

OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WEEKEND SCHOOL TUTORIALS

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Abstract

The present study was a descriptive survey carried out at the ZOU to establish the students' views on the effectiveness of weekend school tutorials. The study adopted the descriptive survey design which is essentially appropriate on areas where human perceptions are required. Due to its ability to solicit information deeply buried in the minds and attitudes of people, and its ability to reveal the true present state of affairs in a given set up, the design was seen to be the most appropriate one. Three instruments used in data collection were the questionnaire, interview schedule and documentary evidence to enable triangulation in order to enhance validity and reliability of data. A total of 982 students from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Region made up the population. Out of this population, 393 made it into the sample as follows: 126(32%) from the faculty of Arts and Education, 98(25%) from Applied Social Sciences, 63(16%) from Science and Technology and 106(27%) from the Faculty of Commerce and Law. Results show that generally resources were made available for the weekend school tutorials. However, transport from regional centre to venue was a problem. Most students benefitted from tutorials through sharing ideas. However, documentary evidence shows that only a few students attended tutorials due distance to the tutorial centre which was considered a challenge. Inadequate tutor preparation also paved way to non attendance. Inadequate tutorial hours per semester per course was another of the several problems raised by the students. The study recommended that ZOU should increase in the number of weekend school tutorial hours per semester to a minimum of ten tutorial hours per course per semester. Because modules are an important type of educational media in distance education, ZOU should ensure that all course modules are available for all the courses. Programme Coordinators need to thoroughly supervise tutors thoroughly.

Key words: Open and distance learning, Effectiveness, school tutorials.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important instructional elements of contemporary distance education is interaction and this has traditionally been through face-to-face as faculty and students share information and ideas. It is widely held that a high level of interaction is desirable and positively affects the effectiveness of any distance education course. However, it is not clear from research or evaluation data that interaction does improve the quality of learning in most distance education programmes (Kearsley, 1995). Open and distance learning is characterised by less face-to-face interaction between the tutor and the students. This has created challenges resulting in student disgruntlement. It is for this reason that it has become necessary for the study to establish

the students' views on the effectiveness of weekend school tutorials with a view to finding out their perceptions on this issue. One of the major contentious issues is the too few hours set aside for these weekend tutorial sessions.

Background of the study

Open and Distance Learning has been hailed the world over for being the panacea towards solving the challenges associated with manpower shortages particularly in the Third World states. Lack of capacity to produce adequate graduates through conventional means brought to the fore the issue of Open and Distance learning as conventional educational institutions can not cope with the demand for education and training of a greater magnitude. In Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) was established for that purpose. ZOU is a state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe, established on 1st March 1999 through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:20. Currently, in 2011, ZOU has four faculties; the Faculty of Arts and Education, the Faculty of Science and Technology, the Faculty of Commerce and Law and the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, offering over 60 diploma and degree programmes. Students are drawn from the country's ten geographical provinces as well as the Virtual Region encompassing students outside the country. To foster interaction between students and tutors and between students and students, ZOU has in place a number of initiatives meant to bring the different groups together regardless of geographical distance. Some of these initiatives include making use of self directed instructional materials such as the printed module, CD-ROM, e-learning and weekend school tutorials. However, ODL institutions in some developed nations have now resorted to the use of up to date sophisticated technology which then includes on-line support, real time chat and e-mail discussion groups with staff and students (Ray and Day, 1998; Peat and Helland, 2002), among others. At the ZOU the main form of interaction is through weekend tutorials which are held three times per semester per course. It is in light of this background, therefore, that this study sought to establish the students' views on the effectiveness of weekend school tutorials.

Research questions

The present study aimed at answering the following research questions:

1. Are the resources meant for the face to face tutorials per course per semester adequate?
2. What benefits are derived by the student from the face-to-face interaction during weekend tutorials?
3. What are the challenges affecting the students in their attempt to benefit from attendance of weekend tutorials?
4. How best could attendance at weekend school tutorials be boosted for the benefit of the students?

Literature review

What are weekend school tutorials?

wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn defines a tutorial as a method of transferring knowledge used as a part of teaching/learning. According to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutorial, a tutorial is a self-paced learning exercise; a lesson prepared so that students can learn at their own speed, at their convenience. It can also be defined as an interactive class taught by a tutor to students at university or college, individually or in small groups.

