FACTORS AFFECTING POOR LECTURE ATTENDANCE DURING THE FIRST THREE WEEKS OF THE SEMESTER: AGRICULTURAL ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT, CHINHOYI UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, ZIMBABWE.

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Abstract

The study was conducted at Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), Zimbabwe in the Department of Agricultural Engineering. The study's aim was to investigate factors affecting poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of the semester. A qualitative survey was used were questionnaires were administered to 80 students and in depth interviews were conducted on 15 University staff comprising of lecturers and administrators in the Department. The qualitative data was then analysed using SPSS 20 software package by way of frequencies to find out the common factors affecting poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of semester at CUT. The study found out that financial constraint, age timetabling and clashes of venues, registration process and late publication of supplementary results are the main factors affecting poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of the semester. The study concluded that, although financial constraints and age are common factors affecting lecture attendance across all universities, CUT has its own unique factors affecting the phenomenon

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under study. The study recommended that the university should provide support programmes which encourage returning students to start attending classes during the first three weeks of the weeks and also that the study should be expanded to other academic departments of the university so as to validate these findings.

Keywords: Poor lecture attendance, factors and semester.

Introduction

Poor lecture attendance by university students including its impact on the immediate student performance has been widely documented over many decades (Romer 1993:167; Redwine 2006:17 and Kelly 2012:1). According to a study conducted at Western Australia University on why pre-service teachers skip classes, many factors were identified which contributed to this phenomenon and these included: family commitments, age, part time work to cushion their living expenses and sickness (Oakley, Lock, Budgen and Hamlett, 2011:3). From this study indications are that students decided to attend to pressing personal issues at the expense of lectures. In the United States on a study conducted at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) students attributed poor lecturer attendances to the following reasons: availability of lecture material online, inability of the lecturer to engage and entertain the students as well as not expecting to learn anything new in a particular lecture and the degree of importance of the course to the degree programme (Redwine, 2006:18). From this scenario it would appear like students strongly felt it was not worth attending the lectures.

On a study on cross institutional absenteeism by Fayombo, Ogunkola and Olaleye (2012:125) at University of Ibadan, Nigeria and University of West Indies, Barbados the common factors affecting this phenomenon were student centered, home, school and socially related reasons. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011:96) on a study on absenteeism in three South African Universities concurred with other previous studies on main factors affecting student absenteeism which included the following: lack of interest on subject matter, part time work, poor lecture delivery methods and peer influence. In both studies the authors found out that those students who attend lectures perform better in the final semester examinations than those who regularly

skip classes. So it is prudent that students attend lectures since it has a strong bearing on their end of semester performance.

From the literature discussed, many studies have showed that poor lecture attendance in universities is common through out the semester but at Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), it is rampant during the first three weeks of the semester hence the need to investigate the factors influencing this phenomenon.

Purpose and significance of the study

The study was conducted to ascertain the factors influencing poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of the semester and also to recommend what can be done to mitigate this phenomenon in the department of Agricultural Engineering at CUT, Zimbabwe.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach

This research study adopted the qualitative approach. Cresswell, (2014) defined qualitative research as a method for examining and accepting the sense people or society attribute to a group or personal problem. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) went on further to say that qualitative researchers investigate objects in their usual environments where they try to deduce or make meanings of what is being studied in that particular setting. This then implies that the researcher is in the 'thick of things' and is not an independent observer but an active participant in the research being carried out. In qualitative research more emphasis is put on interviews, observations, text and images (Petolkoski, 2008). Thus in this research study, interviews and qualitative observations were some of the instruments used.

Research design

The research study adopted the case study research design. Yin (1984) defines case study as an experiential analysis that takes a look at present day experiences within its real life perspectives. The definition implies that there is an element of phenomology in a case study research design and practicality. The research design of a case study was adopted because of the following strengths: aids in gaining an insight of specific experiences of the subject matter being

investigated (Stake 1978); It also enables the researcher to interrogate issues from different angles within clusters of associated members. Lastly a case study allows an analysis from many different view points from which senses from diverse members of a society and the relational perspectives between them is investigated (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). From the stated strengths it can be deduced that a case study research design is flexible in that it allows the researcher to view the subject matter in different angles thus collecting data in greater detail and also that it is contextual to a particular environment under study. These strengths therefore justify the adoption of the case study approach in qualitative research.

However critics argue that a case study is site specific and data collected cannot be used to describe the same phenomenon to the greater populace (Psud43, 2012). The implication of this weakness is that a case study is that data collected is only applicable within the boundaries of the area within which the study is being carried out.

