, economic constraints, and varying cultural attitudes toward online education may significantly influence the relationship between self-efficacy, perceived value, and academic persistence. Consequently, further empirical investigation is required to explore these relationships between online learning self-efficacy, perceived course value, and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

Statement of the problem

Although online classes begin with a great deal of enthusiasm, over 50% of students experience a significant decline in motivation within the first month, primarily attributed to the absence of in-person interaction. In the absence of physical classrooms, peer interactions, or direct engagement with instructors, students might experience feelings of isolation and disengagement. This separation is intensified by the false perception of having additional time, resulting in delays in action. What starts with vibrant energy can swiftly transform into a cycle of overlooked deadlines, incomplete assignments, and waning motivation. As time progresses, this can detrimentally impact performance and potentially result in total disengagement from the course. Research indicates that self-efficacy serves as a primary predictor of success in online learning; however, it remains one of the most delicate qualities in a virtual environment. The lack of daily academic routines, like morning lectures or classroom engagement, can lead to a sense of complacency.

Students frequently rate the quality of online courses as moderately satisfactory, even when offered by the same provider (Cole & Shelley et al., 2014). Certain modules exhibit a clear structure, featuring engaging content and attentive instructors, whereas others fall short, appearing outdated, disorganized, or hastily presented. This variability may result in inconsistent learning outcomes, confusion, and a lack of trust in the platform or institution. It raises significant concerns in certification programmes or degree tracks where the alignment of courses and the gradual increase in difficulty are crucial for a cohesive learning experience.

To remain focused throughout the course, attain great deal of persistence in the student, student persistence, which is the capacity of learners to sustain and finalise their academic programmes, continues to be one of the most significant difficulties in higher education today. A considerable percentage of students worldwide do not complete their degrees, leading to elevated attrition rates, squandered resources, and unmet academic objectives. This difficulty is particularly evident in online and remote learning contexts, where the lack of physical interaction, restricted peer support, and technological obstacles frequently diminish learners' motivation and engagement.

Purpose of the Study

The study investigated online learning self-efficacy, perceived course value, and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University. Specific objectives of the study were to:

i. Determine the level of academic persistence among distant learners at Ahmadu Bello University;
ii. Examine the relationship between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence among distant learners at Ahmadu Bello University;
iii. Ascertain the relationship between perceived course value and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University; and

Research Question

The following question guided the study:

i. What is the level of academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University?

Research Hypotheses

The following formulated hypotheses were tested in this study at .05 significant level:

$H_{0\ 1}$: There is no significant relationship between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

$H_{0\ 2}$: There is no significant relationship between perceived course value and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

Academic Persistence

Academic persistence refers to a learner's continued engagement and commitment to completing an academic programme despite challenges. It is commonly operationalized as students' intention to remain enrolled, complete courses, and avoid dropout (Tinto, 2017). In distance learning, persistence is particularly critical because attrition rates are consistently higher than in face-to-face programmes. Factors such as isolation, limited interaction, competing life demands, and inadequate institutional support can negatively affect persistence (Rovai, 2003). Persistence is therefore not merely an outcome, but a process influenced by motivational, cognitive, and contextual variables. Research has shown that learners' beliefs about their competence and the value they attach to their courses significantly shape persistence decisions (Hart, 2012). This makes academic persistence a suitable dependent variable for the present study.

Online Learning Self-Efficacy and Academic Persistence

Self-efficacy has been widely recognized as a critical determinant of learners' motivation, engagement, and persistence in online and distance education. In self-directed learning environments, students must regulate their learning activities, manage technological platforms, and overcome academic challenges with minimal face-to-face supervision. Consequently, confidence in one's ability to succeed in online learning tasks is central to persistence. Lim (2001) conducted a survey-based study involving 289 students enrolled in an online distance learning programme. Using regression analysis, the study found that computer self-efficacy significantly predicted both learner satisfaction and course completion. Students who reported higher confidence in using digital learning tools were more likely to persist and complete their programmes. Lim concluded that technological confidence reduces anxiety and cognitive overload, thereby improving academic engagement. However, the study was conducted in a technologically advanced environment and did not account for infrastructural limitations common in developing countries. Similarly, Joo, Bong, and Choi (2000) examined 395 university students enrolled in web-based instruction using a correlational research design. Their findings showed that computer self-efficacy significantly predicted students' intention to continue participating in online courses. The authors reported that students with low technological confidence were more likely to withdraw from online learning, even when academic ability was adequate. While the study established a strong association between self-efficacy and persistence, it focused primarily on undergraduate students in a high-resource setting. Similarly, Kuo, Walker, Schroder, and Belland (2014) examined predictors of student satisfaction and persistence among 332 online learners using a mixed-methods design. Their findings showed that students' confidence in navigating online learning resources and academic databases significantly predicted their intention to continue with their programmes.

