

Lecture Non-Attendance by University Students: Triggers and Solutions

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Abstract

Lecture non-attendance by university students is a major issue in many institutions of higher learning globally. This study was conducted to determine the institutional-based factors and student-centered factors that cause absenteeism among undergraduate students in a public university in Kenya. This paper focuses on what we consider to be one of the impacts of demographic changes in the university where we teach. We have both witnessed chronic cases of absenteeism; an observation that informed this study. We carried out the research with two groups of students from one teaching department in June and October 2013. The June group comprised of 1st years (N=68) that were in their second semester, and the October group comprised of 3rd years in their first semester (N=84). The groups were purposively selected; the first years were relatively new to a university environment whereas the 3rd years were considered to be „at home“. A self-administered questionnaire with open ended items was developed and administered to the groups in their respective homogenous cohorts. Through the questionnaires we sought to find out reasons why students in our university miss lectures. We also requested the respondents to suggest measures that should be taken to curb absenteeism at the university. Mixed method of data analysis was used. Based on findings, we categorized the students' responses on causes of absenteeism into two; institutional-based factors and student-centered factors. The suggested solutions mainly focused on the actions to be taken by the university. Given the current demographic trends in Kenyan universities, the students raised critical issues that touch on quality of services, leadership and management of university operations. The university needs to enact policies that monitor and evaluate its core business.

Key Words: Lecture Non-Attendance, University Students, Institutional-Based Factors, Student-Centred Factors

INTRODUCTION

In the last 10 years, educational institutions in Kenya have witnessed a steady rise in enrollments. As researchers and lecturers, we have also witnessed a proliferation of private training institutions and expansion of public institutions. At post secondary level, this has translated to demographic changes characterized by higher numbers of learners in the lecture rooms and diversity in terms of age, ethnic and regional representation. In 2011/2012 academic year for example, public universities admitted 8000 more students than the number admitted in the 2010/2011 (Daily Nation, June, 2011). These are positive outcomes for a young country like Kenya, whose youthful population is about 43% of the total population as per the 2009 census. With such a youthful population, it means the demographics in the universities will continue to change.

This paper is therefore informed by the authors' experiences as lecturers teaching in a public university and also Martin Trow's Theory of Massification of Higher Education - 1971. Trow's classical work investigated the evolution of higher education in quantitative and qualitative forms. The theory assumes that educational quality in higher institutions of learning is a concept that is compounded by various factors. Trow argued that during the period of massification many people receive higher education; a trend that reveals both the needs of the wider society or the state and the role of the universities in national development. According to the theory, the views, purposes, contents, structures, academic standards, functions, ways of establishing education and management systems change immensely with over-enrolment in institutions of higher learning. In such cases, the management of universities can no longer exist in isolation. The students, parents and the society in general get involved in the evaluation of quality of university education directly and indirectly. The theory emphasizes the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation of university education to ensure quality of outcomes. It is in this light that the study was carried out to investigate lecture non-attendance by students in a public university in Kenya.

A segment of educational research shows lecture non-attendance is a phenomenon that is on the rise in universities worldwide (Wadesango & Machingambi, 2011; Kottasz, 2005; Desalegn, Berhan & Berhan, 2014). Absenteeism poses risks for performance and motivation and diminishes interaction with lecturers and other students (Arulampalam, Naylor, & Smith, 2007; Massingham & Herrington, 2006). A study by Kotatasz (2005) reported a number of reasons given by students for missing lectures which include: one can get the lecture materials in other ways (38%), lectures are not worth attending (6%), times or timetable are not always right (50%), illness (72%), transport problems (61%), job commitment elsewhere (14%), poor content of lecture (23%), poor attendance by lecturer (23%), lecturer has disregard for the student (14%), student working on other assignments (61%) and don't care attitude by students (15%).

Other studies have investigated and uncovered the many reasons that students give as explanations for absenteeism (Longhurst 1999; Hunter & Tetley 1999; Timmins & Kaliszer 2002; Gump 2006; Nicholl & Timmins 2005; Hughes 2005). The range of reasons include family, social and work commitments, illness, faking illness, family emergencies and faking family emergencies to mention but a few. Some of these reasons are completely valid and occur as a consequence of life circumstances, life events and the changing student profile. However, a number of the reasons for absenteeism offered by students appear to be quite trivial in nature and give rise to the question of how much students actually value learning activities such as lectures.

