

“Skipping Examinations”: Exploring students’ experiences in the Zimbabwe Open University in Manicaland Province- Zimbabwe.

Author’s Details:

⁽¹⁾Chiparange, ⁽²⁾Gertrude V., ⁽³⁾Chiinze, ⁽⁴⁾Maxwell M. and ⁽⁵⁾Bizamare, Samson-Zimbabwe Open University

Abstract:

Student absenteeism from examinations is a major concern at institutions of higher learning in general but at Open and Distance Learning institutions it brings a lot into question. The aim of this study was to explore students’ experiences as to why they skip examinations in the Zimbabwe Open University. The study also examined the implications of student absenteeism to administration and organization of the institution. The study adopted the survey design as the strategy for data gathering. Data were collected by the use of both a questionnaire and interview with some open-ended and some closed questions. The sample comprised 25 students who had skipped examinations at some point and the researchers used a purposive sampling procedure to select only those satisfying this category.

The study revealed that absenteeism from examinations was rampant due to reasons such as lack of preparedness; lack of full learning packages; failure to attend tutorials; work commitment; poor teaching strategies and domestic responsibilities. The study recommended that the university fully address these shortcomings to ensure students will not transfer blame on to the institution.

Key words: examinations absenteeism experiences reasons unpreparedness survey

Background

The Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is a multi-disciplinary, inter-faculty institution offering degree and non-degree courses through open and distance learning (ODL) methods to youth and adult learners. Open and Distance Learning refers to approaches to learning that focus on freeing learners from the constraints of time and place while offering flexible learning opportunities (www.col.org/SiteCollectionDocument/ODLIntro.pdf). ODL is a way of combining work and family responsibilities with educational opportunities. Despite the exemption from tight conventional timetables afforded by the ODL approach student absenteeism during examinations is a major concern for ZOU-Manicaland. Through document analysis in the Centre for Student Management it has been noted that a sizeable number of students in ZOU-Manicaland fail to sit their sessional examinations. This is in spite of the fact that the student would be duly registered and would have undertaken the requisite coursework assignments enabling one to sit examinations. Naturally, one would expect students who have satisfied all necessary requirements to keenly sit for the sessional examinations in order to move on but surprisingly a disturbing trend of absenteeism from examinations was observed in ZOU-Manicaland during the period August/December 2010 to August/December 2012.

Student absenteeism from examinations is a major concern for lecturers at institutions for higher learning. In quality terms, absenteeism causes a waste of resources, time and human potential (Creswell, 2008). Students who skip examinations also cause administrative headaches in repeats and wasted time for tutors (Given,2008; Silverman,2000). From experience it was noted that examination absenteeism has far reaching consequences on the part of the students as they have complained bitterly when they get an “F” for failure on their result slips. These “Fs” on the transcripts tend to tarnish the potential of the student to prospective employers. The researchers noticed that from the year 2010 to 2012 some students opted not to sit for examinations, for reasons best known to themselves, regardless of registration. The researchers collected examination registers for five semesters and noted that there were about 112 course absences from the examinations. This motivated the researchers to want to look into why some students absent themselves from writing examinations at the Zimbabwe Open University in Manicaland region.

Apparently, this is not a problem confined to ZOU-Manicaland alone as a review of literature on the internet revealed. It is entirely your choice whether you sit an examination after experiencing difficulties at the University of St. Andrews in the United Kingdom [URL:http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk>adviceandsupport](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk>adviceandsupport) [accessed 08.05.2013]. It further states that if you choose not to sit the examination, you will need to provide some evidence as to why, although deferred assessment is not automatically guaranteed. At the University of Auckland (New Zealand) if you think you may have problems sitting your examinations you should contact the Examinations Office as soon as you can. Approval may be given to sit out-of-time and out-of centre for the following reasons: religious-when examinations conflict with Sabbath; bereavement of family member/close relative; legal-court appearance URL: <http://www.auckland.ac.nz>currentstudents>academicinformation>exams>[accessed07.06.2013]

At the Victoria University (Australia) if you fail to attend an examination at the time and place published in the final timetable, except where prevented from doing so by illness or other acceptable reason, you will be deemed to have failed _URL:<http://www.vu.edu.au> studentlife>examandresults>[accessed20.06.2013]. Whereas at the University of Adelaide (Australia) replacement examinations may be granted on the following grounds: medical- where an illness/injury prevents attendance or significantly impairs performance; compassionate-where exceptional personal circumstance prevent attendance; last course-where a student has failed in only one final semester course. However ,students who fail an examination because they misread the timetable or accepted incorrect information from another person are not entitled to re-sit an examination <URL://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/exams/supps.html>[accessed07.07.2013].