Perceived Course Value and Academic Persistence

Perceived course value refers to students' beliefs about the importance, relevance, and usefulness of their academic programme. It reflects the extent to which learners perceive their studies as meaningful and worth the investment of time, effort, and resources.

Hart (2012) conducted a longitudinal study involving 1,192 online undergraduate students to examine predictors of academic persistence. Using logistic regression analysis, the study found that perceived course value was one of the strongest predictors of student retention. Students who perceived their courses as valuable and relevant were significantly more likely to complete their

programmes than those who perceived low value. Hart concluded that motivational beliefs were more important than demographic factors in predicting persistence. Artino and Stephens (2009) investigated the motivational determinants of course completion among 456 military online learners. Using structural equation modelling, they found that perceived course value mediated the relationship between self-efficacy and academic persistence. Their findings indicated that even highly self-efficacious students were less likely to persist if they perceived their courses as irrelevant or unimportant.

Methodology

This section describes the procedure used to conduct the study. It presents the research design, population of the study, sample size and sampling technique, instrument for data collection, validity and reliability of the instrument, procedure for data collection, ethical considerations, and method of data analysis.

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design, which is widely used for collecting data on individuals' characteristics, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours within a defined population. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), descriptive survey research is particularly effective for examining relationships among variables and identifying trends within a specific population.

Population of the Study The population for this study comprised all registered distance learning students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, who were actively enrolled during the 2024/2025 academic session. According to ABU's official records, the total student enrollment is approximately 4,211.

Sample and Sampling Techniques From this population, a sample of 395 distance learners was determined using the Taro Yamane formula (Yamane, 1967) at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants. A complete list of registered distance learners was obtained from the Directorate of distance learning, and each student was assigned a unique identification number. Using a computer-generated random number list, 395 students were selected to participate in the study. This method ensured that every student in the population had an equal chance of being included, thereby reducing selection bias and increasing the representativeness of the sample.

Instrumentation

The instrument for data collection in this study was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher, titled the Online Learning Self-Efficacy, Perceived Course Value and Academic Persistence Questionnaire (OLSEPCVAPQ). The instrument was divided into two main sections. Section A focused on the bio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, including age, gender, marital status, employment status, level of study and years of teaching experience. These variables provide important contextual information that supports a clearer understanding of the background of the study population and allows for meaningful interpretation of the findings. Section B addressed the substantive focus of the study by measuring the key constructs under investigation. Specifically, it captured respondents' online learning self - efficacy, perceived course value, and academic persistence. The items in this section were designed to elicit respondents' perceptions, confidence levels and commitment related to online learning and programme completion. All items in section B were measured using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Validity of the Research Instrument

The research instrument underwent validation procedures to ensure its suitability in measuring the constructs under investigation. To establish face and content validity, the draft questionnaire was submitted to the researcher's supervisor and two other experts in educational psychology, measurement and evaluation, and distance education at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The validation process was to ensure that the instrument measures what it is designed to measure and that the items were suitable for use among postgraduate distance learning students.

Reliability of the Research Instrument

The reliability of the research instrument was determined through a pilot study using the test–retest method. The questionnaire was administered to a group of 10 postgraduate students from a distance learning programme at a similar institution, who were not part of the main study sample. The same questionnaire was administered to the same group of respondents two weeks later to assess the stability of the instrument over time. The data obtained from the pilot study were analysed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained.

Procedure for Data Collection

The researcher administered the questionnaire electronically to the selected respondents using Google form. A comprehensive list of distance learning students was obtained from the programme coordinator, from which the selected participants were contacted. An introductory message explaining the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation, and assurances of confidentiality accompanied the questionnaire link. Respondents were also informed that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any stage without any penalty. The questionnaire was distributed through the official distance learning communication platforms, including Whatsapp groups and email channels. Adequate time was be given for respondents to complete the questionnaire to ensure thoughtful and accurate responses. Follow-up reminders were sent periodically to improve the response rate.

Methods of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies percentages, mean scores and standard deviations were used to answer the research question, while Inferential statistics was applied to test the research hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Specifically, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was thus used to test for the relationships among online learning self-efficacy, perceived course value, and academic persistence.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of the data obtained through the administered questionnaire. It discusses the results found after the analysis.

Research Question

Research question: What is the level of academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University?

Table 1

Level of Academic Persistence Among Distance Learners

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Persistence	10	40	33.29	6.27

Field survey, 2025

Academic persistence was measured using a 10-item scale with possible scores ranging from 10 to 40. The results showed a mean persistence score of 33.29 (SD = 6.27), with observed scores ranging from 10 to 40 among the 395 respondents. This represents approximately 83% of the maximum obtainable score, indicating a generally high level of academic persistence among the study participants. This suggests that most distance learners demonstrated strong commitment to completing their programme, sustained motivation despite academic challenges, and consistent engagement with their online studies.