Further to that, studies indicate that absenteeism is caused by a number of reasons that include: 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 not matching with the course taken at the university; the poor teaching skills of a lecturer could also keep students from attending lectures; lack of confidence in a lecturer; inadequate relations between a student and a lecturer and the distance to university (Mayer & Mitchell 1996; Weller 1996; Williams 2000; Marburger 2001).

It is against the above background, and informed by Trow's theory of massification of higher education that this study sought to investigate the reasons and possible solutions for absenteeism in a public universities in Kenya. The study addressed the following questions: What are the reasons of student non-lecture attendance at university? What measures could be taken to curb student absenteeism at the university?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive survey design was used in this study. The target population was 152 students comprising of two groups from one of the teaching departments in the university: that is 1st years (N=68) and 3rd years (N=84). Both purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used. The two groups were purposively selected. The first years were relatively new to a university environment whereas the 3rd years were considered to be 'at home' in the university. Our assumption was that the difference between the two groups in terms of how long one has been in the university will offer a better understanding of absenteeism as a phenomenon of concern. Convenience sampling technique informed the decision to include all participants who were readily available at the time of administering the questionnaire and agreed to participate in the study.

A self-administered questionnaire with open ended items was developed and administered to the groups in their respective homogenous cohorts (1st years and 3rd years). The questionnaire comprised of two parts: part A dealt with respondents' background, and part B contained two open-ended questions. The purpose of the study was clearly stated on the questionnaires. To ensure anonymity, the respondents were advised not to include any identifying information on the questionnaire.

Through the questionnaires we sought to find out reasons why students in our university miss lectures. We also requested the respondents to suggest measures that should be taken to curb absenteeism at the university. Fifty percent (50 %) of the 1st year group (male 22, female 12) and 83% of the 3rd year group (male 54, female 16) responded to the questionnaire. Mixed method of data analysis was used.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the 68 (43 males and 25 females) 1st year and 84 (64 males and 20 females) 3rd year students, 50% of the 1st years (22 males and 12 females) and 83% (54 males and 16 females) of the 3rd years conveniently selected voluntarily consented to participate in the study and consequently completed the questionnaires

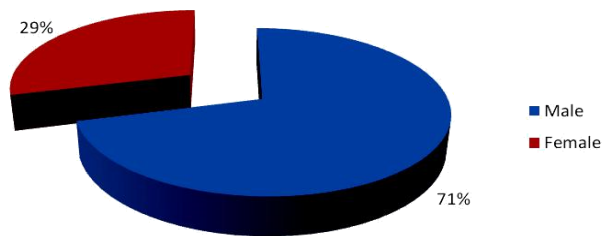


Figure 1. Target population by gender (N=152)

Figure 1 shows the total study population of both the 1st years and the 3rd years based on gender

Figure 2 indicates the total sample (1st years and 3rd years) based on the gender. The sample has a variation of +2 and -2 on gender variation as compared to the target population.

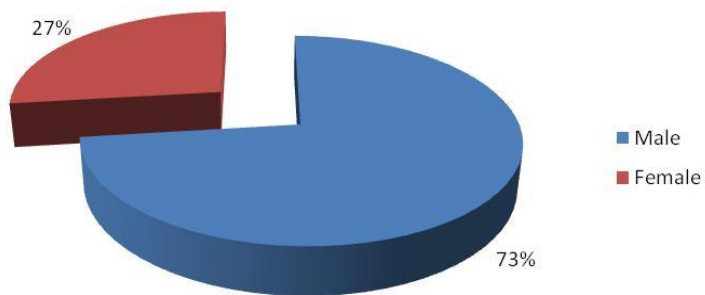
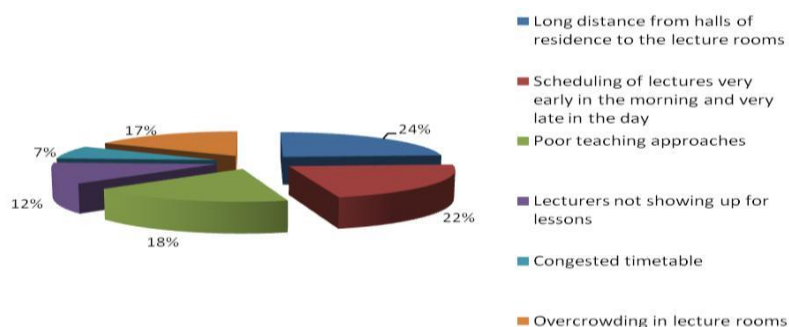


Figure 2. Study sample (N=104)

The study findings categorized the students' responses into two-- institutional-based factors and student-centered factors.