Population size and sampling technique

The study was conducted at Chinhoyi University of Technology mainly focusing on the department of Agricultural Engineering undergraduates from first year to final year. The total number of students in the department is 101 with a staff complement of 13. To determine the study sample size for the students, sample calculator software from Creative Research Systems (2012) was used with following characteristics: confidence level of 95%, confidence interval 5%, population of 101. The calculated output of 80 was adopted as the study sample size for the students.

A non-probability sampling technique known as purposive/selective/judgmental was used to select ten lecturers and eighty students from first year up to final year in the department of Agricultural Engineering. The target was to have a 100% response rate with the exception of those on attachment due to accessibility challenges. All the eighty administered questionnaires were responded to and also all the ten lecturers in the department were interviewed. Data collected was then subsequently used for analysis.

The overall objective of purposive sampling is to put emphasis on certain characteristics of a population that are under investigation which best respond to research questions of the study. Creswell (2006) defines purposeful sampling as circumstances whereby the researcher intentionally selects participants who are privy to the issue being researched upon. The strengths of this method are: it can be used on a small sample compared to probability sampling techniques; it is simple, flexible and saves time and money (Laerd Dissertation, 2012). This method fits well in this study considering the limited time to carry out research the study and targeted number of lecturers in the department and administration staff of interest in the research study.

However, the major weaknesses of the method are the inability to use a large sample size and difficulty to eliminate bias (Laerd, 2012). The researcher used questionnaires as well to counter the disadvantage of not reaching out to a large sample size and almost all targeted stakeholders were interviewed to eliminate bias.

Snowball sampling was used in selecting the administrative staff privy to the phenomenon being studied. Snowball sampling is a non probability sampling technique which involves research respondents enlisting other respondents for a particular subject matter being investigated (Statistics How To, 2016). The major advantage of the sampling technique is that the researcher gets acess to the partial data which is obtainable from the specific respondents who have interests in the subject matter being investigated (Cresswell, 2012). The implication of the advantage was that the researcher had access to respondents and this saves time and money when carrying out the study, in this case the administrative staff who were dealing directly student registration at CUT.

Data collection procedure

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Ethical, validity and reliability Issues

Resinic, (2013) defines ethics as norms and values that separates acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The code of ethics, validity and reliability issues in the research were addressed and as explained in this section.

The permission was granted by the university authorities and responses from interviews and questionnaires were grouped together and used for the purposes of this study only. All the responses were treated strictly as confidential and anonymous. The respondents had the right to withdraw their responses and they were not coerced for responses during the study and participation in the study was voluntary.

Triangulation was used for validating answers from respondents. According to Cohen and Manion (1994) triangulation is an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one stand point. This method is useful in that it provides depth to facts and figures as well as revealing other information not anticipated by the researcher.

Data analysis and procedure

The data collected was analysed following the outline by Miles and Huberman (1994). The outline has the following main processes: reduction of data from the questionnaires which was then coded and summarized; lastly forming themes from research questions and as well as answers from respondents. The qualitative data was then analysed using SPSS 20 software package by way of frequencies to find out the common factors affecting poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of semester at CUT.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Financial constraints

Most students and administration staff cited the challenge of financial constraints. The respondents cited that given the prevailing economic climate in Zimbabwe where money is not easy to get. One of the respondents said The University should consider setting their semester opening dates towards the end of the month rather than during mid-month. From observations this was a valid point; because normally the university opens during mid month and many parents and guardians would have not been paid their salaries therefore they can not afford to send their children to university. This challenge of finances was a common factor cited by McCarey, Barr and Rattray, (2006); Massingham and Harrington, (2006) and Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) in their studies on factors affecting poor lecture attendances at universities. Though in their studies students would be doing part time work during the course of the semester to cushion them for their living expenses

Time tabling and clash of venues

Time tabling at CUT is another factor which affects both students and lecturers. Most of the respondents cited that it was useless to attend lectures when they are clashes in terms of venue allocation.

Some of the respondents said the following on time tabling issues at CUT:

- Mostly during the first week lectures will not be taking place because of the venues and most of the times will not be certain
- I don't attend because of the confusion of the time table where venues will be clashing
- I wont attend during the first week because the time table will not be finalised

From the responses it can be deduced that shortage of infrastructure at CUT is leading to double allocation of venues, before being a University the institution was previously a teacher's college and minimal infrastructural development was done to cater for the upgrading of the teachers college into a University. The end result will be those clashes and also if student come during this time it has a bearing on their pocket as well, because there will be no learning taking place unless time tabling issues would have been resolved. From similar studies this phenomenon is perculiar to the institution.

