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Causes and Structural Effects of Student Absenteeism: A Case Study of Three South African Universities

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KEYWORDS Absenteeism. University. South Africa. Students

ABSTRACT The aim of the study was to investigate the extent of student absenteeism in selected universities in South Africa, explore the reasons why student absent themselves from classes and examine the implications of student absenteeism. The study adopted the mixed methodology and used a survey research design as the operational framework for data gathering. Data were collected by self administered questionnaires and interviews with one hundred and twenty-six students from three universities in South Africa. The study revealed that student absenteeism is rampant in the universities under study due to reasons such as: lack of subject interest, poor teaching strategies by lecturers, unfavourable learning environment, too much socialization, part-time jobs to augment meagre bursaries granted by various sponsors and poor relations with the lecturers. The study also found an inverse relationship between student absenteeism and course performance.

INTRODUCTION

Student absenteeism is a major concern for lecturers at institutions of higher learning. Absences create a dead, tiresome, unpleasant classroom environment that makes students who come to class uncomfortable and the lecturer irritable (Marburger 2001). Absenteeism disturbs the dynamic teaching-learning environment and adversely affects the overall well-being of classes (Segal 2008). In quality terms, absenteeism is a waste of educational resources, time and human potential. Student absenteeism also causes rework and wasted time for lecturers (Lalek 1995; Rumberger 1997). Lecturers who spend class time re-teaching lessons take instructional time away from students who attend class regularly, and the extra time spent going over absentee homework and class assignments takes time away from lecturer planning periods and time needed to provide individual assistance (Weller 1996). When students are absent from class, they miss valuable information resulting from peer-lecturer interaction and the benefits of the specific examples lecturers use to clarify difficult concepts. This valuable part of the learning experience cannot be replicated when lecturers re-teach

the material to absentee students (Weller 1996; Williams 2000).

It is important to note that a primary issue of chronic absenteeism is not that there is no excuse provided, but rather, the excuse is not a valid one. According to Williams (2000), students who have absenteeism problems generally suffer academically and socially. Studies indicate that students who are absent have lower achievement and may be penalized on test scores (Barker and Jansen 2000). Sustained absences may affect retention as it may degenerate into truancy (Lotz and Lee 1999; Barker and Jansen 2000). The implications of absenteeism are felt outside the classroom as well (Williams 2000). Continued loss of instruction or poor academic achievement among students with high absenteeism are essential characteristics of students who later drop out of school (Mayer and Mitchel 1996). Lotz and Lee (1999) indicate that acts of delinquency are more frequent among students who exhibit low grades, have spotty attendance, and later on drop out of school.

According to Enomoto (1997), students who missed class on a given date were significantly more likely to respond incorrectly to questions relating to material covered that day than students who were present. The hypothesis that class attendance is likely to be correlated with student learning has been investigated empirically in economic education literature. Most surprisingly, most studies have found an inverse relationship between absenteeism and course performance (Marburger 2001). The relation between atten-

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dance and performance in one large lecture course suggest that attendance may substantially affect learning. The difference in performance between a student who attends regularly and one who attends sporadically is about a full letter grade (Bowen 2005).

Lotz and Lee (1999) corroborate that students cite a negative self-image and low self-esteem as reasons for non-attendance. According to Enomoto (1997), when students perceive that lecturers do not care enough to follow up on absences, their motivation for attendance is not high. Interestingly, a converse view of compulsory attendance is provided by Lotz and Lee (1999) as contributing to and furthering the absentee problem. Forcing older students to remain in school when they are not motivated will only increase their absenteeism (Williams 1999). Studies indicate that absenteeism is caused by a number of factors such as: lack of interesting and challenging curriculum; a desire for hedonistic activities with peers; negative self-image and self-esteem; lack of subject interest; lack of personal interest in studies; the mental capacity of a student does not match with the course opted; the poor teaching skills of a lecturer also keep away students from school; lack of confidence in a lecturer; inadequate relations between a student and their lecturer and distance to university (Mayer and Mitchell 1996; Weller 1996; Williams 2000; Marburger 2001). It is, therefore, against this background that this empirical study sought to investigate the causes and effects of student absenteeism in three universities in the Republic of South Africa.

