

An Exploration of Factors Affecting Students' Studies in One Selected University in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT Several issues promote or hinder students' progress in pursuit of their studies. The present study sought to establish enabling and constraining factors to students' academic progress in one selected state university in Zimbabwe. The study adopted a descriptive survey approach which utilized both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Informed by Archer's theory on structure, culture and agency, the study collected data from students in five selected faculties in the one selected university. A convenient sample of one hundred and ten students participated in the study. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed with the aid of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package version 21. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis method and presented through verbatim quotations of the respondents. The study found that academic overload, lack of time management, lack of requisite materials, computer illiteracy and financial problems negatively affected students' studies while factors such as student accommodation, relationships and command of the language of instruction did not have much effect. The researchers conclude that there were structural, cultural and agential factors that negatively affected students' studies. Recommendations are made in view of the major findings.

INTRODUCTION

Students' academic success in universities 'has far-reaching implications for students' personal and professional lives' (Benford and Gess-Newsome 2006: 5). Their future depends on attainment of qualifications and failure to acquire qualifications registered for results in a plethora of problems. Cross et al. (2009) as well as Fakude (2012) observe that higher education institutions may ensure access to higher education to students but issues of high failure, high drop out and low graduation rates continue to be experienced in universities. Investigation of the factors relating to the academic success and persistence of students are topics of utmost importance in higher education (Ruban and McCoach 2005). Kyoshaba (2009) observes that factors affecting student academic performance range from admission points set by institutions to ensure students entry into programmes to the so-

cio-economic levels of parents and the former school backgrounds of the students. Geiser and Santelices (2007) state that a student's admission points are a predictor of success in studies. This suggests that students with high entry points have higher chances of succeeding in their studies.

In terms of students' social backgrounds there are different views on how background affects performance. Students from higher social classes are believed to carry the advantage of cultural capital to school hence they perform better than students from lower social classes (Hansen and Mastekaasa 2003). Hirudayaraj (2011) sees first generation university students whose parents and siblings have not had university education as being at risk on account of limited academic family support. On the contrary, there is the notion of educational resilience where students from lower social classes are compelled by their backgrounds to work hard and succeed. In a study on educational and social economic background of undergraduates in relation to their academic performance conducted in a Brazilian university, Pedrosa et al. (2006) established that students coming from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational homes performed relatively better than those coming from higher socio-economic and educational strata.

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The issue of students' age is also contributory to academic performance though studies are inconclusive on whether age has an effect on a student's academic performance. Newman-Ford et al. (2009) argue that younger students tend to perform better than older students because older and mature students are thought to lack basic skills required for effective study or to be impaired by age-related deficits. On the contrary, older and mature students are seen to be more focussed and committed to their studies (Richardson 1994). Richardson (1994) asserts that mature students seek a deeper meaning towards their academic work and were less likely to adopt a surface approach. This shows that older and mature learners were better learners than the younger ones and had better chances of succeeding owing to their learning styles that promoted understanding.

Institutional Factors Affecting Students' Studies

Institutional factors refer to conditions in the higher education institution where students will be studying. On institutional factors affecting students' academic performance, Heinson (2010) observes that class size is one of the factors that impact upon academic performance and the general relationship is a negative one. This suggests that effective and interactive learning may not take place in large classes hence the negative impact on achievement of learning outcomes and student attainment. In large classes, lecturers may simply resort to the use of the traditional lecture method which does not ensure students engagement with learning material but reduces them to passive listeners (Rodriguez 2008).

One of the institutional factors affecting students' academic performance is related to the teachers teaching in universities (Diaz 2003). It is common in universities to find discipline experts without formal training in teaching being hired to teach. Such teachers have different beliefs and assumption about teaching which influence the type of teaching methods that they adopt. In showing the importance of teacher training and development to enhance teaching practice, Rahman et al. (2011: 151) observe that:

Training and development can be thought of as processes designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of edu-

cators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students. Training is an important part of teacher preparation programs, especially for those aspects of teaching that are more skill-like in their conception, but there are many other important aspects of teaching that can only be nurtured through reflective strategies and experiences.