Institutional Based Factors



Figurer 3. Institutional-based factors causing absenteeism

The most frequently mentioned institutional-based factors were: long distance from halls of residence to the lecture rooms (24%), scheduling of lectures very early in the morning and late in the day (22%), ‘boring’ or poor teaching approaches (18%), over-crowded lecture rooms (17%), lecturers not turning-up for lessons (12%), and congested timetable (7%). Some of these reasons have been reported in studies carried out in other geographical regions. Wadesango and Machingabi (2011) found that absenteeism was rampant among the students in three South African Universities due to reasons such as: lack of subject interest, poor teaching strategies by lecturers, unfavourable learning environment, and too much socialization, part-time jobs to augment meager bursaries granted by various sponsors and poor relations with the lecturers. A survey of undergraduate students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Clay & Breslow, 2006) reported that the most important factors in deciding whether to attend lectures are the lectures’ quality and clarity, conflicting deadlines for other classes, the professor’s use of relevant examples, and the professor’s ability to engage and entertain students. In this survey, the primary factor involving the quality and clarity of lectures seem to support the need for educators to continually seek creative and innovative teaching strategies to increase class attendance (Broder, 1994). The decision to attend a lecture might be more heavily influenced by whether the student perceives the material or the lecturer to be interesting, or anticipates that the material will include assessable information not otherwise available (Gump, 2004; Westrick, Helms, McDonough, & Breland, 2009). This is a clear indication that from the past studies and the current study, institutional-based factors causing absenteeism are similar globally.

Student-Centred factors

The most frequently mentioned students-based factors include: illness (25%), ‘laziness’ (21%), negative peer influence (13%), personal commitments (12%), ignorance or ignoring lectures (11%), financial challenges (9%) and negative attitude towards lecturers (9%). In a study by Alija (2013), the reasons for absenteeism included: work engagement out of studies, having one class per day, having too much classes per day, lecture time table being too early or too late in the day, transport problems, bad weather conditions, illness, appointment with a doctor, family commitments, being on holiday, engaged in

social activities, suffering from effects of alcohol, having studied the material elsewhere, difficult material, boring subject matter, lack of motivation, not interested in the subject matter, not liking the instructor and working on assignments. This study indicates that the challenges the current study has pointed out are not only common to Kenya, but also other parts of the world.

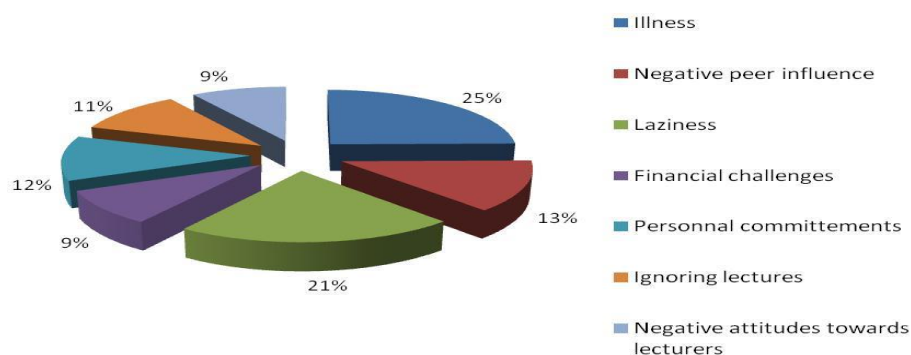


Figure 4. Student-centred factors causing absenteeism

Solutions to Absenteeism in University

The two study cohorts suggested several measures that could help curb absenteeism in the university. Most of them focused on what the university should do and include: accommodating all students on campus (25%); avoiding early morning and late evening lectures (24%); building more lecture rooms to ease congestion (21%); lecturers improving on the teaching approaches/methods (15%); decongesting the time table (8%); and regular attendance of classes by lecturers (7%). The results indicate that accommodation which is far from the lecture halls is a major problem which the university has to prioritize.