There is a general sentiment that absences not backed by documentary evidence are not tolerated in university set-ups and the site: <www.answers.yahoo.com>highereducation>[accessed07.07.2013] maintains there are no good excuses for skipping examinations except for something to do with bereavement while another site <www.talk.collegeconfidential.com>parentsforum>[accessed07.07.2013] also backs this by indicating that such excuses must be documented otherwise students would “ willy nilly” skip examinations. Most universities state in their regulations procedures that students have to follow if unable to sit an examination due to unavoidable reasons, for example, submitting certificate of absence form, notifying the examinations office or discussing with student services. At the University of Maryland if the reason for absence from a scheduled assessment or examination is known well in advance the student must inform appropriate authorities in good time <URL:http://www.umd.edu/catalog/index.cfm/show/>[accessed07.07.2013]. However, most universities caution that deferred assessment is not always automatically guaranteed.

Given this background, it appears that absenteeism from examinations is an issue found all over in universities making ZOU students no exception to the challenge. Hence, this study intends to explore the experiences of ZOU-Manicaland students.

Methodology

The study investigated the reasons behind students skipping examinations in the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) – Manicaland Region. For the study the survey method was preferred because it is a systematic method that can be used in collecting original data from a large sample. Mhlanga and Ncube (2003) note that when the thrust of a research is to describe a prevailing phenomenon, a survey is most appropriate to employ as was the case in this study. Mouton (2001) defines the survey as the method of research that simply looks with intense accuracy at the phenomena of the moment and then describes precisely what the researcher sees. Further, Borg and Gall (1996) argue that surveys seek to answer the questions, “What is...? or Why are...?” as was the case in this research.

The participants for this study were conveniently sampled basing on students who had been identified from the university examination registers as having failed to sit a sessional examination at some point. In Manicaland region the total enrolment averaged around 900 students for each of the five semesters from the year

August/December 2010 to August/December 2012. Out of this population 15 male and 10 female to make a total of 25 students were extracted from the examination registers for the sessional examinations. This constituted the sample which was considered adequate since the study focused only on examination skippers. The researchers adopted a systematic sampling procedure whereby participants were noted from the examination registers of the stated period. These participants were chosen because they had the potential to help the researchers understand the phenomena under study given that they had failed to sit some examination themselves.

The main instrument that was used to solicit for information was the questionnaire. Participants completed a questionnaire that assessed demographics and factors leading one to skip examinations. The demographic information included gender, age, marital status, educational qualification and occupation. Participants responded to a 25 item pencil-and-paper questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions which allowed for focused data collection as well as giving room for expression of personal views with no restriction. Since what was required was more of factual information the instrument proved convenient and economical. This is supported by Marshall and Rossman (2006) who maintain that survey research is the appropriate mode of inquiry for making inferences about a large group of people based on data drawn from a relatively small number of individuals in that group. Furthermore, they note that questionnaires are easy and efficient to administer and manage, easily quantifiable and amenable to statistical analysis and generalizability. The same sentiments are echoed by Punch (2005).

The questionnaire was administered through the Students Affairs Department as it deals with students facing challenges on a regular basis and the return rate was 100% largely due to this wider exposure. In this study confidentiality and ethics were ensured by using secret codes for the names of participants in order to conceal identity.

Findings And Discussion

There was a 100% response to the questionnaire with the majority being males at 15(60%). From the research findings the age group 21-30years was highest represented with 12(48%) of the respondents and this may imply that social and work pressure could account for the high incidence of this age group. Most respondents constituting 15(60%) were married while 7(28%) were single and 3(12%) fell in the divorced or widowed category. The marital status might be reflecting that the married were more likely to be weighed down by family responsibilities as compared to the other categories. On educational qualifications the majority of the respondents were holders of a vocational qualification in the form of a diploma numbering 14(56%). Six respondents(25%) held school leaving qualifications and the balance of 2(8%) were holders of a first degree. The statistics reflect that 56% of respondents (holders of diplomas) were most likely gainfully employed but somehow succumb to greater work pressures which force them to skip examinations.

Those students pursuing the psychology programme recorded the highest number 10(40%) of respondents followed by BEd(EAPPS) with 6 (24%) of respondents. The high incidence of skippers in psychology could be attributed to shortage of study materials while the incidence in BEd(EAPPS) could be attributed to lack of material benefits , for instance incentives by the employer after they have graduated. The composition of respondents by profession was such that 25 % were from teaching and the balance was equally spread across other professions such as mining, farming, retailing, transport and the NGO sector. The teachers recording the highest number in the study would explain the high default rate because of financial difficulties in settling fees with the university. Eighteen(72%) respondents were in professions relevant to their studies whilst 7(28%) respondents were studying programmes not relevant to professions. The 18 reflected constraints from writing examinations because of genuine reasons whereas the other 7 were not so much under pressure to complete their programmes because there was no incentive in the near future on completion of programme. From the findings 18(72%) of the respondents were formally employed while 5(20%) were self employed and 2(8%)

were unemployed. The 72% should have faced some real predicament but for the others the default could be explained by the fact that they prioritise work obligations against studies.

The study established that 15(60%) of the respondents belonged to the public sector and the remainder was in the private sector. The response seems to confirm the assertion that some public sector departments are rigid in human resource handling. A good example is the police force which is alleged to prohibit junior officers from embarking on studies until completion of a certain period of service. However, the private sector can even be more inflexible in that private education of staff members is not regarded as very important hence study leave can easily be rescinded.