It is, therefore, important to have university teachers exposed to principles and processes of teaching to enable them to be reflective practitioners, reflection being the hallmark of scholarly teaching. Rahman et al. (2011) argue teachers impact the teaching learning process and hence the importance to have them better prepared for their role in teaching.

Student academic success is also influenced by nature and extent of engagement with academic work. Universities should have ways to promote and enhance student engagement. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2007: 7) states that engagement:

... demands that students devote considerable amounts of time and effort to purposeful tasks; most require daily decisions that deepen students' investment in the activity as well as their commitment to their academic program and the college.

There should be planned programmes that ensure students spend more time and effort on academic work. This is complementary to contact time through lectures and tutorials by having a supportive campus environment (National Survey of Student Engagement (2007). The establishment of learning spaces in students' halls of residence is one sure way of ensuring students' engagement (Caine and Reynolds 2006).

The issue of students' accommodation is also another institutional factor that affects students' academic performance. Omar et al. (2011) observe that students residing out of campus and mostly in rented accommodation face a number of challenges which their counterparts in university residence will not face. Such challenges range from raising adequate finances to pay rentals, finding transport to and from the university as well as having to contend with living environments that are not conducive to studies. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that living in university residence promotes higher chances of persistence with studies and ultimate successful degree completion. Students' accommodation arrangements are therefore an

important consideration for universities in an attempt to ensure that students are able to focus on their studies without disturbances. Staying on-campus allows students to be part of social networks and learning communities that assist them with their studies (Putman 2000).

A university student's academic journey is shaped by various factors that are institutional, academic, socio-economic or personal in nature. What complicates university studies is that the aforementioned factors sometimes jointly impact on a student's academic endeavours. It is critical to orient university students towards coping with factors that affect their studies. Reviewing institutional factors for academic success, Bain et al. (2010) found attrition rate to be a threat to academic success. It connotes students' failure to complete a programme. Research reveals that student attrition results in considerable costs to both the student and the institution (Cao and Gabb 2007). The students incur costs in terms of fees, opportunity and emotions while an institution incurs costs related to fees, recruitment and tuition all of which threatens the survival of the institution (Cao and Gabb 2006). Attrition rates are critical in higher education due to the scarcity of resources (Ferrer de Valero 2001). It is important for a university to guarantee its existence by monitoring student attrition.

Related to student attrition are institutional factors such as the department culture, student-faculty relationship as well as financial support. Levitts and Nelson (2000) note that financial support is one of the institutional factors that shape a university student's academic journey. Although it does not guarantee university programme completion, financial support is important in facilitating academic studies. It is strategic for a university to fund students who need assistance by liaising with its stakeholders. Bursaries are known to be beneficial to students; however, it calls for an academic institution to establish financial links with both the local and the international community.

In an academic institution, student-faculty relationship is vital in the sense that it dampens or propels academic achievement. Earl-Novell (2006) found that student-advisor relationship is the strongest institutional factor affecting a university student's academic success. In the words of Nathan (2005: 117) the manner in which a student and a professor communicate should

be a 'symbiotic relationship that creates a personal relationship which puts a human perspective on the face of the interaction between the professor and the student in order to promote success for a student'. Thus, the quality of interaction between the student and the lecturer largely shapes the academic success of a student. It cannot be overemphasised that the lecturer should treat students as valuable human beings (Johnson 2005; Bain 2004). In other words, students fulfill prophecies that professors proclaim about their academic prowess.

The culture of a student's department impacts on his or her academic effort. This departmental culture entails the student's interaction with peers, faculty and department programme itself. Success of university students hinges upon their connection with the peers, department and faculty (Hoskins and Goldberg 2005; Mann and Robinson 2009). In this view, the student is expected to actively engage the programme of study and peers. Such active engagement promotes interest and motivation in studies as well as ultimate attainment. Similarly, research studies confirm that online student attrition is largely affected by a feeling of isolation which equates to disconnection (Beqiri et al. 2010) and also that learning communities that are connected tend to be ineffective (Kraska 2008). It is important for the administration of any particular department, college or university to connect to their students in order to know who they are. An institution that is well connected to its constituency functions like a community where members bear one another's burden.

