

Lecturer-Students Perceptions on the Effectiveness of the Block Release Programme At A Selected University In Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Block- Release (Part-Time) programme offered at a sampled university in Masvingo in Zimbabwe. The main research question guiding the study was: What is the lecturer-students' views on the effectiveness of the Block-release (part-time) programme? A qualitative research approach employing the case study design was used to explore participants' views on the programme. The target population was the 2016, 2017 and 2018 intakes in the education department and all the lecturers in the education department who are involved in the block-release (part-time) programme. 35 research participants were conveniently sampled for the interviews. Data were generated through in-depth interviews and FGDs with lecturers and students. The major findings from the study were that programme participants were not impressed by the quality of work for block-release students. Research findings also showed that programme participants were not impressed by the inadequate contact time for block-release (part-time) programme and unavailability of teaching/ learning resources. All the participants expressed concern on the timetable and registration process. A few respondents were however impressed by the lecturers' level of accessibility to students during the time that they are off campus. Based on these findings, it was recommended that the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education through ZIMCHE should streamline guidelines on implementation of Block-Release programmes. Public Service Commission to give employees vacation and study leave so that more flexible blocks are provided which do not clash with conventional programmes. Programme coordinators should monitor and supervise the implementation of the block-release programme more closely. Management to provide the necessary support needed in terms of teaching-learning resources required for effective implementation of the programme and also organise staff development programmes on modern methods of content delivery

Key terms: Block-release, lecturer, students, effectiveness, university, contact-time, resources

Date of Submission: 28-10-2020

Date of Acceptance: 09-11-2020

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

With the new knowledge economy emerging worldwide and demand for higher education increasing everywhere including in Zimbabwe, institutions of higher education are changing their teaching methods including ways of delivering course content. This is done in order to cater for the diverse population of students enrolling in higher education by providing increased access, career-oriented programs, and services for older learners. Ramsden (2003) notes that some of the people enrolling in higher education are adults who are already professionals but seek degrees and self-advancement that will, in turn, help restore competitiveness and productivity to the nation's economy. It was noted that since 2000 there has been a dramatic change in the nature of higher education with participation rates greatly increasing leading to the creation of much diversity among the nature of programs offered, student population as well as methods of content delivery by institutions of higher education (Biggs, 2011). Biggs (2011) notes that, flexible modes such as distance learning and the block-format, where learners have classes on campus for compressed shorter periods are increasingly gaining popularity. This observation is true to Zimbabwe with the sampled university in Masvingo which is the focus of this study cited as evidence. The introduction and background section introduces and puts the study into context by conceptualizing higher education. The statement of the problem is given as well as the objectives and questions that guide the study.

Caul (1993) defines higher education as "... comprising all post-secondary education, training and research guidance at institutions authorized as institutions of higher education by state authorities." It includes all the activities a given country deems to be higher education that is, not only those that take place within ordinary universities and graduate schools, but shorter-term education and training courses that are 2-3 years in length, and even correspondence courses that make use of information technology and are targeted at a broad population of students. The National Centre for Education Statistics (2009) views higher education as, all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of higher education by the competent state authorities. From the definitions above, it is apparent that higher education mostly attracts mature-age students. The National Centre for Education Statistics, (2009) further highlights that enrolment levels among adult students have been consistently on the rise for the past 30 years, with recent figures indicating that adult students account for 40% of total post-secondary enrolment. According to Hussar and Bailey (2011), the greatest increase in post-secondary enrolment from 2009 to 2020 is projected to be among students who are 25 and older. Those students who are between the ages of 25 to 34 years old have the highest projected increase of 21%, whereas traditional-age students (between 18 and 24) are projected to increase by only 9% (Hussar & Bailey, 2011).

In the United States, studies have also shown that there has been an increase in non-traditional learners (over the age of 24) enrolling as greater numbers of students have enrolled in higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The above scenarios point to the fact that the greater proportion of students enrolling for higher education are adults who are probably trying to balance study and other responsibilities such as caring for a family or working professionals who are enrolling in part-time programmes only, while working full-time. According to Kohl (2010), several factors including the need for updated skills to compete in a knowledge-based economy, a change in demographics due to immigration, technological advances bringing the classroom to the student, and a globalization of the higher education system are some of the reasons compelling adults to return to school. These adults however require more flexible modes of content delivery which fit with demands at work and at home and so the traditional day-time teaching practices in the form of weekly lectures and tutorials are no longer convenient for every student as many cannot fulfill the condition of long physical presence in lectures. Gordon (2011) noted that non-traditional students in the United States balanced multiple adult roles, which often resulted in severe time constraints that impeded academic participation. Chao, DeRocco and Flynn (2009) concur with Gordon when they reported that the greatest barriers to access higher education for non-traditional students were time constraints associated with work and family obligations, course location and course schedules.

In trying to increase access and be able to cater for the growing enrolments into higher education, institutions of higher education worldwide have provided different modes of learning that are tailor made to suit the different clientele (Dowd, 2003). Dowd (2003) notes that new innovations in course delivery methods that offer convenience of time, location, and instructional modality such as distance learning through online delivery modes and block-format (part-time) programmes address student characteristics and realities (Dowd, 2003). Ramsden, (2003) explains the central focus of distance education as the placement of the student at home or at work and the justification of the abandonment of education of interpersonal, face-to-face communication. Herselman and Hay (2005:394) concur with Ramsden (2003) and say that "today's learners live all over the world and they are reached on remote campuses, in government and business workplaces, and most probably directly in their homes." Gaubatz (2003) defines block-release (part-time) mode of teaching as very large chunks of teaching time, for example whole day sessions, offered in week-long mode, two or three-week long mode and weekend mode.

Both modes of content delivery suggested above are increasingly gaining popularity with universities worldwide because of their perceived advantages (Basheka et al., 2016). Block release is preferred for providing flexibility to students experiencing hardship undertaking studies due to work schedules. It is also considered to be effective for even those students without jobs because it provides them with ample time to engage in other activities that may not be academic (Basheka et al., 2016). There is overwhelming evidence that block release is being implemented globally, regionally and nationally. At global level, Swansea University in the United Kingdom offers a variety of programmes on block release as shown on its website, www.swansea.ac.uk, University of Derby also in the United Kingdom, has programmes offered on block-release as reflected on its website, www.derby.ac.uk. Universities in Australia offer block-release (part-time) modes of content delivery as well. This is supported by Burton and Nesbit (2002) who aver that the top five academically ranked universities in Australia (Australian National University, University of Melbourne, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, and University of New South Wales) offer block mode courses in multiple different departments. The International University and Colleges in Malaysia as well as Russian Education Centre in Russia are among some of the higher education institutions offering block release programmes (Burton and Nesbit, 2002). A look at websites for different universities regionally, shows that quite a number of them offer education through

block- release (part-time) programmes. Examples of such universities are, University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, ([http: www.wits.ac.za/applications](http://www.wits.ac.za/applications)), University of Johannesburg (www.uj.ac.za/faculties/cbe/PublicManagement-andGovernance/Pages/courses.aspx) and University of Capetown, (www.utc.ac.za) in South Africa. Garrison and Kanuka (2004:96) cited by Basheka et al. (2016) argue that universities must adopt appropriate learning modalities in the delivery of all academic programmes to meet the needs and expectations of the varied student categories. They note that Uganda Technology and Management University (UTAMU) offers block release programmes in two semesters at the end of which students write examinations (Basheka et al., 2016). At national level, Bindura University of Science Education offers block release programmes as advertised on its website (www.buse.ac.zw). Similarly, Africa University also offers degree programmes on block release as highlighted on its website (www.africau.edu/programmes/test.html). Other universities in Zimbabwe that offer degree programmes on block release include Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Midlands State University to mention but a few.

In the block-release (part-time) programme at the sampled university, programme participants come to campus for lecturer- directed learning during designated days of the vacation school period after which they withdraw to their work places or homes. In the periods between the study blocks, they cover some course content and do course assignments while at their work places or homes. They interact with their lecturers through e-mail, cell phones or by appointment. Commenting on different modes of programmes, Dowd, (2003) notes that course innovation without maintenance of quality standards could actually prevent genuine educational access because substandard educational options would result. This study thus, looks at lecturer-students' perceptions on the effectiveness of block release (part-time) programme at a sampled university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe with the view to recommending strategies to improve the programme.