Research Questions

1. What are the causes of student absenteeism in institutions of higher learning?
2. What are the effects of student absenteeism?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (mixed methodology). A quantitative approach was adopted in order to allow the researcher to gather more precise and quantifiable information on the causes and effects of absenteeism. The qualitative methodology was also appropriate to this study because it allowed the researchers to get the data directly from the subjects themselves by sitting with the respondents and hear their views, voices, per-

ceptions and expectations in detail. Thus, the researcher recognised several nuances of attitude and behavior that could escape researchers using other methods.

The research design that was used in this study was the descriptive survey method. Babbie and Mouton (2001) define the descriptive survey as "The method of research that simply looks with intense accuracy at the phenomena of the moment and then describes precisely what the research sees". Descriptive survey is probably the best method which is available to use in collecting data for the purpose of describing a population large enough to observe directly. Such surveys, according to Bassey (1995), are also excellent vehicles for the measurement of attitudes and orientations prevalent in a large population.

The population for this study was 126 students from 3 selected institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Each University contributed 42 participants. The research used a convenience sample and the participation to the study was voluntary.

The main instrument that was used to solicit for information was the questionnaire. Self-administered questionnaires with open-ended and closed questions were used for data collection. Research assistants were used to distribute the questionnaires. The number of returned questionnaires was 13 (16%). Interviews were also held with some of the students. Through the use of interviews, the interviewer was able to elaborate on issues and questions as well as clarifying the meaning of statements, answers or questions that may not have been clear to the interviewee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted because the researchers wanted the respondents to give their detailed views, opinions and perceptions with regard to causes of student absenteeism. In analyzing qualitative data, categories were identified and put into themes for presentation and discussion. For quantitative data, some descriptive statistics including percentages were used.

In this study, confidentiality ethic was ensured by using secret codes for all interview transcripts and the names of the participants were concealed. The research was therefore conducted with respect and concern for the dignity and welfare of the informants.

RESULTS

From the findings of this research, it became evident that the problem of absenteeism was quite

prevalent in the three universities that participated in the study. Thus, in order to get to the bottom of the problem, this study sought to isolate major factors that give rise to this problem. The findings of the study thus revolved around the following categories.

Incidence of Absenteeism

On this item all the respondents (100%) reported that they had missed classes several times during the semester in which the study was conducted. On a follow up item that sought to establish the degree of absenteeism the statistics were recorded in Table 1.

Table 1: Rate of absenteeism

No. of times I have missed classes this semester	Frequency (%)
Twice	5
Thrice	10
Four times	10
Five times	30
Six times	25
Seven times	10
More than seven times	10

From these figures it became abundantly clear that the problem of student absenteeism was a critical issue at the universities in which the study was conducted. This, in some way could be a major reason why student general performance and throughput rate is very low.

Non-attendance Due to Part-time Jobs or Other Work-related Commitments

When asked whether they have part-time jobs that they perform concurrently with their studies, sixty-five percent of the respondents gave responses that were in the affirmative. They went on to indicate that attendance to lectures was sometimes affected as they had to fulfil their work-related obligations. The following remarks from three students were typical: *"I have to strike a nice balance between attending lectures and attending to my place of work. This is important to me because if I do not report to my work place when required I will be fired and my education will suffer"*. *"Some of us come from poor backgrounds and so our families are not able to provide us with all our needs. Looking for a part-time job becomes the only alternative if you want to complete your studies"*. *"As a foreign student*

I need money to add to what the government pays towards my education. The state funds are very inadequate for all our needs so we have to see what we can do".

From these responses, it is clear that socio-economic factors play a significant role in the absenteeism problem. An important issue that comes to the fore here is that lecture attendance is affected by factors well beyond the student control. As a probe, students were asked to indicate the total number of hours per week that they normally spent working. This information was important as it was meant to measure the frequency and degree of work-related absenteeism (Table 2).