A tutorial is also defined as a small class of one or only a few students, in which a member of the academic staff gives focus to individuals' work. This study defines a tutorial as a small interactive class with a tutor that allows discussion and clarification of material covered.

Weekend school tutorials at the Zimbabwe Open University

These are face to face meetings between the tutors and learners and between learners and learners. They replace the distance teacher (the module) and help in breaking the isolation of the distance learner. These are not lecturers but encompass techniques such as group discussions, presentations, demonstrations and explanations. The tutor, during the tutorials merely assists the students to understand the teaching in the

module and helps students to understand the course teaching in the module and to understand the course structure and clears the grey areas students might have accumulated during their reading or studying of the module. During tutorials the tutor has the following roles to undertake: She/he

1. offers study guidance
2. explains assignments
3. gives feedback on assignments for example, on items they need to work hard on
4. adds onto the ideas provided by the learner so that there is full coverage of topics
5. answers questions raised by the learner in particular sections of the modules
6. facilitates learning through guiding the learners as they engage in group discussions
7. helps learners to identify sources of material when these are not easily available.

Therefore, you can notice the difference between tutorials and lectures. Three tutorials of two hours each are held per semester per course. Each course has six contact hours per semester.

In Tutorial 1, the students receive the course outline unit by unit, guidance on assignments writing, study skills and where to get information. The tutor also advises the learner on how to use the module for learning purposes. During Tutorial 2, the tutor attends to challenges the learners are facing and also gives feedback on assignments through purposeful comments that are meant to improve the learners' learning (Koul, 1976). The last session, Tutorial 3 is devoted to revision and preparation for examinations that come at the end of each semester. It is therefore, imperative that learners attend all the sessions owing to their significance.

Previous research studies

In this section of the study we review literature that is concerned with the conduct of weekend face-to-face tutorials. We focus mainly on the adequacy of resources for the face to face tutorials and the benefits derived by the students from attending these face-to-face weekend tutorials. We also look at the challenges affecting the students in their attempt to benefit from attendance of weekend tutorials and lastly, we look at how best attendance at weekend school tutorials can be arranged in order to benefit the students.

Benefits derived by the students from attending face-to-face weekend tutorials

A research by Barker (1995) indicates that interaction is important for a variety of types of learning, learner satisfaction, and persistence of distance students. Further strengthening the importance of studying interaction was Jackson (1994) who described interaction as one of the central issues related to distance education today. In 1993, Acker and McCain made the following statements concerning the importance of interaction through face-to-face. They stated that "interaction is central to the social expectations of education in the broadest sense and is in itself a primary goal of the larger educational process and that feedback between learner and teacher is necessary for education to develop and improve" (Acker & McCain, 1993).

Face –to-face interaction is an educational topic which has been studied for several decades. Flanders (1970), as well as others, has published entire books dedicated to the subject of interaction. Although these books offer useful insights into the study, they limit themselves to the study of "classroom" or face-to-face interaction.

Moore (1989) further states that interaction is divided it into three categories: learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction. A fourth component of interaction was defined by distance education researchers as learner-interface interaction which takes into account the interaction that occurs when a learner must use intervening technologies to communicate with the content, negotiate meaning, and validate knowledge with the instructor and other learners (Hillman et al, 1994).

Hillman et al (1994) demonstrate that the majority of students in a study they carried out indicated that they felt that experiences in a face-to-face learner-instructor interaction were moderately to very positively related

to their success in their learning. They also indicated that they felt instructor interest, teaching skills, and personal interaction with the students aided the learning process. Opportunities to discuss assignments and/or course work with instructors was viewed positively by all three groups of students.

The majority of respondents taking part in courses via videotape felt that they felt inclined to real face to face interaction which they viewed as very important to their learning. However, a few of the respondents indicated that being physically separated from the tutor did not pose a considerable challenge to learning (Howard, 2009; Hillman et al, 1994). They also indicated that they felt personal enthusiasm for their class interaction was moderately to very positively related to their learning.

Some students indicated that they did not feel that learning individually was a hindrance to their education but others indicated a dislike for being the only student at a particular learning site or being physically separated from the tutor.