Statement of the problem

From the background to the study, it appears the block- release approach is gaining popularity and has become one of the modes of conducting lectures at most universities abroad and most if not all universities in Zimbabwe. The question that begs the answer is: does the popularity of block release mode of tuition come with quality and effectiveness? This research is therefore aimed at establishing the views of lecturers and students on the effectiveness of the block-release (part-time) programme at a selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

Major research question

How do lecturers and students view the effectiveness of the block-release programme?

Sub research questions

1. What are the views of lecturers and students on the adequacy of contact time for block-release lectures?
2. What are the lecturer-students' views on the quality of work produced by block-release students?
3. How do lecturers and students view the availability of teaching- learning resources?
4. What strategies can be implemented to improve quality of education offered through block release (part-time) programme?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were to:

- a) Determine lecturer-students' views on the adequacy of contact time block-release lectures.
- b) Examine lecturer-students' views on the quality of work produced by block-release students.
- c) Establish lecturer-students' views on the availability and impact of teaching-learning resources on students and lecturers' work.
- d) Recommend strategies to improve quality of education offered through block release (part-time) programme.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework provides a grounding or an anchor for the literature review, and most importantly the methods and analysis (Lysaght, 2011). It is a guide for logically developing and understanding the different, yet interconnected parts of the literature review (Grant, 2014).

This study is guided by Parsons (1970)'s System Theory. According to Parsons (1970), Systems theory as a sociological paradigm, is attractive because of its universalism, conceiving a multi-faceted approach to the analysis of social systems and applicable to a whole range of problems relevant for sociology. The perceptions of lectures and students which is the focus of this study are a sociological issue that involves studying the whole system within an organization. The use of systems theory for the current study therefore becomes justifiable. Parsons (1970) argues that systems theory not only allows us to take a better look at a problem, but it also helps

to identify why there is a problem (Giddens and Sutton,2013). For Parsons (1970), the out puts of a system are results of the interplay between certain factors affecting the operations of the system. To Parsons (1970) to understand the whole, one needs to understand the parts making up the whole. Parsons agrees with Bertalanffy's (1968) holistic approach to studying a system which makes the theory relevant to the current study, in that in trying to ascertain lecturer-students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the block-release programme at the sampled university, the researcher investigates aspects or elements that relate to the implementation of the programme, the infrastructure, availability of learning resources, contact time for lectures and quality of work offered to students among other things. If there are problems in the way the programme is being implemented, the systems approach helps the researcher to identify and understand these as she conducts research.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hart (2018) defines literature review as the analysis, critical evaluation and synthesis of existing knowledge relevant to a research problem. According to Hart (2018) literature is a key source which provides the materials to justify a particular approach to the topic, the selection of methods, and demonstrates that this research contributes something new to the understanding of the world. Hart(2018) further reiterates that literature review plays a critical role in discovering important variables relevant to the topic, synthesizing and gaining new perspective, identifying relationship between ideas and practice, establishing the context of the topic or problem, rationalizing the significance of the problem; understanding the structure of the subject, and relating ideas and theory to applications (Hart, 2018). Literature review, according to Hart (2018), can identify the gaps or paucity of information relevant to specific areas in which the researcher can significantly contribute to the literature in the field. According to Shunda (2007), literature review is a compilation, classification or summary and evaluation of what other researchers have written or know about a particular topic. It is a prelude to further research, a digest of scholarly opinion (Shunda, 2007). The following section focuses on literature review around the sub questions.

The adequacy of contact time for block-release programme.

This study aims to explore lecturer-students' perceptions on the block-release programme at a selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. One of the sub-questions guiding this study focuses on the views and sentiments of lecturers and students on the adequacy of contact time for block-release programme. Block-release programmes can be delivered in a number of ways but the two main models are the Integrated or Infill and Free-standing or bespoke (Pollard, Newton and Hillage, 2012). The sampled university adopted the former model where there is a mixture of full and block-release or part-time students. Chinhoyi University of Technology Guide for writing Modules for Block-release students (2015) adequately explained how block-release lectures are conducted. Block-release students attend lectures in a condensed time period and most of the time are not on campus. It has been observed that face-to-face student-lecturer interaction is limited in this mode of course delivery. Pollard et al, (2012) corroborate that for block-release students, time available for class-based learning is limited hence should be used to the best effect. It has been established that block-release lecturers on campus are condensed with activities such as lectures, seminar presentations to mention but a few (Higher Education Authority, 2012). This observation implies that for block-release programmes a large amount of content is covered in a short space of time that some students may find it difficult to absorb. In a case study on block-release programmes by Pollard et al (2012), one lecturer reported that;

With part-time students you can design courses in such a way that each session builds on the other and set independent study tasks to maximize the value of face to face sessions, the students treat class time as precious.

This may mean that contact time for block release programme is limited prompting programme coordinators to congest the time table. Although a similar study was carried out at Africa University in Manicaland, Zimbabwe, no such study was conducted in Masvingo hence this study was carried out to assess lecturers and students' perceptions on the efficacy of block-release programme.

According to Wade (1994) contact time is when both students and lecturers meet face to face to share information in their quest for knowledge. Wade (1994) notes that for the lecturer, contact time is a golden opportunity to meet with the students, delivering the teaching material effectively with the aim to ensure that they are learning what is being taught. In Zimbabwe, as cited by the then Minister of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture David Coltart in an article in the Chronicle of 29 April 2010, low pass rates for learners in both primary and secondary schools were attributed to inadequate contact time with teachers. The minister expressed that the government had no money to pay teachers adequate salaries and that had seen them spending the better half of the school term on strike leaving students unattended. In this regard, Nagel (1992) notes that, quality education is established during the pedagogical meeting between the teacher, student and the content that is carefully planned to achieve the objectives of the course. In the same vein, Kemp (2007) cited in Makombe et al (2016) indicates that exposing the learner to a variety of teaching methods during contact enables him or her to easily

comprehend course material which enhances attainment of learning outcomes. Stressing the importance of contact time, Freeman (1993) had this to say, "Quality products in schools, as in business, come from quality processes and systems during contact with teachers." Heneveld and Craig (1995) agree with Freeman (1993) when they argue that the teaching-learning process should not only rely on lecture method with chalk, duster, and chalkboard as in the traditional classroom teaching where there is hardly any scope for the children to interact with the teacher, teaching-learning materials and the teaching learning environment, where teaching becomes very monotonous and students have to mostly rely on rote learning. They elaborated that teaching-learning process should be quality time for children and their teachers. From the above information it implies therefore that contact time is a very critical element for programme effectiveness. Thus, this study will solicit among others views and sentiments of lecturers and students on the adequacy of contact time for block-release lectures.

Quality of work in block-release programmes

The second sub-question guiding this study focuses on the views of the participants on the quality of block-release tuition. This entails quality of lectures delivered, work given to students as assignments, in class tests, presentations as well as the final product of the teaching-learning process, the graduates. Quality in higher education institutions has become critical in recent years that institutions have created a quality assurance division to ensure services provided by these institutions are of high quality. In addition, Ministries of Higher education in many countries the world-over have set up a regulatory body to regulate the programmes offered by Universities and colleges as a way of ensuring quality of education offered (Machumu & Kasanga; 2014). In Zimbabwe the regulatory body for programmes in higher education institutions is the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). ZIMCHE was created through an Act of parliament (Chapter 25:27) promulgated in 2006 (Garwe, 2014). The mandate of ZIMCHE is to promote and coordinate programmes offered by institutions of Higher education. It also acts as a regulator in determining and maintaining standards of teaching, academic quality and research in Universities and colleges. It can be drawn therefore that ZIMCHE is a gatekeeper of standards in higher education institutions, thus assisting universities and colleges to improve their standards. Against this backdrop, one of the questions that begs an answer in the current study is: what is the lecturer-students' views on the quality of the block-release programme offered by the selected university? Put differently does the block-release programme at the sampled university meet the quality standards expected by ZIMCHE?