Table 2: Time spent at work

Total no. of hours that I work per week	Frequency (%)
Up to 4 hours	5
5 to 8 hours	20
9 to 12 hours	10
13 to 16 hours	20
17 to 20 hours	10
21 to 24 hours	20
More than 24 hours	15

The results indicate that more than 35% of the respondents miss more than 20 notional hours per week due to work commitments. When asked to rank order the most pressing factors/needs that predispose them to seek for part-time employment instead of applying themselves fully to their studies, students identified the following as crucial imperatives: (a) tuition fees (b) residence/renting fees (c) general upkeep (d) transport to university. From these findings, it turned out that several students experienced absenteeism that has a socio-economic character. It is, therefore, undisputable that a robust relationship exists between student attendance for lectures and/or learning programmes and their socio-economic status.

This study established that most students who reported experiencing absenteeism of this character include the following: Foreign students; male students; students from poor family backgrounds; students from single parent families; self-sponsoring students. These findings do not only enhance our understanding of student attendance patterns but they also enhance our insight into issues that affect student pass rates and general throughput rates. Indeed, several studies have established that a strong correlation

exists between student attendance to lectures and/or learning sessions and general pass rate and /or throughput rates (Steyn and Niekerk 2002). As demonstrated by Williams (2000), student absenteeism is one of the strongest indicators of students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

Non-attendance so as to Catch-up on or Completing Work to do with Studies

It emerged that many students do not attend core learning sessions at university due to other pressing study related activities that they will be doing. In this aspect, a total of sixty-seven percent of the respondents reported having absented themselves from lectures several times because they were busy trying to catch-up or completing work that has to do with their studies. Several activities were mentioned as having a bearing on students' non-attendance for lectures, chief among them being the need to work on assignments, completing assigned projects, researching in the library, preparing for presentations and studying for pending tests.

An insightful revelation in this regard was the finding that non-attendance to scheduled university classes or activities by students had two dimensions. First, there was a group of students who do not attend sessions by simply staying at home doing other study related activities or for any other reasons best known to themselves. Secondly, some students came to university but they did not attend the scheduled learning activities/programmes when required to do so. These students indicated that during this time, they will identify a quiet place such as a library, a free lecture theatre or any other quiet place where they can try to update their work on which they are lagging behind.

These findings are insightful as they reveal students' inherent problems in managing their study activities or programmes. Much as they may like to attend their lectures or related learning sessions, they end up not able to do so due to competing educational issues that demand attention. From these findings, it is clear that when students do not attend a scheduled session, caution should be exercised not to simply misconstrue this as a mere signal of lack of motivation or some form of deviant behaviour on the part of the students. Instead, this may be a signal that the student support systems that are currently in

place in universities are inadequate and /or ineffective. These support systems may be failing to equip and capacitate the students with the required skills with which to approach and cope with their studies.

Non-attendance Due to Lecturers Whom I Dislike

Students were asked to indicate whether non-attendance in lectures or other university activities had anything to do with the lecturers who teach them. On this issue fifty-eight percent of the participant students reported that their non-attendance to lectures was precipitated by their dislike of lecturers who teach certain courses/subjects. On the other hand, forty-two percent of the respondents thought otherwise. The former group of students cited factors ranging from poor teaching styles by lecturers, boring lectures, lectures being too long, lecturers showing favouritism to certain students as critical lecturer characteristics that predispose them towards absenteeism or non-attendance.

The following sentiments from a law student were typical *"Methods used by lecturers such as multiple choice in LLB course do not enhance evaluation and analysis skills which is the basis of this course but now it seems as if its an alternative to effective methods known to everyone reasonable in the faculty"*. A student studying accounting raised the following remarks: *"Some lecturers have swinging moods. Some select students to talk to. They seem not involved and interested with lecturing"*. Contributing to the debate on lecturer-induced absenteeism, one participant student responded as follows: *"Teaching techniques, if poor, may contribute to absenteeism. Some lecturers come late and some overlap their lectures with time for other lectures. If the lecture is too long it becomes boring. Lectures must be short and precise because we end up sleeping and it will be of no use to come and sleep every now and again. Short and precise lectures are number one"*. Contributing to the same issue, a student from the faculty of social science expressed his views as follows:

The lectures are not appetising. Its not something that you would wish for. There is no difference going to college and attend or not. I prefer studying at home than going for lectures. Romanticising is another factor. The social

science faculty needs intervention otherwise the varsity reputation is at risk. Lecturers need to be shifted and new ones coming in. Close supervision for lecturers is required. They are too relaxed and have too much freedom of which most of them are not good performers.