The effect of poor instructor use of education technology was felt to be slightly to extremely negative by each of the groups of learners who felt that this dissuaded them from attending tutorials. The students also felt that talking during class, being ignored by the instructor, and the instructor treating some class members differently than others was also positively related to their non attendance of tutorials thus they detested face-to-face interaction (Howard, 2009; Hillman et al, 1994).

Breuch (2005) argues for face-to-face interaction as opposed to online interaction when he argues that because contributions to online chats are slowed by technology, they result in conversations appearing differently than they would in face-to-face environments.

Sapp and Simon (2005) arguing for face-to-face interaction remark that there are multiple issues introduced by online learning systems. For example, the presence of non-verbal cues common in the traditional classroom face-to-face tutorials, cause instructors to be at ease in determining student engagement and understanding. There is more social interaction, and such interaction is attributed to creating a conducive learning atmosphere. Sapp and Simon (2005:478) assert that "increased interpersonal contact between teachers and students (and among students) is necessary" and that, though online synchronous elements may facilitate some additional opportunities for interaction, they may insufficiently "simulate real-time interaction," which they imply contributes to a sense of "interpersonal camaraderie," the students' level of learning motivation, and their development of interpersonal skills critical for personal and professional development.

Stodel et al (2006) argue that face-to-face classroom interaction enables students to be energised by the classroom discussions and interaction. They further argue that there is robust dialogue and students perceive others and in turn they are also perceived. Furthermore, students get to know classmates and develop real-world friendships. Face-to-face tutorials also enabled the use of non-verbal cues which are used to avoid misinterpretation of ideas as opposed to a situation where students are only confronted with the module. The face-to-face tutorials also enabled students to freely speak among themselves rather than always being required to write down notes (Stodel et al., 2006).

Howard (2009) argues that face-to-face interaction in ODL programmes would likely help instructors to better accommodate learners who would normally have preferred or been more inclined to succeed in the traditional classroom. The face-to-face medium would also give tutors an opportunity to ease those uncomfortable students who find the content of instruction very unfamiliar.

According to a research study conducted by Sapp and Simon (2005) online courses needed to foster more interpersonal accountability, hence the absence of human mediation and interaction through face-to-face negatively affected levels of procrastination and motivation among students who would not have their tutor

advising them physically on the need to do their work in time. Kibby (2007) concurs by remarking that the face-to-face experience may carry with it a higher sense of responsibility and provides students with more built-in incentives to perform and complete course assignments.

Challenges hindering students benefiting from their attendance of weekend tutorials

According to Howard (2009), actual face-to-face meeting demands class space that may or may not be available. In addition, students who are either bound to unpredictable schedules or reside geographical zones far away from the source of instruction, in the case of ZOU, far away from regional and district centres, and may not be able to participate in a live face to face interaction.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the descriptive survey design which is essentially appropriate on areas where human perceptions are required. Due to its ability to solicit information deeply buried in the minds and attitudes of people, and its ability to reveal the true present state of affairs in a given set up, the design is seen to be the most appropriate. Three instruments to be used in data collection are the questionnaire, interview schedule and documentary evidence to enable triangulation in order to enhance validity and reliability of data.

Population

A total of 982 students who were duly registered during the January to June 2011 semester from all the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Region made up the population. Out of these 393 made it into the sample as follows: 126(32%) from the faculty of Arts and Education, 98(25%) from Applied Social Sciences, 63(16%) from Science and Technology and 106(27%) from the Faculty of Commerce and Law as shown in Figure 1 below.