Language of Instruction and Academic Discourse

Trice (2001) as well as Leung and Berry (2010) observe that inadequate English proficiency and low self-efficacy are some of the factors that affect mostly non English first language speaking students in universities. The truth in this observation emanates from the fact that such students lack cultural capital to take to school and this is further compounded by the language of instruction, which is not their home language. Brock-Utne (2006: 156) also argues that the use of foreign language acts as 'a barrier to knowledge for millions of African children'. Similarly, Alidou (2009) asserts that under-achievement is not necessarily as result of inherent cognitive

problems in learners but failure to master the language of instruction. It is true that students have to grapple with the language first before attempting to understand the content. This poses a serious challenge.

In showing the importance of one's mother language in learning, Ball (2007: 7) argues that:

Language, thought and culture are inextricably bound Much of our thinking is done in words and communication using language enables us to develop intersubjective understandings Conversely, culture is embodied, in part, in the words we use and how we use them.

The fact that there is a clear connection of language, thought and culture means that learners learn better in their own mother tongue. However, universities in Zimbabwe, like many other African universities, still use English as the language of instruction. Mangu (2005) argues that the continued use of foreign and former colonial masters' languages in African universities shows how Western the universities are. Mangu (2005) further observes that most African universities were only African in name as their curricula were dictated to them by Western countries.

Academic Factors Affecting Students' Studies

Academic factors that impact on the university student's academic studies include the Grade Point Average (GPA), admission tests, rigour of the high school curriculum as well as study skills (Latkowski et al. 2004; Mckenzie and Schweitzer 2010). GPA refers to a cumulative grade point average a student earns for all university courses. Research proves that university or even high school GPA predicts a student's academic performance. Ishitani and DesJardins (2002) found that students with a higher first year GPA were less likely to drop out of university or college. The reason for universities and colleges to use admission tests and GPAs as is supported by Power et al in Mckenzie and Schweitzer (2010) who report that there is a correlation between university GPA and high school grades although it may vary according to individuals and groups. This shows that students admitted to different degree programmes in a university should show some readiness through possession of requisite entry points and passing entrance tests.

The rigour of a high school curriculum affects a student's success in university studies (Latkowski et al. 2004). Like the GPA, the rigour of the high school curriculum is an effective predictor of university academic performance. Study skills have been found to influence academic performance. A study by Mckenzie and Schweitzer (2010) confirms that students with poor study habits are more likely to withdraw from university or to have academic adjustment problems in their transition from high school to university.

Social Factors

When considering factors affecting university students' progress in academic work, social factors cannot be overlooked. Such social factors include romantic relationships, clubs and organisations as well as student cults among others (Umar et al. 2010). The above-mentioned factors affect academic performance in two ways. First, in terms of the time they demand from an already loaded student. Second, in view of the physical and mental states they cause to students. It is incumbent upon a university student to balance the stressful academic attainment and social activities. There are various views regarding the relationship between academic performance and romantic relationships. Berger (1997) found that a romantic relationship may ease environmental stress. What it means is that a university student can cope with environmental stress by engaging into a romantic relationship which of course should be balanced with educational pursuits. Regarding romantic relationships, Paul and White (1990) observe that being in an intimate relationship involves trust, sensitivity, responsiveness, ability to make a commitment and all this in some ways impact on academic performance. In a study on dating Zimmer (2001) found that dating has a positive effect on emotional health of adolescents. In their study on dating status in institutions, Quartman et al. (2001) discovered that students who dated more frequently had a lower academic performance. Thus, dating can be detrimental to students' academic performance although it is sometimes associated with benefits for students' emotional health.

Membership in clubs and organisations was found to be closely connected to academic achievement. In a research that examined the

degree to which cognitive motivation predicts academic performance, Jackson et al. (2003) found that increased school activity may assist a student's motivation to achieve academically. Paul and White (1990) examined extracurricular activity participation and academic performance in a senior high school setting and found that engagement in extra-curricular activities and academic performance were highly correlated. Similarly, Mynell in Umar et al. (2010) affirms that more involvement in school activities means a better grade point average.