Machumu and Kasanga (2014) opine that if quality is not properly practiced, higher education institutions cannot survive the competition around the world. CHE and AfrQAN (2012) suggest that higher education institutions can ensure quality by improving students' welfare and support system, monitor staff teaching, students learning and promoting quality research and publication. Machumu and Kasanga (2014) further revealed that low quality graduates have been produced in several countries both developed and developing. The evidence of low-quality graduates is demonstrated by lack of competences and employability skills exhibited by graduates (Machumu and Kasanga, 2014). Thus, African Virtual University (2012) observes that the rationale for quality assurance in higher education is to ensure that institutions effectively deliver education, training research and community services of high quality as well as imparting a range of graduate skills necessary for social and economic development. Quality education therefore connotes high standard of education services provided by schools, colleges or universities. Pollard et al, 's (2012) study on block-release programmes in England established that some universities were reluctant to support block-release programmes due to concerns relating to cost-benefit analysis of the programme compared to fulltime programmes as well as issues to do with perceived risks to quality and reputation. This finding implies that the quality of block-release programmes may be compromised due to attitudinal tendencies of university management towards the programme. Contrary to Pollard et al (2012) findings, Higher Education Authority (HEA)'s (2012) study in Ireland on part-time and flexible higher education, revealed that some universities supported block-release programmes adequately to the extent of establishing dedicated desk for block-release students to be guided on provision of services and facilities. Thus, one student in this study expressed satisfaction of the services provided as captured in the excerpt below;

The commitment of the University to my course is unquestionable and the help and guidance provided is exemplary. I have found a significant part of the course content so far very interesting; it is new as well as challenging.

It can be drawn from the findings of HEA's (2012) that if block-release programme is well planned students can get the value for money. How do lecturers and students view the quality of services offered to block-release students as well as the quality of work produced by the students? This question was interrogated in this study with a view to suggesting strategies to improve the quality of graduates of block-release programme.

A number of studies (HEA.2012; Machumu & Kasanga, 2014; Pollard et al, 2012; King, 2008) suggested a myriad of strategies to improve the quality of services and hence products of block-release programme. Some of the suggested strategies include the following;

1. Adopting flexible delivery on campus, at university centers, in cyberspace or a combination of these in order to encourage growth and participation of the students
2. Flexible systems and financial support which recognizes the importance of block-release or flexible study.
3. Flexible opening times for facilities such as the library, cafes, food shops, IT services to allow block-release students access out of normal hours
4. Clear communication regarding expectations and guidelines for part-time students about timetable and form of assessment
5. Block-release students need consistent and early communication in the event of changes to the timetables or venues as they make complicated decisions in order to attend lectures
6. Ensure that block-release courses meet market needs, that is courses should meet the expectations of employers, employees and other would-be block-release students

This study explores among other things strategies implemented by the sampled university to ensure block-release students get the services they deserve. Thus, the quality of content delivered by lectures, quality of work produced by lecturers, quality of work given to students and facilities availed for block-release students were scrutinized.

According to Culter (1999), from an educational standpoint, quality is about delivering what was promised. It is about focusing all the school's efforts and resources on the learners. Quality education is seen by Chinapah (1997) as, "a process of ensuring that a learner who enters an educational programme exits with the requisite standard of competences or outcomes set." Ross (1990) sees quality education as, "the provision of basic educational skills that human beings need for their survival and developing their intellectual potential to improve the quality of their lives." Quality of work is therefore determined by the skills and competences displayed by the learner at the end of a programme. Liston (1999) argues that low levels of an institution's internal efficiency would hamper the achievement of the identified educational objectives, hence this study sought to analyse the internal efficiency of the sampled university by soliciting views of both lecturers and students on the effectiveness of the block-release programme offered by the school of education at the sampled University.

Availability of teaching-learning resources to support block-release programmes

This sub-question aims to explore the extent to which institutions of higher education that offer block-release programmes provide adequate teaching learning resources. A number of studies (Okango et al, 2015; Hightower et al, 2011, Johnson et al, 2005) established a link between teaching learning resources and quality of education availed to learners. Thus, this study also interrogates the issue of availability of teaching learning resources that aim to assist block-release students at a selected university in Masvingo with a view to assessing the efficacy of the programme. Owoko (2010) observes that the term resources do not only refer to teaching methods and materials but also to the time available for instruction, the knowledge and skills of teachers acquired through training and experience. In addition, Okongo, Ngao, and Nyongesa (2015) opine that adequacy of teaching-learning resources refers to acceptable quality and quantities of material resources, physical facilities and human resources. The resources should be availed by institutions to facilitate teaching and learning. To this end Padmanabhan (2001) asserts that adequacy of teaching-learning resources determines the educational system's efficacy. He further elaborates that scarcity of textbooks, libraries and physical facilities constrain educational systems from responding fully to the needs of learners (Padmanabhan, 2001). Padmanabhan (2001) therefore suggests that to raise the quality of education, its efficiency and productivity, learning materials should be provided adequately. One of the questions that this study sought to answer is: Are the block-release students at the selected university catered for in terms of teaching-learning resources?

Lyons (2012) connotes that learning is a complex activity that involves interplay of students' motivation, physical facilities, teaching resources and skills of teaching the curriculum. Teaching and learning resources that have been identified to be crucial for effective learning of students include material resources, human resources such as teachers, lecturers and support staff as well as physical facilities for instance laboratories, libraries, and classrooms (Adeogun, 2001).

A study by Okango et al (2015) in Kenya on the availability of teaching-learning resources on the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school centers, revealed that inadequate teaching-learning resources affected the implementation of inclusive education and recommended for more funding for the procurement of teaching-learning resources. Although this study focused on teaching learning resources in pre-schools while the current study focuses on a programme offered at university level, both studies look at the impact of resources on the quality of education which is critical to explore and recommend strategies to improve

the capacity of educational institutions to procure teaching -learning resources. Regarding provision of teaching learning resources for block-release students, Boorman et al (2006) observed that, there are costs to the institution for instance keeping premises such as the library, canteen open over extended hours. This may mean that some institutions of higher learning do not provide block-release students with the needed support due to costs associated with such provisions. It has however been noted that though provision of services like canteen and library services over extended hours is costly they are necessary for block-release students, whose timetable is normally congested (Boorman et al 2006). In the same vein, Fray, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009) opine that higher education institutions today provide a range of services aimed at supplementing the role of academic tutors and these include online resources, centers for academic writing, library and information services. This subject was explored in this study to establish the preparedness of the selected university to support block-release students.

Ozdemir's (2016) study on the relationship between quality of teaching and learning resources with student achievement at Gaziantep University identified four components of higher educational institutions which should be catered for to ensure quality in these institutions. The four components are:

1. Physical and technological environment. This component includes things like laboratory equipment or facilities, library services and lecture theatres
2. Administrative environment. This entails availability of quality information, quality of skills and competencies, quality of the courses offered
3. Educational environment. This refers to student course content, availability of quality teaching material, and availability of quality educational network resources
4. Psychological environment. This last component of the educational environment entails peace and security in educational institutions which is ensured through collaboration or teamwork with other students as well as support from academic and administrative staff. The study also revealed that the quality of education and services of higher educational institutions is associated with student achievement (Ozdemir, 2016). A classroom equipped with proper lights, fan or air conditioning, and other basic facilities will make students feel comfortable and may encourage them to participate in the learning activities (Shaheen, Cheng, Audrey & Lim, 2010). Furthermore Hellman (2003) cited in Makombe et al (2016) observes that block- release education programmes require reliable infrastructure that is well equipped so that an efficient educator - educatees communication is sustained. Thus, this study assessed the components of the educational environment of the sampled university to gauge the conduciveness of the institution to the learning of block-release students as expressed by students and lectures.

This study seeks to find out if there is necessary infrastructure that is, classrooms, internet, library facility and other relevant structures at learning venues for the department of education block-release programme at the sampled university as these provide a conducive environment for effective teaching and learning to take place. According to Smith (2000), the library is a key resource at any center for education as it is important for academic research in which individuals review literature on topics, themes or concepts of particular interest. Buchanan (2000) concurs and stresses that the use of the library enhances independent study and development of research skills among students. Libraries provide documents, historical images, audio recordings, photographs and film clips which benefit students during the classroom mode of teaching-learning as well as when they are on 'release' and continue with their study (Library of Congress, 2000). Graham (1991) emphasizes that education programmes cannot succeed without adequate facilities like classroom, textbooks among others. He suggests that for effectiveness, institutions should operate with well-stocked and up-to-date libraries that have sufficient study space and that cater for the teaching and research needs of the various academic departments (Graham, 1991).

Lynch, Fawcett and Nicolson (2000)'s findings from learners from a school in Britain show that learners are of the view that ICT gadgets especially use of smart phones and laptops during lessons enhance learning. In the same vein Castro, Sanchez and Aleman (2011) argue that the use of ICT equipment and/or software transforms teaching and learning environment towards learner-centeredness. Chai, Koh and Tsai (2010) agree with the above and add that ICT can help to "produce a creative learning environment

In a newspaper article (Sunday news 18-24 April 2010), Professor Phineas Makhurane, the founding Vice Chancellor of the National University of Science and Technology was quoted as saying, "Soon after independence things were going on well and there were no problems, the National University of Science and Technology expanded, students increased from 2,000 to roughly between 6000 and 7000, the infrastructure was very impressive, things were good then but the situation of scarcity of resources that has prevailed over the past few years has dampened efforts in the education sector. The unavailability of resources has weakened our education system" (Sunday news 18-24 April 2010).