Among the circumstances presented as having prevented students from writing examinations were the following:

- Confusion over course codes and examination dates for those courses being shared across programmes
- Family problems such as illness, funeral, rituals, weddings
- Work commitment which denies study leave, for example, a NGO worker assigned work outside the country during examination time
- Late release of results coupled with early cut-off of registration as this creates discrepancies for repeat courses
- Lack of individualized communication between student and university especially for examination timetable
- Distance to examination centre and period of stay in rented accommodation which gave rise to astronomical expenses that tend to drive students to skip

On the issue of examination preparedness 3(12%) of the respondents categorically stated that they were prepared to sit examinations whilst 10(40%) also categorically stated that they were not prepared to sit examinations with the remaining 12(48%) indicating lack of confidence to sit the examinations. Twenty(80%) of respondents reported that preparation for examinations is imperative with 5(20%) indicating that it is possible to write an examination without preparing for it. Twenty-three(92%) respondents reported that they were familiar with examination set-up whilst 2(8%) were not. Eighteen respondents(72%) reported that they suffer examination fever despite level of preparation whilst 7(28%) were not afraid. Seventy-two percent of respondents again reported that examinations are not always difficult whilst 28% indicated that they are always difficult. From these findings it implies the reasons for skipping examinations have nothing to do with the level of examination difficulty and unfamiliarity of set-up but other factors. Students could stay away from examinations for unpreparedness or lack of confidence and this seems to concur with the results of the UNISA survey on examination absenteeism. It indicated that 61,3% did not have time to prepare with 8,3% failing to attend tutorials and feedback on assignments (Inspired:UNISA:Volume7:August 2010).

Turning to institutional support all respondents(100%) reported that ZOU provided them with academic support in the form of modules and tutorials such that their level of preparedness was largely dependent on that. However, areas of improvement were noted like facilitating week-end opening of library up to 1600 hours, extension of tutorial hours and timeliness in distribution of modules. The respondents reported the following as services ZOU failed to offer that affected examination preparedness: internet connectivity; quick publication of missing results and appeals; decentralising tutorials to district centres; avoid baby-sitting of some programmes by coordinators not well-versed in the areas; module availability; provision of past examination papers; up-to – date library stock. ZOU should address these areas to delight the customer.

Ten respondents(40%) indicated having attended one tutorial session while 3(12%) attended two sessions, a further 5 respondents(20%) attended three sessions with 7 respondents (28%) having attended all sessions. A total of 16 respondents(64%) experienced a variety of constraints that kept them away from attending tutorials.

The array of reasons include distance to tutorial venue, tutor ill-preparedness and work commitment. The majority of students were failing to attend all tutorial sessions which implied that they were not adequately prepared as they claim to get a lot of benefits from tutorials namely skills in assignment tackling, clarification of concepts, tips on examinations and study skills.

A total of 7 respondents(28%) reported to have fully covered all the concepts on their courses whilst 18(72%) had not covered all concepts for a variety of reasons viz; late issue of modules, absenteeism from tutorials.

Ten respondents(40%) indicated that they had not visited Student Affairs office whilst 6(24%) had consulted that office. The remaining 9(36%) confessed ignorance of the existence of that office. The 19 respondents(76%) who indicated having had no contact with Student Affairs could explain the incidence of skipping examinations as unprepared students with no counselling are more prone to skipping examinations.

In the final analysis the following were identified as contributory factors to stopping students from attending examinations: family problems comprising illness, funerals, rituals and even weddings where one is the key organizer. Work commitment that actually interferes with examination preparation or clash with the sitting dates. Ill-preparation when the student lacks confidence to tackle the examination. Financial constraints such as travel and subsistence expenses required to attend the various engagements culminating in writing examinations. Poor communication of examination timetables bears heavily on students based in remote rural areas. Late availability of modules delays preparation which eventually translates to examination fever. Student Affairs has on record students who visit the office to discuss some of these personal issues that affect their studies as indicated below.

Table 1

Student Visits to Centre for Student Management

PERIOD	NUMBER
April – June 2012	168
Year 2011	
April	42
May	72
Jun	110
Jul	72
Aug	75
Sept	75
Oct	180
Nov	21
Year2010	
April	26
May	84
Jun	156
Jul	243
Aug	90
Sept	20
Oct	17
Nov	24

From the findings, it becomes clear that student support services need to be intensified so that students are assisted in making sound decisions that relate to their studies and life in general.

Recommendations

In the light of these findings the study proposes the following measures to reduce the incidence of examination absenteeism.

- Ensure modules are available in adequate quantities before commencement of semester
- Tutorial hours be increased and decentralize the tutorials to district centres for accessibility
- Individualise communication on examination timetables and guarantee receipt by all students
- Ensure clarity on course codes as some borrowed courses are creating confusion
- Facilitate availability of past examination papers

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