Students' cults, where members are expected to place the interests of the cult over any others impact on university academic performance. A cult is an association like any other, with a hierarchy, ranks, a governing body and a head or leader but it is secretive in its activities (Umar et al. 2010). The demands of a cult just like a romantic relationship compel university students to strike a balance between commitment to a cult and academic performance. Cults entice students by promising benefits such as payment of school fees, protection from aggression, popularity and admiration or good grades while at school. The promised benefits fail to come the student's way leading to academic stress. Umar et al. (2010) found students' cults to be academic impediments.

Personal Factors

Apart from institutional, academic and socio-economic factors, personal factors shape a university student's academic performance. Personal factors comprise prior knowledge; personality and academic ability (Latkowski et al. 2004). These personal factors are pertinent to a university student's career in that they are the ones that a student brings to the learning situation. The prior knowledge brought by the students to the university has far reaching effects on their academic performance. In his theory of students' departure from academic institutions, Tinto cited in Latkowski et al. (2004) believes that pre-college education interacts with and directly influences a student's initial commitment to university and their goals. Tinto argues further that a student's initial level of commitment is thought to affect the intensity of his or her integration into the social and academic university life (Latkowski et al. 2004). That being the case, the level of integration directly affects the student's de-

cision to remain in university. Thus, the students' lasting initial commitment to university business is largely shaped by their prior knowledge. In a study on how technology stratifies learners, Madzanire and Meier (unpublished) found that students at a university in Zimbabwe who had been exposed to computers prior to their entrance into university studies were better oriented to university education than their counterparts from rural day secondary schools that lacked knowledge about current computer technology. In this sense, prior knowledge proves to be a contributory factor towards success in university studies.

University students bring with them different levels of academic ability. Research reveals a correlation between GPA and the likelihood of completing a programme. Ishitani and DesJardins (2002) found that students with high first year GPA were less likely to drop out of college. Universities bundle students with diverse abilities and needs. When the diverse abilities and needs are allowed to reach a point where they matter, cultural conflict which impacts on students' academic discharge may occur (LeBaron 2003). The university should strive to meet the diverse needs of individual students while also providing everyone with equal opportunities regardless of gender, sex, class or ethnicity (Berns 2010).

A student's personality correlates with his or her academic achievement. Self-efficacy, that is, the belief that one will perform successfully in a given course (Mckenzie and Schweitzer 2010) was found to be predictive of university grades. LeCompte cited in Mckenzie and Schweitzer (2010) found that an expectation of academic success has a highly significant positive relationship with actual academic success and with low withdrawal rates. Latkowski et al. (2004) found that personal factors such as academic self-confidence and achievement motivation had the strongest correlation to university performance. It is vital to build students' self-concepts. University students' studies are shaped by interplay of institutional, academic, socio-economic and personal factors which cannot be ignored.

Theoretical Framework

The purpose of the study was to explore factors affecting students' learning at university. The theoretical framework that provided a

springboard to this purpose was Archer's (1995) theory on structure, agency and culture – a theory that remains widely cited to this day when it comes to methods of explaining social behavior. In this study, the theory is adopted as means of better understanding events related to Higher Education.

For Archer (1995), the study of structure, culture and agency is key to understanding the social world. The question being asked directly is 'Is it social structure or human agency that shapes and determines human behaviour?' Agency is the capacity of an individual to act independently and make own free choices (Boughey 2010, 2012). Structure is the patterned arrangements which influence the choices and opportunities available to the individual (Boughey 2010). Like the nature-nurture controversy, the tension or debate here is 'human-social'. Conversely, the question is 'Does the individual act as a free agent or in a manner dictated and directed by social structure?' In pursuit of such a question, sociologists like Giddens (1987) would prefer to combine parts (structure) and the people (agency) in analysis (Ritzer and Goodman 2004). Giddens (1987) cited in Ritzer and Goodman 2004: 1) "argues that structure and agency are a duality that cannot be conceived of apart from one another, ... (for) individuals create both their consciousness and structural conditions that make their activities possible" – a dialectical relationship that Giddens (1987) calls "double hermeneutic" (Ritzer and Goodman 2004: 1). However, in pursuit of the same question, Archer finds this conceptualization analytically insufficient, and critiques the confluations of structure and agency. In her conceptualization of the interplay between structure and agency, Archer (1995, 1996) advises that structure and agency be kept separate, distinct and irreducible because it makes it possible to analyze the interrelations between the two (Zeuner 1999). Archer (1996) advances that each be kept and analysed separately, but with the interplay of each with the other explored. In Archerian analysis, students modify their learning experiences in terms of contextual feasibility, but since they are active agents, they, at the same time, adjust their studies to what they want to realize. Agents have the ability to either reinforce or resist influences of cultural systems (Ritzer and Goodman 2004). Archer's focus is on a process she calls 'morphogenesis', that is" a process through