The purpose of this study is to determine, using qualitative approaches, the extent to which unavailability of teaching-learning resources, quality of work given to students, contact time and environmental factors among other related elements of the programme work against programme effectiveness at the sampled

university. The findings will create a gap to the current study and at the same time add literature to the existing body of knowledge from a Zimbabwean context

Strategies to improve quality of education through block-release programme.

Research (Pollard et al, 2012, Okongo et al, 2015; King, 2008; Hightower et al, 2011) on the quality of block-release programmes offered by higher education institutions revealed some gaps that compromise the quality of education and suggested some intervention strategies aimed at improving block-release tuition. Some of the suggested strategies include inter-alia:

1. Flexible opening times for facilities such as the library, cafes, food shops and IT services to allow students access these facilities out of normal hours
2. Clear communication regarding expectations and guidelines for part-time students about timetables and form of assessment
3. Commitment by institutions of higher learning to ensure that block-release is not considered as a residual form of learning
4. Supportive university leadership
5. A safe environment and sufficient facilities
6. High quality professional development of lecturers for instance part-timers
7. Appropriate assignments and work load for both lecturers and students

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative approach within the Interpretive Paradigm to establish lecturer-students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the block-release programme. For Flick (2009) a paradigm is "an integrated cluster of substantive concepts, variables and problems attached with corresponding methodological approaches and tools." According to Rubin and Babbie (2010) a paradigm includes the accepted theories, traditions, approaches, models, frame of reference, body of research and methodologies; and it could be seen as a model or framework for observation and understanding. From the above definitions a paradigm is therefore simply a basic set of beliefs that guide research. Interpretive research is concerned with subjective meanings as it seeks to recognize the individuals' interpretation and understanding of the social phenomena (Schwandt, 1994). To investigate lecturer-students' perceptions on the effectiveness of block-release programme at the selected university, the researchers adopted the interpretive paradigm because of the methods that consider the experiences of different individuals as well as the focus on participants' experiences of a social phenomenon, block-release programme.

The research employed the qualitative approach. According to Leedy (2004) qualitative research focuses on collection and analysis of full and rich data about a phenomenon, as a result, data collection is not limited to numerical facts but includes data obtained through observation, interview and participation. Since perceptions of the participants were the central focus of this study and investigations of the same are done in a natural setting, the researchers adopted the qualitative approach.

Research Design

MacMillan and Schumacher (2001:166) define research design as a plan for selecting subjects, research sites, and data collection procedures to answer the research question(s). They further indicate that the goal of a sound research design is to provide results that are credible. In this study, the researchers chose case study research design so as to come up with a clear understanding of the phenomenon under study. Robson (2002) defines a case study as a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. It is a qualitative research method used to examine contemporary real-life situations and provides the basis for the application of ideas and extension of methods. Magwa and Magwa (2015) allude that the case study probes deeply and analyses intensively so as to establish generalizations about a wider population to which that population belongs

The study aimed at establishing views of participants on the effectiveness of the block-release (part-time) programme at the selected university from lecturers and students engaged in the programme and therefore the perspectives of individual lecturers and students as well as groups needed to be sought. The researchers chose to use this strategy because of its considerable ability to generate answers to questions guiding the study

Study Population

According to Shastri (2003) a population denotes all those who fall into the category of concern, or objects or events that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research. Castillo (2009) defines a population as the target group with whom the research is going to be carried out. In this regard population is a group of individuals or items that share one or more characteristics from which data can be gathered and analysed. Witzel (2000) defines a target population as all possible cases of

interest in a study. Target population is the total number of units or the actual group from which data can be gathered (Parahoo, 1997). This study focused on perceptions of lecturers and students on the effectiveness of block-release (part-time) programme at a selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe and the target population were all lecturers in the school of education involved in teaching block-release students and all undergraduate and postgraduate students from 2016, 2017 and 2018 intakes in the education block-release programme.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

A sample can be defined as a group of relatively smaller number of people selected from a population for investigation purpose (Witzel, 2000). Bless and Higson in Smith (2007) define a sample as a subset of the whole population which is actually investigated by a researcher and whose characteristics are generalized to the entire population. The process through which a sample is extracted from a population is called sampling. Shastri (2003) defines sampling procedure as a way of coming up with members from the overall population that are used as research participants. Therefore, sampling procedure can be defined as a way of drawing a representative group which is used in the research process. Creswell (2013) notes that, in investigation it is impossible to assess every single element of a population so a group of people smaller in number than the population is selected for the assessment and on the basis of information obtained from the sample, inferences are drawn for the population. The participants for this study were selected using the purposive sampling technique which falls under the broad category of non-probability sampling techniques. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) note that, purposive sampling is when the researcher handpicks the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their typicality. This technique allows the researcher to select participants that are likely to be information rich in respect of the study. For this study, (5) lecturers among them the longest serving in the department, both PhD holders as well as PhD/Professors were selected to participate in the study, (10) undergraduate and (20) post-graduate students representing a from 2016, 2017 and 2018 were selected. This was done to ensure that the sample included students who have been in the programme for a long period and have experience in the programme to provide rich data as well as those that are just one or two years in the programme.

Data collection instruments

This section presents the instruments used in data gathering. According to Chiromo (2009) research instruments are tools or measurement approaches used in collecting data or information needed to find a solution to the problem under study. Chiromo (2009) suggests that different datacollecting instruments can be used in relation to the research methods employed. This study used the qualitative approach where participants were interviewed in their natural settings. Face-to-face interviews and FGDs were used to obtain data from participants and these were derived from the research questions. In-depth interviews were conducted with lecturers and students and FGDs were held with students only.

Lecturer-students views on the implementation of block- release programme

This section presents views of lecturers and students on how the block-release programme is run at the sampled university. The views of the participants are presented research question by research question.

Lecturers' views on the adequacy of contact time

The researcher contacted interviews with lecturers to solicit their views on contact time of students and lecturers in block-release. Questions to which responses were expected were: what are your views on contact time for lectures during block-release sessions? Is there lecturer-student contact after block-release sessions? Comment on off-campus modes of contact and what is the impact of the cohort system on lecturer-student contact time? The views of lecturers were captured verbatim in the following section.

Contact time is inadequate; we cannot sufficiently teach course content without hurrying students. Students do not have time to internalise the content taught to them during classes. We cannot do seminars which are more interactive as is required especially for masters programmes. We are forced to teach for examinations rather than knowledge dissemination because examinations are soon after the block and there will not be enough time for students to prepare. The worst thing is after the block there is no other contact time with students except when they come for examinations and they think they need clarity on some of the course material then they arrange to meet with individual lecturers in the various areas. Off-campus modes like internet are only used for assignments and disbursement of course content. In these hard times internet cannot be sufficiently explored considering the loads of work and student numbers. There is no time to search for resources that are needed to benefit the students. (lecturer A).

Contact time for lectures is inadequate. The greatest challenge emanates from the issue of the timetable for lectures. The timetable is issued a few days before the commencement of the block which is too late for errors to be detected and corrected. The fact that the timetable does not have enough information for example, the name and contact details of the lecturer creates a chaotic situation in that as a lecturer I may not know my students and they also may not know me so a lot of time is lost in trying to locate each other. The timetable usually has clashes where two or more classes may be scheduled to meet with the same lecturer at the same time or they may be allocated the same venue at the same time. A great deal of time is lost trying to relocate or move furniture to different rooms. Sometimes there are two drafts of the timetable, first and second draft and if you have not seen the second draft as staff lectures clash and time is spent trying to sort out the issue(lecturer B).