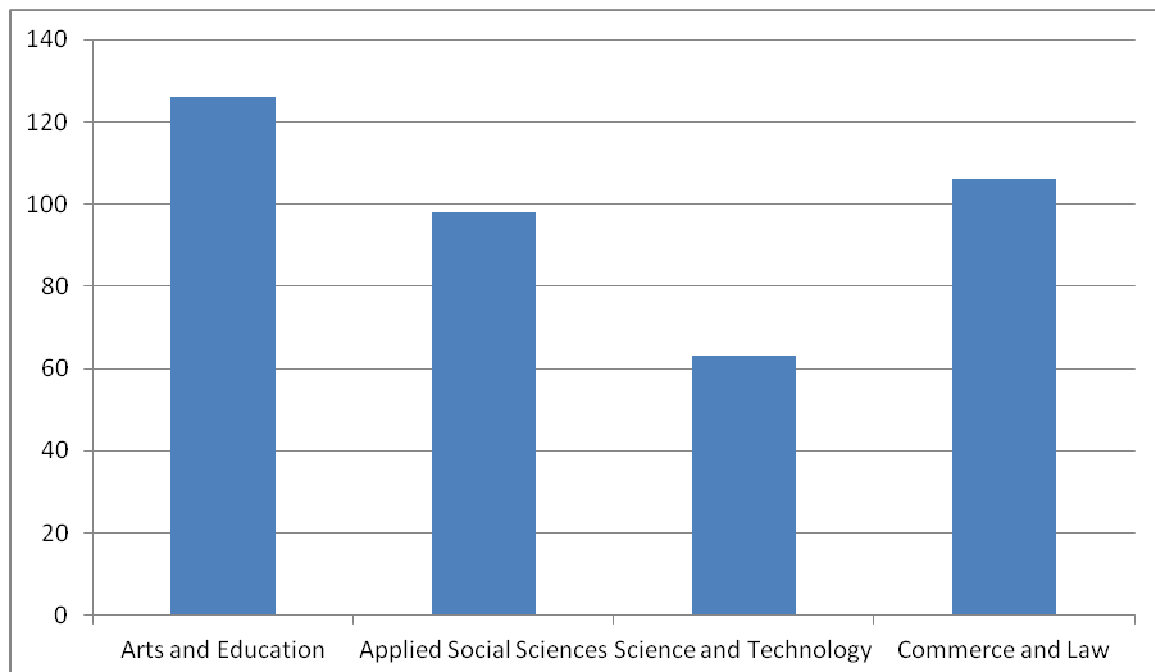


Fig 1: Distribution of the population by faculty

Sampling and sampling procedure

In order to accord each of the four faculties proportional representation, the current study adopted the stratified random sampling. The four faculties made up the four strata from where a sample was chosen. Each of the respondents from the four strata was then chosen through simple random sampling at the rate of 20% per strata. This therefore, implied that out of a total population of 982, 393 were chosen into the sampling.

Data presentation and discussion

Data for the current study were gathered form a sample of 393 respondent students from the four faculties of the Zimbabwe Open University. Hereunder, we present the results of the survey in tables.