These sentiments are critical as they help reveal that a number of lecturer-related characteristics or attributes can be a factor in the problem of non-attendance for lectures by students. In other words, these lecturers attribute act as push out factors that militate against student attendance to classes. These findings are consistent with findings made by Williams (1999) and Weller (1996) in respect of education in Britain. Their studies revealed that demeaning teacher attitudes often lead to school avoidance by students.

Non-attendance Due to Uninteresting Courses/Subjects

On whether there were any courses or parts thereof that students dislike so much that they could choose not to attend classes, fifty-eight percent of the students gave responses that were in the affirmative. On the other hand, forty-two percent of these did not consider this aspect an important one in this regard. Thus, many students expressed dissatisfaction over the way lectures are delivered in class. The running thread in most student responses on this aspect was that lectures were boring. From these responses, one could infer with reasonable justification that most lectures presented to students fail to generate the students' learning interest or motivation in general. Student motivation has been cited by several research studies as being closely correlated not only to student attendance but also to general student achievement and throughput rates.

Missing Classes so as to be with Friends and Peers

From the findings it emerged that peer influence has a significant bearing on student attendance to lectures. Close to forty percent of the respondents admitted having missed classes in the past in order to be in the company of friends. Peer influence has been cited by several researchers among them Williams (1999), as an important factor that contributes to various forms of anti-school behaviour such as absenteeism,

truancy, and dropping out. This is not surprising given the fact that over eighty percent of the students who participated in this study were young people whose average age ranged from 20 to 21. This is the age group that seems to be most vulnerable to the problem of peer influence. The peer group has also been cited by Sharma (2005) as an important agent which has a strong bearing on the student's will and ability to perform well. Although data was mainly focusing on the effect of peer group on achievement, this has important implications for this study because the student's level of achievement can predispose students into absenting or even dropping out.

DISCUSSION

The issue of student absenteeism in the South African Higher education landscape has become a complex educational, political and social problem that is generating increased interest among educators, researchers, and policy makers. The problem of absenteeism is becoming the concern of every member of society since it has negative consequences at both the individual and social level. For instance, studies carried by Bowen (2005) have established that students who attend classes more regularly seem to be more successful in their studies than those who frequently absent themselves. In a related study, Baldacchino and Farrugia (2002) examined the relationship between class attendance and performance in the context of agricultural economics classes and confirmed that student absenteeism resulted in lower grades. Marburger (2001) also reported a carefully designed study of attendance and test performance among university students. Students were significantly more likely to answer incorrectly those test questions covering material taught during days on which the students were absent.

Contributing to the same debate, Reid (2005) postulates that when students are absent from school, there are a wide range of short term educational consequences that they face. First and foremost, students miss out on assignments. By missing out on assignments, they are more likely to underachieve or perform poorly in different subjects. This discussion does not only view absenteeism narrowly in terms of its obvious negative impact on student achievement and throughput rate but also in terms of its social outcomes. As Baderin (2005) observes, most

students who skip classes tend to perform badly thereby severely limiting their chances of economic and social well-being throughout their adult lives. Halpen (2007) cites increased crime, poor levels of health, reduced political participation and increased demand for social services as some of the likely social consequences of failing to do well in school.