Contact time is enough. It is guided by Ministry regulations and ZIMCHE standards. Each module is allocated 36 hours for undergraduate programmes and 48 hours for masters' programmes. Timetable is designed to suit that requirement so that there is adequate time for lectures. If lecturer feels that the time for their lecture was affected in any way they are free to work beyond six o'clock which is the normal time to end classes for the day. The assumption is that lecturers should teach their 36 hours before going on cohort. To some of the cohorts we send lecturers from our main campus here in Masvingo because we have a challenge of finding lecturers who can teach some of the courses. Lecturers should create time, timetables should extend even to 8 o'clock in the evening instead of 6 o'clock where need be. Students should understand that university education is not spoon-feeding by lecturers. It is just showing the way. Presentations should not take time, they should only cover what is principal. (lecturer C)

Contact time for modules is adequate on paper but on the ground, it is not adequate at all given for example, the multi-campus system and challenges of transport to lecture venues. Both lecturers and students have to travel long distances to lecture venues and because of the high costs of transport some students and lecturers resort to walking to lecture venues but they get there well after the time scheduled to start lectures. The multi-campus system creates serious problems especially for lecturers as contact time is lost in between venues(lecturer D)

Contact time is compromised because the block-release runs concurrently with the conventional timetable. The same lecturer who teaches block-release students has lectures with conventional students. The cohort system also seriously affects contact time for block-release in that work that should be covered in a month is compressed so that it is all covered in two weeks because the same lecturers have to go for cohorts. Instead of 2hour long lectures they are made 3 hours. These strains both the lecturers and the students who have to work from 8 o'clock in the morning to 6 o'clock in the evening (lecturer E)

The views of the lecturers expressed in the excerpts above show that 4(80%) of the lecturers concurred that contact time for block-release is compromised while one lecturer (20%) indicated that contact time is adequate since it satisfies ZIMCHE standards. The inconsistency of lecturers' views on contact time may mean that in principle, block-release modules are allocated time as guided by the general regulations and ZIMCHE standards but on the ground the programme is fraught with challenges that compromise the allocated time. Issues raised by the majority of lecturers as compromising contact time include interlia, clashes on the timetable, concurrent running of block-release and conventional programme, venues which are dotted around main campus which presents logistical challenges of transport. The challenges of block-release relating to contact time emanate from a number of sources within the institution. This confirms the Systems Theory as propounded by Parsons (1970) who emphasises on interdependency of different parts of a system or organisation if the institution's objectives are to be achieved. The findings also corroborate findings of a study on block-release programme at Africa University by Makombe et al (2016) which revealed that the crisis on lecture venues when conventional study programme ran concurrently with the block- release (part-time) programme and the movement from Africa University campus to Hartzell High School which is one kilometer away or vice versa for lectures during teaching- learning session negatively impacted on contact time and could mean compromised teaching-learning effectiveness.

4.3.1.2 Students' views on contact time

The researcher conducted interviews and FGDs with students on the issue of contact time in block-release programme. The same questions that the lecturers were asked are the same questions students were required to respond to during interviews and FGDs. The extracts below captured students' responses on the adequacy of contact time.

Contact time is more than enough especially for masters. We just need about 10hours per module and not 36 hours. The bulk of our time should be spent on research rather than sitting in front of a lecturer taking down notes that we will not even have time to read. Contact time should be short but used effectively (student A).

Contact time is too little. Everything is done hurriedly because of the cohort system. Within a week you are done with two modules and expected to do seminar presentations. At least four assignments from two modules are expected to have been done and submitted in two weeks before the lecturer goes for cohort. The standard 36 hours is just on paper but on the ground, it is not followed. Considering the amount of tuition fees, we pay we are not getting value for our money (student B)

Contact time written on paper is 36 hours but it is not followed. Everything is done hurriedly so that content is covered in the shortest possible time. Lecturers come to class to dictate notes so that they are able to complete their modules before they go for cohort. There is no effective use of contact time (student C)

Contact time is very little. We get a maximum of 21 hours and a minimum of 7 slots of 2 hours for the whole module. 3-hour lectures are too long for both the student and the lecturer. Sometimes we have lectures from 8 in the morning to 6 in the evening with just 1-hour break from 11 to 12. This is exhaustive and it impacts on quality. The university needs to do something with this cohort animal. It's destroying the good reputation of the institution. They are prioritising money at the expense of quality (student D)

Contact time is inadequate. This is why lecturers resort to dictating notes so that they cover their course content. Work which is supposed to be done over a period of 30 days is done in a maximum of two weeks. There is no real learning for block students. We are just passive recipients of knowledge. The cohort system is putting pressure on both students and lecturers. (student E)

To start with, 36 hours contact time allocated for masters' programmes on the time table is not enough according to ministry regulations and ZIMCHE standards so it is inadequate. Furthermore, a lot of time is lost trying to find vacant rooms for lectures and moving furniture from one room to the other because most of the time groups clash in one room. The timetable has a lot of clashes on both time for lectures and rooms for lectures. The same lecturer is expected to be teaching two groups at the same time and time is lost in trying to correct such issues. What amazes me is that we experience the same problems every block. I did my undergraduate studies here and now I'm in the final year of my masters' programme. There has not been any improvement despite the concerns raised by students(student F)

A lot of things interfere with our contact time making it inadequate in the end. The lecture venues are not easily accessible from where we are accommodated during the block. Some of us have to get lifts into town then get another lift from town to the lecture venue. This is expensive and not manageable and so sometimes students walk these long distances and are late for lectures. This is also true for some of the lecturers who do not drive. Another thing that interferes with contact time for lectures is the absence of critical services on lecture venues. There are no photocopying and printing services at venues for lectures, no library or WiFi but students need these for their assignments. Because these services are not available at venues, students have to access them in town and this has to be done during the same time the lectures are in progress, between 8 in the morning and 6 in the evening. Students also need the canteen among other important services. They either have to go to town for their lunch and lose some of the contact time as they do so or buy food from vendors who bring food stuffs to the venues. This cohort thing also deprives us of contact time with lecturers as they have to rush through course material in order to finish in time to go for cohort. Something needs to be done to address the situation for block-release students otherwise valuable time for contact is lost (student G)

The researchers also conducted two FGDs with students and there was consensus that contact time for block-release was compromised. Three major issues raised were the cohort system, clashes on the timetable and the multi-campus system among others. The issue of cohorts compromising contact time for block-release programme was raised in both of the two FGDs held with students. This view was shared by 7 (70%) of the students that were interviewed on contact time. The issue of clashes on the timetable brought about by lecturers was also shared by students during the interviews as well as during FGDs with the two groups. One student during the FGD with female students said:

The timetable committee is not serious. I wonder if ever they take time to go through it before they display it. The timetable is a nightmare. It is going to cause a serious accident one day. It's all clashes. There are clashes on rooms, clashes on lecturers and clashes on each other, as we move furniture from one room to the other.

The idea of taking time to go through the timetable before displaying it was also raised by one lecturer who suggested that the timetable should be shared with both lecturers and students involved at least a month before commencement of the block-release programme so that corrections are made if there are any in order to avoid loss of contact time when the block commences. A study by Simpson (2000) showed that time-tabling and scheduling of learners' sessions are necessary to regulate and monitor the learning. The finding could be an indicator of the need to have an orderly timetable for effective execution of the block-release programme.

Another issue that came out from interviews with individual students as well as discussions with both focus groups was the multi-campus system. There was a general consensus that contact time was lost trying to access venues. The general concern raised was that venues for lectures are not easily accessible by the majority of students who may have to pay for lifts into town and then either walk or get another lift from town to the lecture venue. This concern was also echoed by lecturers who cited logistical challenges of transport to lecture venues. The concerns raised by both students and lecturers confirm the need for consideration of various factors that contribute to make the block-release programme effective. The Systems theory which anchors this study suggests that a system as whole has different elements which are interdependent and influence each other (Parsons 1970). Contact time in this regard influences the effectiveness of the block-release programme and as such consideration should be made to make sure adequate contact time is availed for the programme.

The above interview data strongly suggests that contact time for block-release programme is not adequate. Only two out of ten students expressed different views from the rest and an interesting observation is that both students, although in different levels of their programme, major in Philosophy. It may be concluded that their lecturer has a different way of presenting course content that makes students feel comfortable. From the impressions given by students above, it is not surprising that in some cases; intended course material was not fully covered. This is in agreement with Pollard et al., (2012)'s observation that for block-release students, time available for class-based learning is limited hence should be used to the best effect. Higher Education Authority (2012) reports the observation that block-release lecturers on campus are condensed with activities such as lectures, seminar presentations among other work commitments. This observation is in agreement with the views and experiences expressed by participants in the current study which point to pressure of work on lecturers as compromising contact time for block-release lectures.

Quality of work for block-release programme

The researchers conducted interviews with lecturers and students to find out their views on the quality of work for students on block-release programme. Responses were expected to answer the following questions: What are your views on the quality of work for block release students? What factors influence the quality of academic work for block release students? How do the factors affect quality of academic work for block release students?

4.3.2.1 Lecturers' views on quality of work

Below are excerpts on the views of lecturers on the quality of work for block-release students captured verbatim.