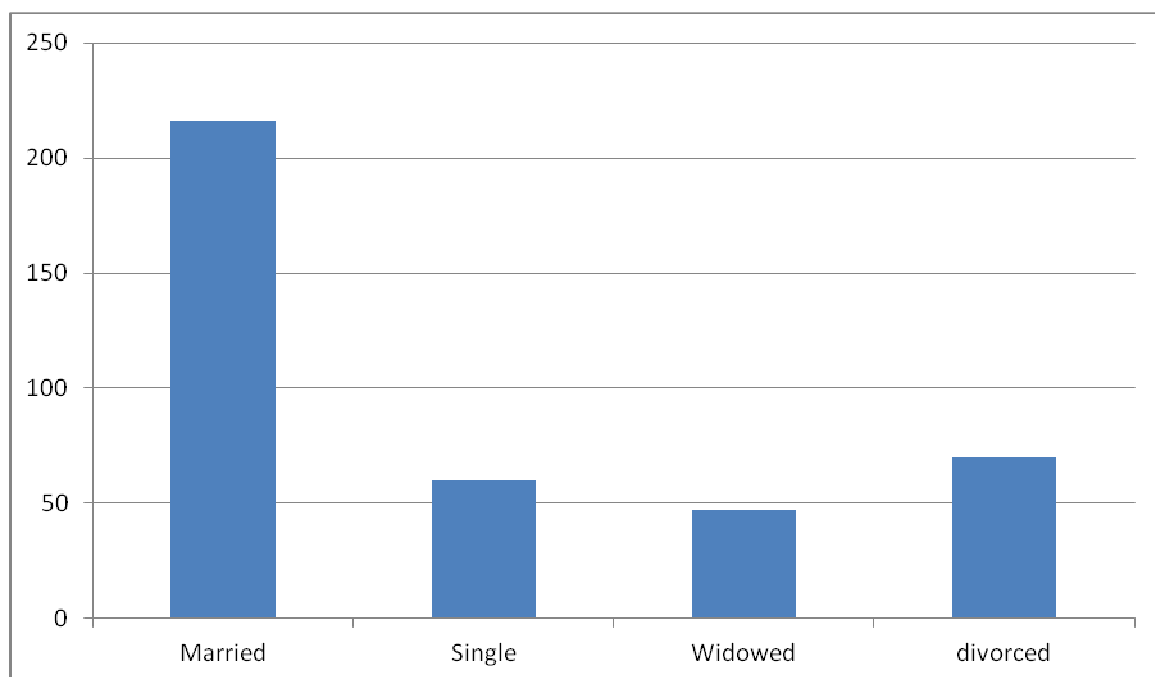


Fig 2: Distribution of respondents by marital status

Figure 2 shows the majority of the respondents were married. These were 216 and constituted 55% of the population. Sixty (15%) were single while 47 (12%) were widowed and 70 (18%) were divorced. The characteristics shown in the table are typical of open and distance learning students. As such they have so many social demands on them which consequently affect their studies positively or negatively.

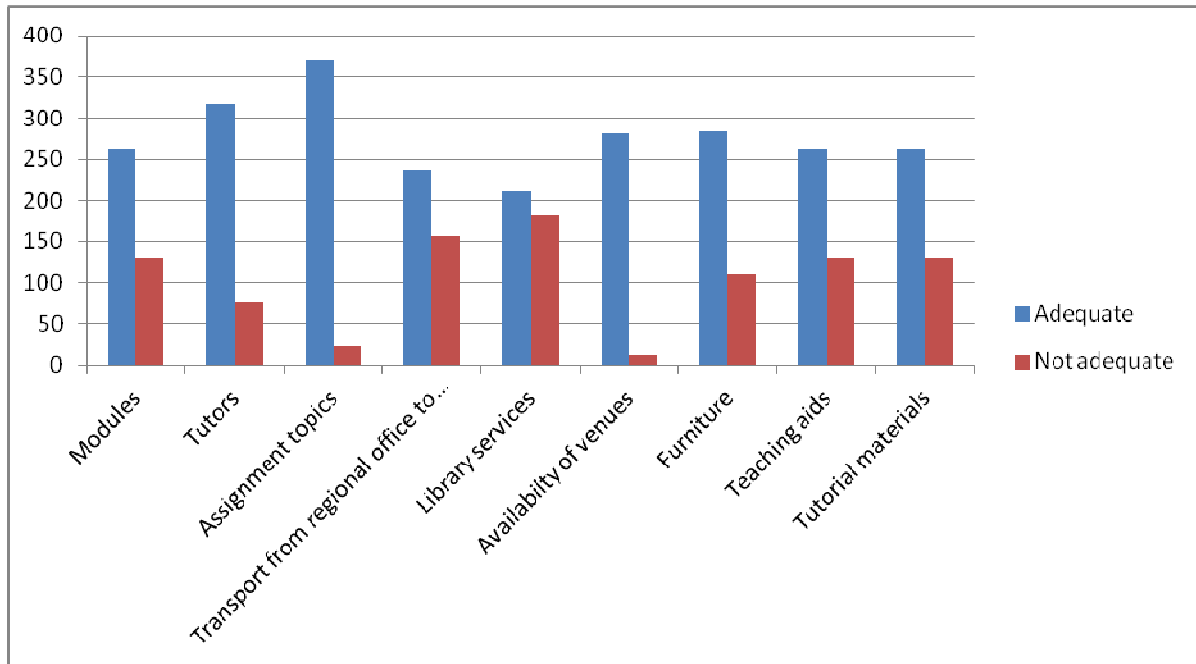


Fig 3: Respondents' views on the adequacy of resources for the face to face tutorials

Fig 3 shows that generally resources were made available for the weekend school tutorials. A majority of 263(67%) stated that modules were available with only 130(33%) indicating otherwise. Tutors were available according to 318(81%). Observations have also revealed the same as in some instances tutors outnumber the students. Only a minority of 24(6%) indicated they had problems in accessing assignment topics during tutorials. According to them only a few were made available and those who fail to get them are instructed to do their own photocopying. However, the majority of 393(94%) saw no problems with assignment topics. Transport from regional centre to venue was a problem for 236(60%) who failed transport should be provided form the centre. Students who get to the regional centre to do some administrative undertakings such as paying fees and collecting modules need to get to the venue of tutorials since the two are separated. Library services were adequately provided for 212(54%) while 181(46%) indicated that the services was not available to them. The major problem indicated by those who failed to get the service was that both librarians were not available as they were also attending tutorials as students. The majority of 281(97%) felt the availability of venues was not a problem. However, a minority of 12(3%) thought otherwise. Furniture was seen to be adequate by 283(72%) while teaching aids were adequate according to 263(67%). One hundred and thirty (33%) thought teaching aids were not adequate. Tutorial materials were adequate for 263(67%) students while another 130(33%) felt tutorial materials were inadequate.