which complex interchanges lead not only to changes in the structure of a system but also to an end product...there are emergent properties of social interaction that are separable from the actions and interactions that produce them" (Ritzer and Goodman 2004: 1). Thus, Archerian methodological approach is 'analytical dualism', that is studying the 'structure-agency debate' without conflating the two (Archer 1996).

Influenced by Archer's methodological approach, this study explored whether students' studies were affected by the institutional dispositions or whether students themselves were central stimulators of the factors that affected their studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quality of a piece research stands or falls because of the appropriateness and suitability of the research methodology followed, particularly the whole process of planning, collecting and analyzing the data. Critical issues in this whole process include choice of research paradigm, design, instrumentation, validity and reliability of study, as well as data handling and ethical considerations.

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm chosen for this study involved equally dominant models of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell 2010). The quantitative provided standing facts that affected students learning, while the qualitative gave meaning and further insights into the facts (Lawson et al. 2007). Thus the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches in this study did not only provide numerical data, but confirmatory and exploratory information about the issue under study. This revealed the factors that affect students' studies and why the factors had that impact.

Research Design

This study utilized the descriptive survey as its research design. The design was preferred because of its compatibility with the adopted research paradigm. The descriptive design allowed the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, which in turn gave way to statistical and thematic analysis. The other reason

why the descriptive design was most preferred was compatibility with the main goal of the study, which was not only to know basic factors, but to go further and provide meaning to the standing factors so that the study is fact finding with adequate interpretation of the existing phenomenon (Cooper and Schindler 2001).

Population and Sampling

The study population was students in their second and last semester at the institution. These, it was felt, had had ample and substantial engagement with university life to be in a position to comment meaningfully on factors that impact on student studies in a university. Hence, the population from which we learnt was purposively identified and the criterion used was “fitness of purpose” (Cohen et al. 2010: 117). From this population of 582 students, equal disproportionate stratification (Thompson 2002) was employed to randomly draw 22 students from each of the 5 studied faculties. The equal disproportionate stratification provided great advantage in the ability to study responses of each of the five strata. The sample of 110 from 582 students was felt would provide more accurate results.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to solicit data from the respondents. This instrument was prioritized by the researchers because of its ability to draw a deep understanding of the respondents’ views concerning factors affecting their studies at the institution. The questionnaire was in four sections. Section A obtained the respondents’ bio-data, where respondents had to tick in an appropriate box their faculty, gender, year in college, resident status and age range. Section B solicited for the factors that affected students’ learning on a verbal-cum-numerical rating scale from Very much (5) to Not at all (1). Ten factors were identified and students ticked on effect of each factor. The third section allowed respondents to add any other factors that impacted on their learning other than those provided. The fourth and final sectional section requested students to comment on the effect of each of the factors on their learning.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity and reliability in this study, the researchers collected data across the

five major faculties at the university so that they could have representative views and avoid bias. Creswell (2012) says that corroborating evidence from different individuals ensure that the study will be accurate because the information draws from multiple sources. The researchers also tried to have an authentic portrait of what they were looking for by having investigator triangulation.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed statistically through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. Data were presented through descriptive statistics of frequencies, percentages and means. Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data collected through the semi structured questionnaire. An interrogation of the respondents’ discourse assisted in grouping data according to themes.