Quality of work leaves a lot to be desired. Before the cohort system began everything was alright in terms of quality. Now you can imagine what happens to students while their lecturer goes for cohort. I do not go for cohort but I witness the challenges. There is confusion and chaos emanating from the timetable which may indicate a module taken by a lecturer who is not present because they have gone for cohort. Because of this some lecturers may assign colleagues to their classes and those assigned may not be very familiar with the area. Students are left with no one to assist them with assignments and other areas of their course. Sometimes lecturers just leave course outlines with assignments and expect students to work on these while they are on cohort and submit on their return. This is done before the lecturer has even introduced the module or taught anything. Students have to navigate their way using the module outline. There is no learning at all (lecturer A)

Quality of work is generally below the expected level. Our block-release students do not have enough time for research and discussions. There is no time for debates during class. Students get fatigued and frustrated with the compacted timetable. Learning becomes a routine just to fulfill requirements of the course but there is no transformation through education. We are very much concerned with the quality of graduates we are producing especially the postgraduates, whether they have the competences and skills needed in the different fields of work. It's worrisome. Honestly, a lecturer cannot supervise an excess of thirty (30) dissertations at the same time delivering lectures and be effective. Both the teaching and supervision of dissertations is done just for

the sake of it but quality is compromised in the process. We need to prepare handouts for students but there is no time. We can talk of quantity but not quality of work under our circumstance (lecturer B)

The cohort system has increased the length of a single lecture from 2 to 3 hours so as to compensate time when lecturers are at cohort. The programme is so packed that students do not have time to internalize the content that they are given during the block. Examinations are soon after the block so lecturers are forced to teach for examinations. Students do not have time to research in the library. There are no libraries at teaching/learning venues; there is no Wi-Fi either. So, even when they have breaks in between lectures both students and lecturers cannot use that time for research. The only place to access the library and Wi-Fi is in town but time will not allow and it is also expensive in terms of transport costs (lecturer C)

The concerns expressed by the participants above demonstrate the general consensus that quality of work for students on block-release programme at the institution under study is compromised. The common issues raised as militating against effective implementation of the programme include among others, shortage of time due to the cohort system, lecturers' work- loads, unavailability of critical resources such as library and Wi-Fi, at venues where they can be accessed by most of the students, boards as well as projectors. It emerged that the programme is so packed that students do not have time to research neither do they have time to internalize course content. As such no meaningful learning takes place. This ultimately affects quality of work for block-release students. The views expressed by lecturers above may point to the fact that the quality assurance division which ensures services provided are of high quality is not looking into issues to do with the block-release programme. African Virtual University (2012) observes that the rationale of quality assurance in higher education is to ensure that institutions effectively deliver education, training research and community services of high quality as well as imparting a range of graduate skills necessary for social and economic development a function which seems not to be taken seriously at the sampled university.

The concern about the low quality of graduates raised by lecturer B agrees with the observation by Machumu Kasanga (2014) who revealed that low quality graduates have been produced in several countries both developed and developing and that this was demonstrated by lack of competences and employability skills exhibited by graduates. It can be argued therefore that the block-release programme at the sampled university falls short in meeting the quality standards expected by ZIMCHE and as such there is need for strategies to improve the programme.

4.3.2.2 Students' views on the quality of work

The researchers had interviews and two FGDs with students to determine their views on the quality of work for students on block-release (part-time) programme. The same questions asked to lecturers were the same questions given to students. Responses from the students are captured in the extracts below;

The quality of work for block-release students is questionable. An average of 3 modules is done within a month and examinations are written within 2 to 3 weeks after the block. It is as good as saying 3 modules are done within 6 to 7 weeks. Students do not have enough time to read through their course material. They do not have time to research for more knowledge on concepts let alone to internalize material learnt. Students cram for examinations. There is no learning for life. Cohorts impact negatively on the quality of work for block-release programme. Work which is supposed to be done in a month is done in 2 weeks. It is unbearable to have for example, continuous 9 hours in a day on one module. Both students and lecturers get fatigued because of the unnecessary pressure (student A)

Quality of work is greatly compromised. The sampled university's block-release programme is producing half-baked graduates. They are producing skimmed not creamed milk. Work that is supposed to be done within 36 to 48 hours is done in about half the time because lecturers have to go for cohort. The cohort system causes a lot of stress and strain on both lectures and students. We have incidents of students breaking down and ending up hospitalized because of the pressure. Just this block an ambulance came 3 times in one day taking students who had collapsed to hospital. All this is because of the pressure. Students spend long hours in lectures during the day then the night is spent preparing presentations and writing assignments so they are extremely exhausted. The body breaks down because it lacks rest (student B)

Quality of work is very poor. Everything is done hurriedly so that course content is covered at the expense of quality. The university does not care about the value students get from the programme. What they want is money and more money. Lectures are just dictation of notes because there is no time for meaningful learning. Learning is not interactive. Students are just passive recipients. It makes no difference if one does not come for lectures and just copy notes from others because they will not lose anything (student C)

Work for block-release is sub-standard. I cannot recommend friends and relatives to attend block-release at this university I'm not even proud of the qualification that I will get from here. For a student who is doing a master's degree to have a lecturer sitting in front dictating notes surely it is an insult. In this era of technology, we should at least make use of overhead projectors for lesson delivery and seminar presentations. Some of us cannot use overhead projectors because we did our high school and went to teacher's college back

then before the introduction of ICT. When we came to university, we thought we had come to the fountain. I did my first degree here and now my masters' degree and soon I will be graduating but still I cannot use an overhead projector because I don't know how it works. (student D)

Two FGDs were conducted with students on the issue of quality and it emerged that quality of work for block-release was compromised. The major themes that emerged from both FGDs as negatively impacting on quality were time for contact, lecturer work-load, methods of content delivery and the issue of resources. The issues raised by students in both FGDs were also shared by students during interviews as well as lecturers. One participant during FGD with male students echoed the sentiments below:

Quality of work for block-release programme leaves a lot to be desired. Whoever decides on venues for lectures during block is not serious. I don't think they even make efforts to visit and inspect the venues before the commencement of the block. Maybe they just secure venues over the phone. At one of the venues for example, most of the rooms do not have power. There are no sockets to plug in our laptops or smart phones. Even if we want to use overhead projectors for presentations and lecture delivery, there is no source of power. During winter it gets dark early and afternoon lectures have to be shortened because by 5 o'clock it is already dark in the rooms. This means almost an hour of contact time is lost.

The issue was also raised during FGD with female students by one participant who said:

The environment at one of the High schools used as a venue is not conducive for lectures. The rooms are seldom swept. Litter bins are not emptied for days, they are full of rotting matter and it is stinky in the rooms. The bathrooms are also not cleaned. You don't want to spend the day there. It is a health hazard. I wonder if the university management or whoever is responsible for block-release programme at the institution ever makes an effort to check on the state of the venues before and during the duration of the block. There is no canteen to buy food from and students rely on vendors who bring food from outside in their car boots risking contracting cholera. Besides this, students have to walk for about a kilometer or more to places where they can be served hot meals. This problem affects our time for lectures

An analysis of the responses from both interviews and FGDs shows that there is general consensus that quality of work is compromised. Lecturers and students agree that time for the programme is affected mainly by the cohort system and issues emanating from the timetable that because of the limited time at their disposal lecturers end up teaching for examinations. The method of content delivery was also cited as one of the factors that affect quality of work for block-release students. This is consistent with the results of studies carried out at certain universities in England and United States to ascertain quality of student learning using the lecture method which reported concerns raised by students about courses not being very interesting, that they just sit and take notes and then cram for examinations cite the studies referred to. Students in the studies further reported that they have difficulty seeing the value of what they are learning (Fink, 2003). The results from both studies indicated that instructional methods are critical for effectiveness in learning. In this case, lecturing as a method of content delivery was found out to have limited effectiveness on the overall outcome of the programme because education is not being transformational but just so that students can pass examinations and go.

The Systems Theory which anchors this study emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of the different elements of a system in order for it to function effectively (Bertalanffy, 1968). One of the proponents of the theory, Boulding (1956), highlights the focus of systems theory as the interactions and the relationships between parts, including the relationships between the organizations and the environment in which they are involved in order to understand an entity's organization, functioning and outcomes. The issues raised in the interviews by both students and lecturers as factors that compromise the effective implementation of the block-release programme at the institution can be said to be the parts referred to by the Systems theory. These parts need to work together if efficacy is to be realized in the way the programme is implemented and ultimately for there to be quality in the work for block-release students. If one of the elements becomes dysfunctional then the whole system does not function effectively. In this case, the compromised quality of work for block-release students impacts negatively on the effectiveness of the whole block-release programme.