The findings of this research provoke various issues and implications that could generate keen interest among all those with a stake in higher education. Firstly the finding that students skip classes for a multiplicity of reasons most of which have little to do with the students themselves or their universities implies that efforts to stamp out the problem of absenteeism should be directed at all the factors within the wider social, economic and political environment rather than merely concentrating at the student *per se* or at the university. Secondly, the findings that lecturer characteristics and attributes can accentuate the problem of non-attendance raises two major paradoxes that exist in education in general and in higher education in particular. First, lecturers are supposed to be the champions in promoting student attendance, retention and throughput rates. This is so not just because it is part of their call as professionals but also due to the fact that student attendance is a prerequisite for the existence of the lecturing job. Secondly, the revelation by participant students that they skip scheduled classes because they dislike certain lecturers and certain courses is rather puzzling as this is least expected in a conducive teaching/learning relationship.

Contrary to popular perception, the findings of this research have shown that lecturers are proving to be major culprits in the student absenteeism problem. If lecturers' actions or professional behaviour predispose students into absenteeism, it can therefore be argued that lecturers, consciously or unconsciously, may be contributing to low student pass rates and throughput rates. In support, Fleming (1995) carried out a study at Lincoln University. In his study, he found that the major reasons given by students for non-attendance at lectures were poor lecturing (23%), timing of the lecture (23%) and poor quality of the lecture content (9%). Contributing to the same issue, Teasley (2004) also asserts that students that have poor or conflicting relationships with teachers will avoid school in order to avoid their teachers.

Gump (2006) regards classrooms as conflict prone situations characterised by teachers and pupils all pursuing different goals and agendas. Conceived in this sense, absentee students can be regarded as victims of classroom conflict. Bowen (2005) expands on this idea when he asserts that all schools repress and coerce students, and those students who cannot withstand the repression and coercion get ejected from the school system. In a study of American School education, the same author concluded that schools are expected to make students do things they might not otherwise choose to do. Literally, this seems to suggest that schools make demands that run counter to students' natural inclinations. Teasley (2004) alludes to this view by postulating that in most classes, students are expected to remain silent unless called upon by the teacher, sit relatively motionless in their seats for extended periods and listen to tedious lessons.

In the light of this revelation, it is not only enough for lecturers to simply acknowledge the existence and severity of the absenteeism problem in their classes. Rather, they should try to respond to the problem by exploring creative techniques to increase class attendance. Admittedly, if this ideal is to be achieved, lecturers *per se* cannot go it alone. Instead, this would call for a concerted effort from all university structures such as central administration, teaching and learning centres, student support units and student representative bodies. This view is reinforced by Williams (1999) who remarks that if survival of students in schools is to be guaranteed, then it is not enough simply to ensure that students attend school without paying more attention to the quality of education that the students get from such schools.

This seems like a call for all those partners in the provision of higher education to carry out their respective roles accordingly. For instance, at the level of government, there may be need to improve lecturers working conditions so as to boost their motivation with a view that this will have positive returns in the way they discharge their duties. This is important as participant students raised the concern that some lecturers seem not to have the zeal to teach. However, working conditions or salaries alone may not be adequate to address the problem of absenteeism without some sort of quality control or monitoring system in place. Therefore, universities must ensure that their quality assurance systems are

well functioning so that somehow lecturers are made accountable for what they are doing.

It emerged from the findings that a reasonable number of students evade lectures and/or tutorials so as to concentrate and catch up on other more pressing aspects of their studies. This confirms Fleming's (1995) study at Lincoln University which found that 40% of the reasons offered for non-attendance at lectures involved the pressure of other learning tasks. According to Fleming, students choose to miss a class in order to work on an assignment because they think they will gain more marks from doing the assignment. This tendency points towards a crisis of time and study management skills that university students are experiencing. The implication that comes to the fore here is that if the problem of absenteeism is to be kept under check, universities should face the challenge of exploring and implementing effective intervention strategies that equip the students with appropriate styles of studying and how to manage academic pressure in higher education. This is particularly important given the public outcry that most students enrolling with universities are ill-prepared for higher education and its exigencies.