Ethical Issues

The researchers addressed ethical issues in conducting the study. Informed consent was sought from the participants. The researchers informed participants of voluntary participation and withdrawal, confidentiality and anonymity. Permission to conduct the study was sought and granted by the authorities of the university in which the study was carried out.

RESULTS

In this section the researchers present the results of the study. Quantitative results are presented statistically and qualitative results are presented thematically and also by way of verbatim quotations.

Factors Affecting Students’ Learning

Table 1 presents results of students’ views on the extent to which they agreed that given factors affected students’ learning. All the factors with a mean response of more than 3.5 were deemed as affecting students’ studies negatively in a huge way. The established factors were overload of academic work, challenges with time management, lack of required materials for studies, computer illiteracy and financial problems. Factors such as staying on or off campus, involvement in love relationship and command of the language of instruction were established as not having a negative effect on students’ studies.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of the extent to which factors affect students learning (n=110)

Factor considered/ Extent of affecting learning	Very much		Not at all			Mean
	5	4	3	2	1	
Staying on campus	34 (30.9%)	28 (25.5%)	16 (14.5%)	14 (12.7%)	18 (16.4%)	3.42
Staying off campus	32 (29.1%)	25 (22.7%)	28 (25.5%)	14 (12.7%)	11 (10.0%)	3.48
Involvement in love relationships	23 (20.9%)	27 (24.4%)	30 (27.3%)	15 (13.6%)	15 (13.6%)	3.25
Family commitments	23 (20.9%)	33 (30.0%)	30 (27.3%)	18 (16.4%)	6 (5.5%)	3.45
Overload of academic work	35 (30.0%)	28 (24.5%)	29 (23.6%)	12 (11.8%)	6 (3.6%)	3.67
Problems of time management	52 (47.3%)	20 (18.2)	23 (20.9%)	8 (7.3%)	7 (6.4%)	3.93
Lack of materials required for studies	31 (28.2%)	27 (24.5%)	26 (23.6%)	14 (12.7%)	12 (10.9%)	3.46
Command of language of instruction	33 (30.0%)	31 (28.2%)	21 (19.1%)	16 (14.5%)	9 (8.2%)	3.57
Computer illiteracy	59 (53.6%)	18 (16.4%)	17 (15.5%)	13 (11.8%)	3 (2.7%)	4.06

Students Qualitative Responses of Factors Affecting Studies

Structural Factors

Issues related to students' staying on or off campus, lack of materials required for studies, financial challenges and overload of academic work were taken as structural factors and respondents to the questionnaire had the following comments;

SR11

Staying off campus gives students burden as they will have more responsibilities to do before going to school and it is also expensive to them.

SR12

Financial problems are most affects (sic) students learning because assignments need (sic) to be typed, food, accommodation

SR18

Overload of academic work may cause students to lack focus because of the amount of

work given. for example having many lectures every day and on weekends may leave students with less time to read and do assignments.

SR22

Lack of materials can be subject to financial problems which is a major hindrance to effective learning

Cultural Factors

Issues such as language of instruction, love relationships and family commitments were classified as cultural factors and respondents made the following comments;

SR5

Command of the language is very important and if you not know (sic) the language you will fail your studies.

SR16

Language does not have much bearing as English is the language used and is understood by almost all students.

SR32

Involvement in love relationship at first year level is disturbing especially for ladies at level 1.

Agential Factors

In agential factors students have to exercise personal agency to ensure success in their studies and this includes managing their own time, making maximum use of time, visiting libraries and searching for information as well as prioritizing.

SR7

Time management affects anyone's learning. It is important to manage time.

SR31

One may stay on campus but if they do not visit the library everyday they may still have problems in their studies

SR88

Students should prioritize to make maximum of the time they have.

SR99

One should generally work hard

In completing the open-ended section of the questionnaire those were some of the comments the respondents made to substantiate their claims on factors affecting students' learning.

DISCUSSION

It emerged from the study that there were numerous factors that affected students' learning. Structural factors included students' staying on or off campus, lack of materials required for studies, financial challenges and overload of academic work. The challenges of staying off campus as a factor affecting students' learning established in the present study is consistent with findings in Omar et al. (2011) study of off campus students in Malaysia which established

that such students experienced problems in expenses in transport and rentals. Such problems, invariably, negatively affect academic performance. Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) claim that living on campus can positively impact on retention and graduation.