4.3.2 Availability of teaching- learning resources

Interviews with both lecturers and students expected them to respond to the following:
Comment on the availability and state of teaching-learning venues. How accessible are the teaching-learning venues to students? What are your views on the library and Wi-Fi facilities at block release teaching-learning venues? Are there catering facilities for students to access meals at block release teaching-learning venues?

4.3.3.1 Lecturers' views on the availability of teaching- learning resources

The views of lecturers on availability of teaching-learning resources for block-release (part-time) programme are captured verbatim in some of the excerpts below:

The issue of resources for block-release programme needs urgent attention. Venues for master's degree for example, are supposed to be more than just desk and chair as is the case with our venues. There is need for Wi-Fi because both students and lecturers need quiet time between lectures to surf the internet. They need to research for their assignments and other areas. Our venues do not offer this important resource. Material such as white boards, markers and overhead projectors among others are needed during lesson delivery but these are not provided for at the venues. Instead of using the traditional method of dictating notes that we do, we should be using projectors for presenting slides but most of the rooms do not even have electricity and those that have electricity do not have functional sockets. Some of the rooms at the venues do not have furniture, I mean just a desk and chair. Students spend a great deal of the much-needed time moving furniture. Another critical resource is the library. There are no libraries at venues for block-release programmes. This means students cannot use the library during the day because of the distance to the main library and time(lecturer A).

The university has got state of the art teaching-learning facilities. Block –release students come when the university is in session with conventional students so university facilities are in use for the whole duration of their block. We hire schools which are easily accessible to both lecturers and students. Distances for education students for example, are walk-able. The assumption is that these schools have all the resources required to provide a conducive teaching-learning environment for our students. For example, one high school has almost everything that is needed including catering facilities. We made provision for Wi-Fi there. Lecturers and students can get assistance with this at the reception. (lecturer B).

The responses of lecturers on the availability of teaching-learning resources are in line with Nsubuga (1978) who points out that, school facilities help teachers to teach effectively and learners effectively learn in convenient and comfortable surroundings. This is also supported by Hoimes (1983) who asserts that in normal circumstances, a school with enough teaching and learning materials has a high chance of providing good quality education to its learners. It is not surprising therefore that the lecturers at the sampled university are concerned about the unavailability of critical resources at teaching-learning venues. UNICEF (2010) reporting on ECD programmes, suggests the unavailability of materials and resources among other critical resources as the major obstacle to successful implementation of ECD programmes in Sub-Saharan Africa. It can therefore be argued that the contradicting views by one participant above are based on assumptions and not what prevails on the ground. Although he acknowledges that lecture venues were a big challenge especially when the university was open to the conventional study programme while at the same time the block- release (part-time) programme was on and that the programme coordinators faced challenges in securing conducive teaching-learning venues, what he says about the hired venues for example, one high school contradicts the views shared by other lecturers involved in the block- release (part-time) programme. This contradiction could mean that securing of venues and agreements on what is required to be on the venues is done through the phone and no physical follow up is made before and during the block session to make sure that everything required for successful implementation is in place. This confirms findings by Pollard et al.'s (2012) study on part-time block-release programmes in England that some universities were reluctant to support block-release programmes due to concerns relating to cost-benefit analysis of the programme compared to fulltime programmes among other issues. This implies therefore, that some attitudes of university management towards the programme may compromise the quality of block-release programme.

Based on literature, the scenario at the university under study as shown by the views of the lecturers above could mean compromised teaching-learning effectiveness. Hellman (2003) argues that block- release education programmes require reliable infrastructure that is well equipped so that an efficient educator - educatees' communication is sustained. Another issue that was raised by all the lecturers as of major concern is that of library facilities and Wi-Fi. From the literature reviewed above, Smith (2000) reiterates that the library is a key resource at any centre for education as it is important for academic research in which individuals review literature on topics, themes or concepts of particular interest. Buchanan (2000) agrees with Smith (2000) when he says that the use of the library enhances independent study and development of research skills among students. The experiences shared by the participants above put together concur with the systems theory that the whole is the sum total of parts that are interdependent. The failure of one element of the system affects the effectiveness of the whole system (Parsons, 1970)

4.3.3.2 Students' views on the availability of teaching- learning resources

Four major issues came out from the interviews and focus group discussions with students on availability of teaching-learning resources, the library and Wi-Fi facilities, the state of the rooms regarding lighting and sources of power for plugging in gadgets, teaching learning material and canteen services. All the students shared the view that the unavailability of these critical resources at the lecture venues compromised the effectiveness of the block-release programme. Some of the impressions of students on the availability of teaching-learning resources are captured verbatim in the extracts below.

The situation of teaching-learning resources for block-release (part-time) programme is critical. Resources are limited and those available are in a very bad state. For example, one High School which is used as a venue for lectures is a health hazard. Rooms are seldom swept and litter bins are not emptied regularly. Litter can be found rotting in bins in classrooms. The bathroom facilities are not clean and you do not want to be there. Learning venues do not have library and Wi-Fi facilities. The main library in town is very small. Sometimes you get there and you want to use Wi-Fi to research but you fail to log in because the facility can only allow a limited number of clients at any given moment. (student A).

Teaching-learning resources are a challenge for the block-release programme. The venues for lectures themselves for example, are not easily accessible by most of the students. It is costly to get to venues especially from the main campus and other locations where students will be accommodated for the block. This forces some students to attend some and not all lectures because they cannot afford transport costs every day for the duration of the block due to financial constraints. Venues for example, one high School does not have Wi-Fi, most rooms do not have electricity and in rooms where there is electricity, sockets do not work which means that both students and lecturers will not have anywhere to plug in their laptops and smart-phones. We cannot use overhead projectors for presentations. There are no boards and markers in the rooms, just desks and chairs but not in all the rooms. (student B)

The issue of resources for the block-release programme is a cause for concern. There are no resources to enable effective implementation of the programme. The lecture venues do not have libraries neither do they have Wi-Fi. Students and lecturers cannot use their breaks to research on the internet or from library books. The main library in town does not have adequate books. It only has sitting space. The books that are in the library are old and material contained in them is outdated. Students mostly rely on notes given by lecturers when doing assignments. Another critical resource which is not available at lecture venue is the canteen. Students attending their lectures at one High School for example, have to go into nearby locations to look for food from vendors (student C).

The above sentiments from students who were interviewed were shared by their colleagues during focus group discussions with both female and male students. The general consensus was that critical resources needed for effective implementation of the block-release programme were not available and those that are available either are in bad condition or very limited. One participant in the FGD with female students commented that:

There is virtually nothing good for us at the venues. It's just the dirty walls bearing a name but nothing inside. Most of the rooms have no power, and those that have, only have lighting. The sockets do not work. It is a very good way by the university of telling us that they don't value block-release students. In the same vein another participant in the FGD with male students observed that:

There is no canteen for us to buy food from. How do they expect us to function the whole day on empty stomachs? We are forced to buy cooked food from street vendors against our wish because we have no option. We need food just like the conventional students. We pay a lot of money for this programme considering that we are here just for a month or less. Everything for block-release programme, the resources, venues and lectures, is compromised. The good is on paper just to attract people and once there you experience the reality. We deserve better treatment. We want value for the money we pay.

The sentiments expressed by the participants above are consistent with findings made by Okango et al (2015) on a study in Kenya on the effect of availability of teaching-learning resources on the implementation of inclusive education in pre-school centers. The study revealed that inadequate teaching-learning resources affected the implementation of inclusive education. Although this study focused on teaching learning resources in pre-schools while the current study focuses on a programme offered at university level, both studies look at the impact of resources on the quality of education. The experiences expressed by the participants are also in tandem with Boorman et al.'s (2006) observation that, there are costs to the institution for instance keeping premises such as the library, canteen open over extended hours and that this may mean that some institutions of higher learning do not provide block-release students with the needed support due to costs associated with such provisions. The concerns by participants in this study about learning resources are substantiated by Fray, Ketteridge and Marshall (2009) who opine that higher education institutions today provide a range of services which include online resources, centers for academic writing, library and information services aimed at supplementing the role of academic tutors. Some of the issues raised by the participants were also shared in Ozdemir's(2016) study on the relationship between quality of teaching and learning resources with student achievement at Gaziantep University which identified components of higher educational institutions which should be catered for to ensure quality in these institutions. Among the four components identified two are at the center of the concerns by participants of this study. These are:

1. Physical and technological environment that is, things like library services and lecture theatres and
2. Educational environment, referring to student course content, availability of quality teaching material, availability of quality educational network resources.