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one

$H0_1$: There is no significant relationship between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

Table 3

Online Learning Self-Efficacy and Academic Persistence

Variables	Mean	Sd	N	Df	r-cal.	P-value	Remark
Online Learning Self-efficacy	37.84	7.12	395	393	.81	.000	H_{01} Rejected
Academic Persistence	33.29	6.27					

P<0.05

A Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence. The result showed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence, $r = 0.81$, $p < .05$. Consequently, the null hypothesis ($H0_1$) was rejected, indicating that online learning self-efficacy significantly relates to academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

Hypothesis Two

$H0_3$: There is no significant relationship between perceived course value and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University.

Table 5

Perceived Course Value and Academic Persistence

Variable	Mean	Sd	N	Df	r-cal.	P-value	Remark
Perceived Course Value	39.14	6.80					H_{01}
			395	393	.89	.000	Rejected
Academic Persistence	33.29	6.27					

P<0.05

The Pearson correlation result indicated a very strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between perceived course value and academic persistence, ($r = 0.89$, $p < .05$). Hence, the null hypothesis ($H0_3$) was therefore rejected, suggesting that perceived course value significantly predicts academic persistence among distance learners.

Discussion of Findings

Finding from research question showed a generally high level of academic persistence among the study participants (Mean= 33.29; SD = 6.27). This suggests that most distance learners demonstrated strong commitment to completing their programme, as a result of their persistence. This aligns with Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016), who reported that in distance education contexts, where learners frequently juggle academic commitments with professional and family responsibilities, self-efficacy plays a central role in sustaining engagement and persistence. For students enrolled in distance learning programmes across diverse disciplines, online learning self-efficacy assumes heightened significance. On the other hand, low self-efficacy has been associated with anxiety, disengagement, and eventual withdrawal from online programs (Artino, 2012).

The first hypothesis postulated whether a significant relationship exists between online learning self-efficacy and academic persistence among distance learners at Ahmadu Bello University. The results showed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship, indicating that learners with higher confidence in their ability to learn online tend to exhibit greater academic persistence. This finding aligns with Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which states that individuals' beliefs in their capabilities influence motivation, perseverance, and academic performance (Artino, 2012). In distance learning settings, students rely heavily on technology to access instructional materials, participate in assessments, and communicate with instructors; therefore, confidence in digital tools becomes essential for sustained engagement and persistence. Empirical studies have also demonstrated that online learning self-efficacy significantly predicts learner satisfaction, engagement, and persistence (Shen et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2013).

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between perceived course value and academic persistence. Results showed a very strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship, indicating that students who see their courses as meaningful, relevant, and worthwhile are much more likely to stay enrolled. This aligns with expectancy–value theory, which states that students' academic behaviors are influenced by both their expectation of success and the personal value they assign to learning tasks (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). When students view their coursework as intellectually engaging or connected to their personal and professional goals, they are more motivated to put in effort and overcome academic hurdles. Empirical studies support this idea. Lee et al. (2022) found that task value was a major predictor of persistence in massive open online

courses (MOOCs), while Shaikh et al. (2022) showed that perceived academic value was a key factor in ongoing participation in online higher education. These results suggest that making coursework relevant and aligned with learners' goals is crucial for persistence in distance learning. In practice, this means institutions offering online programs should focus on learner-centered curriculum design and clearly show how course content applies to real-world situations. Such approaches can improve students' perceived value of their studies and foster long-term academic commitment.

Conclusion

Academic persistence among distance learners is a multifaceted construct influenced by both technological competence and motivational orientation. This study demonstrated that computer self-efficacy, information-seeking self-efficacy, perceived course value, and utility value are significant determinants of sustained engagement in distance learning. The findings indicate that learners who possess confidence in navigating digital platforms and accessing academic resources are better equipped to cope with the demands of online education. In addition, when students perceive their courses as meaningful and beneficial to their future goals, they exhibit stronger commitment and resilience despite challenges such as limited infrastructure, competing responsibilities, and reduced face-to-face academic support.

The study further underscores that academic persistence is not solely an individual attribute but is shaped by institutional practices, curriculum relevance, and access to learning resources. Distance education institutions must therefore move beyond content delivery to actively support learners through structured digital literacy initiatives, accessible academic resources, and value-driven instructional design. In conclusion, strengthening learners' technological self-efficacy and enhancing the perceived relevance and utility of academic programmes are essential strategies for improving retention and academic success in distance education. By addressing these interconnected factors, universities can create more supportive learning environments that promote persistence, reduce attrition, and improve overall educational outcomes.

Recommendations for Policy

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. University administrators should institutionalise digital literacy programmes for all incoming distance learners to enhance computer self-efficacy and preparedness for online learning.
2. Policies should be developed to ensure sustained access to digital academic resources, including online libraries, databases, and learning management systems.
3. Institutional support systems should be strengthened through academic advising and technical help desks dedicated to distance learners.
4. Funding mechanisms should be explored to subsidise internet access and learning devices for economically disadvantaged students to reduce technology-related barriers to persistence.

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