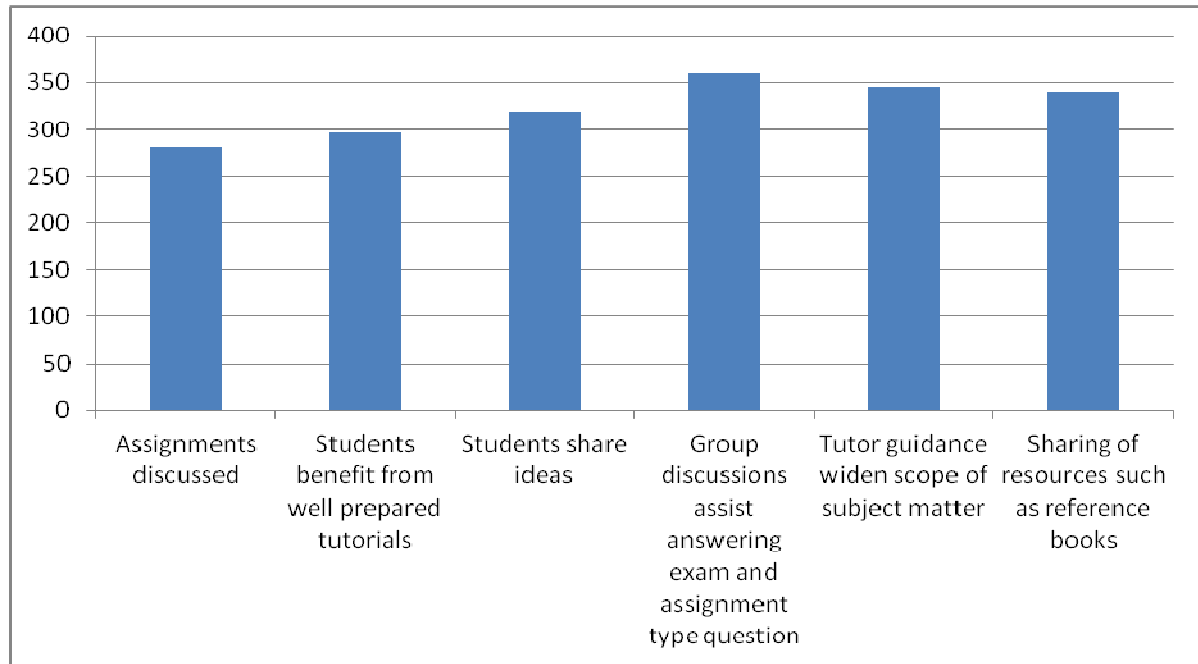


Fig 4: Respondents' views on the benefits derived from the face-to-face interaction during weekend tutorials

Figure 4 presents the respondents' views on the benefits of attending tutorials. The majority of 280(71%) indicated that assignments were discussed to the advantage of those attending the tutorials. Kibby (2007) concurs by remarking that the face-to-face experience may carry with it a higher sense of responsibility and provides students with more built-in incentives to perform and complete course assignments. Another 296(75%) students thought they benefitted from well prepared tutorials. Asked to substantiate this claim in an interview one student remarked that most questions that appeared in examinations had their stuff discussed during tutorial sessions. Most of the students, 320(81%) felt tutorials enabled them to share ideas amongst themselves while 360(92%) thought the group discussions they undertook during the tutorials assisted in answering examination and assignment questions. Stodel et al (2006) concur by arguing that face-to-face classroom interaction enables students to be energised by the classroom discussions and interaction. There is robust dialogue and students perceive others and in turn they are also perceived. Students involved in the interviews stated that they gave each other parts of the module and previous examination papers to go and prepare delivery notes. They would then come as a group and make presentations to each other. These findings are in line with findings elsewhere which found out that opportunities to discuss assignments and/or course work with instructors was a cause for students attending tutorial sessions (Hillman et al, 1994; Moore, 1989; Jackson, 1994). These contradict with findings by Howard (2009) and Flanders (1970) who argue that the absence of the tutor did not cause any considerable challenge to learning. However, Sapp and Simon (2005) further assert that tutorials increased interpersonal contact between teachers and students to the benefit of both.