From the findings it emerged that absenteeism has a socio-economic character that works adversely against students from lower socio-economic families and backgrounds. Similarly, students from single parents or child headed families are also equally affected. In support, Zhang (2003) found that out of the 137 students in the study that were described as truant, 33 of the students' homes were categorized as poor and 74 of the students' homes were categorised as extremely poor. Zhang, further asserts that money becomes a large issue of families in poverty. Accordingly, there is no money for fees, food and transport to college. This was mainly attested by the number of students who reported that they engage in part-time economic activities so as to raise funds to augment the little resources that their families can mobilise for their education.

Kottasz' (2005) study found that two-fifths of students in the UK claim that their university education is suffering because they have to work part-time. Half of the students interviewed in a survey of 782 third year undergraduates for the National Institute of Economic and Social Research had to work while studying at university. Four-fifths of these said it meant they miss out on lectures and on using library and computer

facilities. Longhurst (1999) on the other hand identified that in a study of Further Education college students, 22% had missed classes at some time because of work commitment. This scenario evokes the contentious debate about the degree to which education in general and higher education in particular is meritocratic. Closely related to this debate is the issue of whether higher education is really accessible to all those who need it irrespective of family background and social class. In other words if the student's right to education in general and higher education in particular is mediated through one's social class, then the view that education is a basic human right becomes highly unsustainable.

This view finds support from Segal (2008) who postulates that schooling was once thought to have an enlightening and equalising mission, but it is now increasingly seen to have inegalitarian and repressive features. If some students can sacrifice their education so as to raise money to support their learning, it becomes highly contentious whether the concept of equal opportunity and equal access in higher education has any real meaning which is above the level of rhetoric. At the outset it has to be conceded that the South African social environment is characterised by chronic deprivation, absolute poverty and gross inequalities. The critical issue here is that if student achievements, throughput rates and social outcomes are to be raised to a meaningful level, then the government and other stakeholders should face the challenge of waging an assault on poverty through various poverty reduction and alleviation projects. This would empower the lower class families and hopefully reducing absenteeism that is related to socio-economic status. Only then can lower class students probably enjoy their full right to higher education in much the same way as those from well to do families. It is hoped that this measure will not only bring about equity in the provision of higher education, but will also impact positively on student achievement outcomes as well as the general throughput rates.

From the findings, it became 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. This is important given the fact that the majority of university students are post-matric adolescents many of whom are staying away from home for the first time in their lives. Understandably, some

of them experience a great deal of crises in decision-making. In the current study, quite a sizable number of respondents indicated that the motivation for their absenteeism from lectures was the need to be with their friends and peers. In support, Reid (2005) asserts that truant individuals are influenced by their peers to not attend school and encourage peers to engage in activities outside of the school with them. This, in some way, points towards the level of maturity that most university students have. It is therefore crucial that when students enroll with university, their level of maturity should not be taken for granted.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the problem of absenteeism is quite prevalent in the South African higher education landscape. The problem is precipitated by interplay of a multiplicity of factors which are both internal and external to the student and or the university. Key among the factors that give rise to absenteeism are poor teaching strategies by lecturers, unfavourable learning environments, poor socio-economic background, peer influence as well as unconducive interpersonal relations between students and lecturers. The problem of student absenteeism is gaining much attention from educators, researchers and policy makers as it is not just an educational problem but also a social and political issue with huge social costs. Therefore, this study advocates that in order to address the problem in any meaningful way, efforts should be directed not only at the student or university but at the broader socio-economic and political environments in which universities are located.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ø The University Teaching and Learning Centres should identify training needs and organise symposiums, workshops, conferences and staff development programmes for lecturers so as to enhance their skills and performance levels.
- Ø Lecturers should try to respond to the problem of student absenteeism by exploring creative techniques to increase class attendance. Obviously one way of operationalising this ideal is through the use of innovative teaching methods, the use of better equipped classrooms and a change in attitude.
- Ø The implementation of effective and functional student orientation and student support programmes could be part of the intervention strategies that universities might need to consider among others.
- Ø Students need regular guidance and counselling services as well as career support so that they may be able to cope with university life and all that goes with it. It is hoped that this support may make a difference.

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