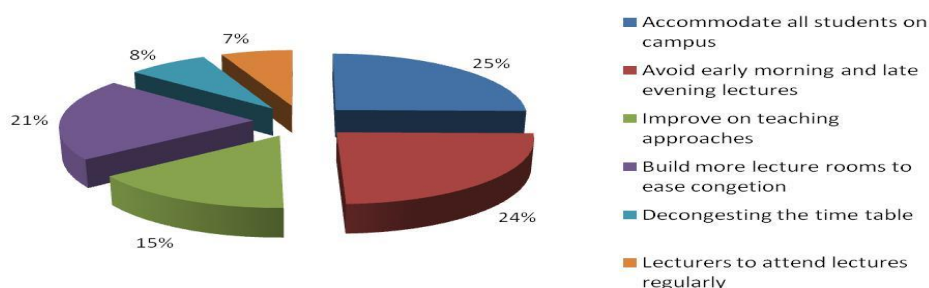


Figure 5. Solutions to curb absenteeism

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that the problem of absenteeism was prevalent among university students in the university under study. Literature also shows absenteeism by university students is an issue of global concern particularly with massification of higher education. The problem is caused by the interaction between institutional based factors and student-centred factors. According to Fayombo, Ogunkola and Olaleye (2012), the student-centred factors are personal and internal to the students and may not be controlled externally. Institutional-based factors are external to the students, hence can be effectively addressed by the university. Based on the responses, it was found that the institutional-based factors were the primary reasons for students' absenteeism, which then points an accusing finger on the university management. Gump (2006) and Micholl and Timmins (2005) argue that students will not attend lectures that are perceived as academy-centred such as: failure to connect the content of the lecture to the real world, the availability of lecture material in online forms, and unexciting and unchallenging lecturers. Other studies have found that students will not miss lectures that were interesting and those considered important to their degree (Hunter & Tetley, 1999; Khamasi, 2001; Khamasi, 2004; Khamasi, 2005).

The problem of lecture non-attendance is prevalent across the globe as evident in this study and other studies discussed in this paper. This issue requires urgent attention from those in management of institutions of higher learning, to curb the adverse consequences on the quality of university education in this era of massification of university education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to solve the problem of student non-lecture attendance, the recommendations are focused on the need to address the institutional-based factors, which we believe are the primary causes of absenteeism in the university where the study was carried out. In this regard we recommend the following:

- i. Accommodation: the University needs to prioritize accommodation and provide affordable rooms within the university vicinity. Due to urgency of the matter, the initiative calls for public-private partnerships. This will shorten the distances from halls of residence to the lecture rooms.
- ii. Teaching time-table: in absence of accommodation close to the university, the University ought to avoid early morning (6am-7am) and late evening lectures (6pm-9pm). Most students do not attend lectures during these times because the place of residence is very far from the university.
- iii. More lecture rooms: One of the reasons why classes are scheduled late evening and early mornings is because there is shortage of lecture rooms. In addition, one of the reasons that students give for missing lectures is because they are overcrowded. There is need for the university to build more lecture rooms. This will ease congestion and allow scheduling of small groups for effective teaching and enhance favourable student-teacher ratios.
- iv. Decongest teaching timetable: in order to enhance effective teaching and learning, there is need to decongest the teaching time table. In most cases, there is no break between lessons, which makes students to occasionally miss lectures

and meals among other needs. The breaks between lessons will allow students to attend to other pertinent matters such as lunch and corresponding and much needed health break.

- v. Lecturer preparedness: Lecturers should be adequately prepared for teaching. In such a case, they will be able to engage students effectively in the allocated class time; motivate and sustain their attention as well as use a variety of teaching approaches.
- vi. Role modeling: lecturers should be role models by attending lectures regularly and punctually. The university should monitor and evaluate the teaching services regularly with the goal of curbing lecturer absenteeism.
- vii. Student support services: the university should institutionalize, monitor and evaluate student support services. This should include regular orientation and career counseling services as well as effective psychological counseling and peer support programs. Normally, universities have the above named programs. But their effectiveness is unknown.
- viii. University core business: with massification of higher education in Kenya, universities need to re-focus on the core business. Teaching is the main business. Mass absenteeism signifies a hitch in the university academic services.

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BIO-DATA

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