Some 345(88%) felt tutor's guidance at the tutorial sessions helped to widen the scope of the course subject matter presented in the modules. One student during an interview remarked saying "we have benefitted from well prepared tutors. They read widely and present content that is very useful and very often the tutors are widely read." The same opinion was shared by quite a significant number of interviewees (56%). There is sharing of resources such as reference books at the tutorials according to a majority of 340(87%). The same results were replicated in the interview with the majority remarking that various resource books were made available by the various students who attended the tutorials. This variety was shared among the students

hence a diversity of sources and material was made available giving the students the opportunity to compile comprehensive notes.

However, documentary evidence shows that out of 982 registered students at the Zimbabwe Open University, Mashonaland West Region, only 263 turned for the tutorials. Therefore this could imply that there were challenges to their attendance. This then prompted the researchers to find out what some of these challenges are. In Table 4 below we present the findings on the students' views on challenges associated with non attendance at tutorials at the ZOU.

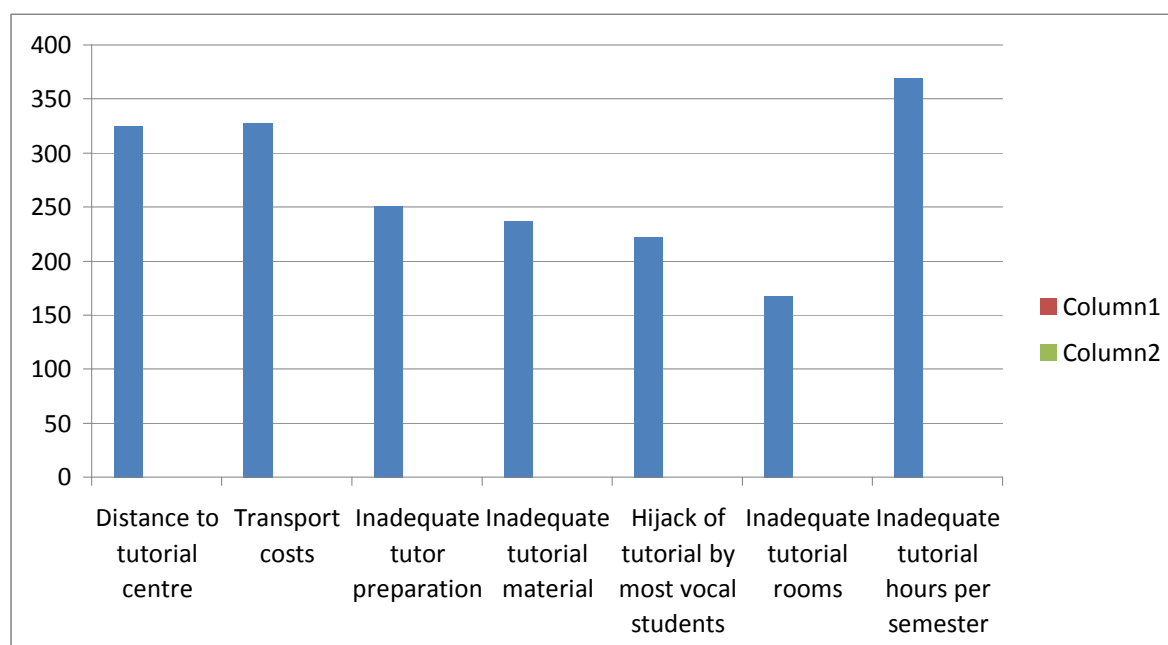


Fig 5: Challenges encountered in weekend school tutorials

Figure 5 shows that distance to the tutorial centre was considered a challenge by 325(83%) while transport costs challenged a majority of 328(84%). Another majority of 251(64) felt inadequate tutor preparation was a challenge encountered at the tutorials. Some students interviewed said that some tutors were of the habit of reading the module without making any other input to the discussion. Such students felt that reading of modules by the tutor does not assist them in any way since they are capable of reading on their own. There was also inadequate tutorial materials according to 237(60%). The results replicate those elsewhere on the effects of poor instructor use of education technology which was felt to dissuade learners from attending tutorials (Hillman et al, 1994: Howard, 2009). A majority of 223(57%) felt the tutorials were hijacked by the most vocal students. Results from the interviews also revealed that group discussions were taken over by those who were talkative but not necessarily relevantly informative and gifted. A majority of 168(43%) felt there was inadequate tutorial rooms at the venue. Probed in the interview on the inadequacy of rooms, a significant number, 45 indicated that at times different programmes were made to learn in the same room. This arrangement paved way for noise as groups could hear what other groups were discussing. There was therefore, interference among groups making it almost impossible to benefit from the noisy arrangement. Inadequate tutorial hours per semester was another of the several problems raised by the students. ZOU currently offers six contact tutorial hours per semester per course. Students interviewed indicated that they could not travel to attend these few hours since it was uneconomic on their part because only learnt a few aspects. One student interviewed suggested that tutorial hours should be increased from the present six per course per semester to ten hours. Under such circumstances, therefore, the vast majority did not find any

reason to attend tutorials. However, contrary to these findings Breuch (2005) advocates for these tutorials as opposed to other modes of learning.

Due to the diminishing numbers of attendees at tutorials, the researchers wanted to find out what strategies could be adopted in order to woo back the students to attend weekend school tutorials. We present the findings in Table 5 below.

Table 1: How best attendance at weekend school tutorials can be boosted for the benefit of the students