Registration process

On the registration process some students had this to say:

• Registration takes a long a time because of the long queues'

• The registration process is very slow and time consuming to the extent that it disrupts the flow of lectures at the beginning of the semester

From these responses it can be deduced that most students start to register when the semester opens therefore this leads to long queues and overwhelming of staff at the registry department due to huge numbers registering. Students should always be encouraged to try to register before the semester opens, so as to avoid this mishap.

Accommodation allocation issues on campus

A few students raised an issue where by accommodation allocation at campus is usually finalized during the first three weeks of the semester, therefore this affects their attendances of class during this period of time. However administrators were of the view that accommodation allocation was now an online process therefore students should be in position to know whether they are going to be accommodated at campus well before the semester opens.

Culture at the CUT

Most of the interviewed lecturers, administrators and students who responded to the questionnaire agreed that poor lecture attendance at CUT the first three weeks of semester is now a culture. They gave the following responses

• I don't come during the first week because there would be few students at campus

• Lecturers do not come because there is no punishment if they do no attend lectures during the first week

• More than half of the lecturers do not show up during the first week and when they do show up they just introduce themselves and offer some basic material such as course outlines

From these responses both the university and students are to blame for not playing their partduring the first three weeks of semester opening at CUT. However the university management has put in place some measures to counter this bad culture by having the quality department enforcing lecturers to teach during this period and also university administrators sometimes phone the lecturers who would have skipped lectures to attend to students. The

interviewed administrators were optimistic that the situation would improve especially for the returning students.

Poor lecture attendances by returning students mostly 'seniors' is in agreement with studies by Desalegn et, al (2012) who found out that due to socialization students change their behaviours and adopt norms and values obtaining in the societies they would be living in. Though in this study it is just prevalent during the first weeks but in other universities it is a culture for 'seniors' to skip classes through out the semester.

Late publication of supplementary results

This was a challenge mainly to the returning students who would have written supplementary exams and the results sometimes were published days into the semester. The returning students had this to say:

- Registration online should be applicable for both carrying and non-carrying students
- The university should publish supplementary results on time

From the responses it seems the university administrators and managers are 'sleeping on the job', this is because the norm all over other universities is that supplementary results are always published before the semester opens. This is a grey area which needs to be attended to by the university administrators and managers.

LIMITATIONS

The population size from which the study was conducted, that is the department of Agricultural Engineering, can not be used to generalise the results of the whole student population of Chinhoyi University of Technology. There is also threat of internal validity where respondents may not be truthful in filling up the questionnaire and during interviews; even though the respondents were told that their names will be anonymous also the study is purely academic.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that financial constraints and age are common factors across universities which affect lecture attendance. However, CUT has unique factors of its own which affect poor lecture attendances which include the following: clash of venues, fluid registration process,

accepted culture of not attending classes during the first three weeks of the semester, late publication of supplementary results and accommodation allocation issues.

Recommendations

• The university should have a clear cut policy on publication of supplementary results for returning students and also on the requirements for registration by students in terms of amounts which a students can pay to register.

• University should provide support programmes in encouraging returning students to start attending classes during the first weeks of the semester.

• Scheduling of opening of university should be convenient for the returning students especially targeting month ends so that students adequately prepare financially.

• There is need for validation of results across the university academic departments.

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QUESTIONNAIRRE TO STUDENTS

Please tick a box or write your response in the spaces provided as appropriate.

1.   Indicate your gender

Male	
Female	

2.   Indicate your age

18 and below	
19-24	
25 And above	

3.   Indicate Level

1	2	3	4	5

4.   When do you start to attend classes on university opening?

First week	
Second week	
Third week	
Fourth week	

Fifth week	
Any other specify	

5.   Justify your answer in Question 5 above

………………………………………………………………………………………………

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6.   Are lecturers always ready to conduct lectures during the first week?

Yes	
No	

7.   Justify your answer in question 6 above

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………………………………………………………………………………………………

…………………………………………………………………………………

8.   Are there administrative challenges affecting your lecture attendance during first weeks of university opening? YES/NO

9.   If yes please explain

………………………………………………………………………………………………

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10.   Do you have any recommendations of solving the challenge of poor lecture attendance during the first weeks of university opening?   YES / NO

If   yes,   state   your   proposed   recommendations

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GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO UNIVERSITY STAFF MEMBERS

1.   When did you join cut?

2.   Which level and courses do you teach?

3.   What are the factors which influence poor lecture attendance during the first three weeks of the semester?

4.   Which measures can you suggest to curb this phenomenon