The study also found that overload of academic work was a factor deemed to affect students learning negatively in a huge way. This finding corroborates findings by Ruiz-Gallardo et al. (2011) that overloading students with academic work resulted in low marks, absenteeism from lectures and drop out from programmes. Similarly, Biggs (2003) confirms that students faced with huge workloads resort to surface learning. Learning is only done to complete tasks at the expense of real understanding of content and mastery of skills.

It further emerged from the study that financial challenges was a strong factor affecting students' academic work. This finding confirms findings by Jusoh et al. (2011) that students faced a plethora of financial problems that resulted in skipping meals in order to save, borrowing from others for daily needs and failure to have enough money towards end of semester. Such challenges, invariably, negatively affect learning. Jusoh et al. (2011: 32) state that:

Financial problems are inversely related to academic performance. On the whole, high achieving students have less financial problems compared to less achievers.

Findings in the present study on how financial issues were a huge factor serve to confirm findings from related studies.

The study also established that lack of materials required for studies was also a determinant factor for effective learning at university. This finding is consistent with views by Yara and Otieno (2010) that resources 'are basic things that can bring about good performance in students'. Lack of resources can be a result of poverty and Lacour and Tissington (2011: 522) observe that 'poverty directly affects academic achievement due to lack of resources available for student success'. This finding on lack of requisite learning material related to poverty also corroborates Bergeson's (2006) of effect of poverty on learner attainment.

It further emerged from the study that computer illiteracy was a strong factor in negatively affecting students' learning. This finding confirms earlier findings by Barlow-Jones (2008) that

students' levels of digital literacy had an effect on their academic performance. Similarly, Broos (2005) contend that computer literacy enables students to access and process information easily for enhanced learning. This is in line with Idowu and Adagunodo's (2004) view of computer literacy as 'the ability to use computer system to word process document, analyze data, develop small computer programmes, browse internet and install software' (Idowu et al. 2004 cited in Ige and Orungbemi 2013: 105). Computer literacy, therefore, assists students significantly in their learning.

The study established that command of the language of instruction was not a very strong factor affecting students' learning. Such a finding stands in contrast to calls for the Africanisation of the university by ensuring the use of local languages in teaching and teaching of indigenous knowledge systems (Louw 2010; Mangu 2005). It is clear from the study that students did not see the use of English as an impediment. Conversely, in other studies Brock-Utne (2006) and Alidou (2009) also argue that the use of foreign language in learning denies students epistemological access and is a cause for underachievement.

CONCLUSION

In the light of findings from the present study it is concluded that there are structural, cultural and agential factors that negatively affected students' studies in the university in which the study was carried out. Structural factors included issues related to institution and university systems such as students' accommodation, resources, finances and workload. There were also cultural factors related to how students valued the language of instruction and family and love relationships insofar as they affected academic studies. In terms of agential factors, there are instances where students require exercising personal agency in order to realize success in their studies. This is possible through active engagement in learning programmes by making use of all the time at their disposal and setting right priorities. It is in dealing with factors in which they are able to exercise agency that can take charge of their studies to influence positive results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- ♦ Issues related to students' accommodation should be taken seriously in universities. Where possible students should be accommodated in university residences closer to all the facilities that students may require to enhance their learning. Learning spaces should also be created in halls of residence to ensure that students have adequate space to their work either as groups or as individuals.
- ♦ Student funding is also an issue that requires attention so that students from poor backgrounds are afforded the opportunity to progress well with their studies. Without adequate funds for basics such as food, performance is negatively affected. In instances where loans and bursaries are made available to students, basic budgeting courses should be considered for students so that they are able to make full use of available funds.
- ♦ Basic life skills programmes that involve managing time and relationships should also be integral programmes to the main academic programmes in the university.
- ♦ The university academic programme should not overload students with work to an extent that they are not left with time to do more academic work on their own. An overloaded programme simply results in students adopting surface learning approaches.

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