Solution	Number	Percentage
Increase the number of weekend school tutorial hours per semester	375	95
Decentralise weekend school venues to district centres	373	95
Ensure availability of modules for each course	375	95
Tutors to be adequately and appropriately prepared for tutorials	240	61
Ensure adequacy of tutorial rooms	235	60
Further help ODL students understand the usefulness of weekend school tutorials	260	66

Table 1 shows that 375(95%) advocated for an increase in the number of weekend school tutorial hours per semester. Generally, interview results seem to concur with the results in the table on contact hours. Students generally require a minimum of ten tutorial hours per course per semester. Owing to distance travelled to tutorial centres, a majority of 373(95%) students felt there was urgent need to decentralise weekend school venues to district centres. According to one interviewed student, decentralisation would help cut expenses drastically thereby ensuring that all tutorials were attended without fail. Because modules were an important type of educational media in distance education, 375(75%) students advocated for the availability of modules for each course. Some student were going without modules and had no starting point, even the course outline, according to some of the remarks obtained in the interviews. According to 240(61%) respondents, tutors need to be adequately and appropriately prepared for tutorials. Some students remarked that tutors were in the habit of giving haphazard deliveries which were indicative of unpreparedness. At most some of such tutors were those that resorted to module reading. In order to avoid group interference, 235(60%) respondents advocated for the provision of adequate tutorial rooms. However, for the majority of those who attended the tutorials, they felt they had benefitted hence they advocated for the Programme Coordinators to help ODL students understand the usefulness of weekend school tutorials.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings presented and discussed above the researchers drew the following conclusions:

- Tutors are available and according observations in some instances tutors outnumber the students who attend the tutorial sessions.
- Transport from regional centre to venue is a problem for students.
- Library services are to large extent provided for.
- The suitability and availability of venues is not a problem.
- Furniture and teaching aids are adequate, but in some instances furniture is not appropriate for the adult learner.
- Tutorial materials are adequate.

From the look of things, it appears resources are generally available in some areas for the weekend school tutorials. There is therefore, need for improvement in areas such as transport, library service, furniture and venue appropriateness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Also based on the findings, the following recommendations are made. It is recommended that:

- ZOU should increase in the number of weekend school tutorial hours per semester to a minimum of ten tutorial hours per course per semester.
- There is urgent need to expedite the decentralisation of weekend school venues to district centres in order to help cut expenses drastically thereby ensuring that all tutorials are attended without fail.
- Because modules are an important type of educational media in distance education, ZOU should ensure that all course modules are available for all the courses.
- Programme Coordinators need to thoroughly supervise tutors to ensure that they are adequately and appropriately prepared for tutorials.
- In order to avoid group interference during tutorials, adequate tutorial rooms should be hired.
- Programme Coordinators should help ODL students understand and appreciate the usefulness of weekend school tutorials.

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