Literature reviewed for this study, Padmanabhan (2001) observes that adequacy of teaching-learning resources determines the educational system's efficacy highlighting that scarcity of textbooks; libraries and physical facilities constrain educational systems from responding fully to the needs of learners. For the quality of education, its efficiency and productivity to improve, Padmanabhan (2001) suggests that learning materials should be provided adequately.

4.3.4 Strategies to improve quality of education offered through block release (Part-Time) programme.

Interviews were conducted with both lecturers and students to find out suggestions on how to improve education offered through block-release (part-time) programme. The question that the participants responded to was: What strategies can be implemented to improve quality of education offered through block release (Part-Time) programme?

4.3.4.1 Suggestions by lecturers to improve quality of education offered through block-release (part-time) programme

The majority of lecturers agreed on a number of strategies to improve quality of education offered through block-release (part-time) programme. Below are some of the suggestions made by lecturers captured verbatim:

The caliber of students we have in our education programmes are technophobic. I suggest that we educate them on the use of the virtual library as well as avail services on remote desktop. It is also important for the university to subsidize transport for block-release students. Timetable should be regularized. Weekend school can also be adopted to compensate time that might have been lost during the block. The university should also avail resources needed at venues for lectures where these are not readily available (lecturer A).

Public Service Commission should consider giving employees study and leave so that they can develop themselves. Block should be between January and February or mid-June to mid-August when conventional students are on vacation so that block students can use university facilities optimally (lecturer B).

Timetable for the block should be available to lecturers and students well in advance, at least a month before commencement of the block. This enables early identification of clashes and other errors and will reduce loss of contact time. The timetable should also indicate by way of a key for example, lecturers taking the different courses. Students should also be encouraged to register online well in advance to avoid interference with contact time. Module outlines with guidelines and expectations of the course as well as the course assignments should be availed to students even a month before commencement of the block. The university should address the issue of the cafeteria at all venues for lectures before block students come (lecturer C).

Some of the suggestions given by the participants above as strategy to improve the quality of education offered through block-release (part-time) programme concur with the results from Pollard et al 2012, Okongo et al(2015); King, (2008); Hightower et al (2011) research on the quality of block-release programmes offered by higher education institutions. The afore mentioned suggestions include clear communication regarding expectations and guidelines for part-time students about timetables and form of assessment, appropriate assignments and work load for both lecturers and students and a safe environment and sufficient facilities. This may be a clear indication that the areas of focus are critical for effective implementation of the block-release (part-time) programme.

4.3.4.2 Suggestions by students to improve quality of education through block-release (Part-time) programme

Some suggestions that came up from interviews and FGDs with both female and male students are in concurrence with the ideas suggested by the lecturers. Extracts from some of the students are captured below:

The university should employ more lecturers to ease the workloads on staff. Adjust opening times for library to accommodate block-release students. Have structures in one place instead of the multi-campus system (student A).

University management and quality assurance should show that they value block-release programme by supporting it and doing what is possible for its effective implementation. I also suggest that there should be staff training on contemporary methods of delivering course content so that lecturers move away from the traditional lecture method and dictation of notes. There is need to create platforms for lecturer-student contact during off campus periods (student B).

Management should make sure that lecture venues are well furnished with furniture, WiFi, library facilities, toilets and canteen. Library and canteen opening hours should be flexible to accommodate block students. Timetable should be given to students well before the beginning of the block for familiarization. Registration by students should also be through before the block commences (student C).

The university should employ more lecturers or hire part-time lecturers to service cohorts. There should be a difference between distance learning like the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) and block-release programmes. Contact time should be effectively used and management should put mechanisms to monitor this to make sure quality learning is taking place (student D).

Most of the suggestions given by students concur with what was suggested by the lecturers and are consistent with the suggestions that came from Pollard et al (2012), Okongo et al (2015); King, (2008) and Hightower et al (2011) studies. The idea of having flexible opening times for facilities and services to allow students access out of normal hours, commitment by institutions of higher learning to ensure that block-release is accorded the importance accorded to conventional programmes, supportive university leadership, safe learning environments and sufficient facilities, professional development of lecturers, appropriate assignments and work load for both lecturers and students were repeated by most students and lecturers alike. This gives these issues reasonable ground to be considered as strategies to improve quality of education offered through block-release (part-time) programme. The idea of assignments and feedback on performance given to students as a form of assessment is consistent with Hunsaker (2004) who regard assessment as a very useful teaching-learning process that provides feedback to the students on their learning. In the block release (part-time) programme at Africa University, Makombe et al.'s (2016) study observed that assessment instruments used included assignments, in class tests, term papers, viva, practicum and examination. The conclusion was that the likelihood of a comprehensive measurement of learners' performance and focused teaching-learning was high and that this promoted programme effectiveness. This same aspect of assessment and feedback is what is advocated for by students in the current study in order for the block-release programme to be effective

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The following section discusses results sub-question by sub-question.

Lecturer-students views on contact time

All the research participants were concerned that contact time for lectures during the block was not adequate and that although it was also very important for lecturers and students to be in contact during the off-campus period for assignments, projects and consultations concerning their courses, modes of contact available to both students and lecturers were not fully utilized because of financial constraints among other reasons. The concern by participants that contact with lecturers during the off-campus period was almost not possible was shared in the findings of Makombe et al.'s (2016) study which revealed that students were not impressed by the accessibility of lecturers outside classes. Common reasons given by both lecturers and students as militating lecturer-student contact time include inter-alia, the cohort system, clashes on the time-table inadequate facilities at venues forcing students to at times leave venues looking for service like internet, photocopiers and food elsewhere.

Quality of work for block-release students

It was revealed that the standard of work given to students in terms of course content, written assignments, presentations as well as in class tests was very good. However, all the participants cited the time factor as compromising quality saying that everything was done hurriedly because of pressure on lecturers emanating from work-loads which include among others, supervision of dissertations and the cohort system. Unavailability of the necessary teaching-learning resources such as the library, internet, current text books and adequate furniture were cited as main factors compromising quality of work for block-release students. The sentiments shared by the participants in the current study that the quality of work given to students was diluted contradicts findings by Makombe et al., 's (2016) study at Africa University which revealed that students were satisfied with the quantity of material covered and level of difficulty of the work for block-release students. This may mean that if properly run the block-release programme can be an effective mode of tuition

Availability of teaching-learning resources

Findings from the research revealed that there are no resources necessary for effective implementation of the block-release (part-time) programme at the venues for lectures. The critical resources include, teaching-learning materials such as white boards and markers as well as projectors, lecture rooms that are furnished with desks and chairs and well-lit with functional sockets for plugging in gadgets, library, Wi-Fi, canteen and well cared for bathrooms. The findings are in line with Boorman et al's (2006) findings that some institutions of higher learning do not provide block-release students with the needed support due to costs associated with such provisions. The issue of costs could be the reason why the sampled University fails to provide the services to the satisfaction of the stakeholders. The proper funding block-release programme can yield the desired results as alluded to by Fray et al. (2009)'s observation that higher education institutions today provide a range of services which include online resources, centers for academic writing, library and information services among others

aimed at supplementing the role of academic tutors. Furthermore, Ozdemir's (2016) study on the relationship between quality of teaching and learning resources with student achievement at Gaziantep University identified among other things, library services and lecture theatres, availability of quality teaching material, and availability of quality educational network resources as critical for quality teaching. The observations above entail that in the absence of critical resources effective implementation of the block-release programme is impossible.

5.3.4 Strategies to improve the effectiveness of block-release programme

The participants recommended that the institution should employ more lecturers in the department of education, to support the block-release (part-time) programme fully with all the resources required and not to treat it as a residual form of learning. Participants also recommended the provision of canteen services, tuck-shop, library, printing and photocopying services on lecture venues. Staff development of lecturers on contemporary methods of content delivery was another recommendation that came from the participants. The strategies suggested above concur with the intervention strategies suggested for research (Pollard et al 2012, Okongo et al 2015; Hightower et al., 2011) on the quality of block-release programmes offered by higher education institutions which included inter-alia: provision of and flexible opening times for facilities such as the library, cafes, food shops and internet services to allow block-release students to access these facilities out of normal hours, commitment by institutions of higher learning to ensure that block-release is not considered as a residual form of learning, high quality professional development of lecturers as well as supportive university leadership

V. CONCLUSION

The study was carried out to explore views and sentiments of lecturers and students on the effectiveness of block-release programme at selected university in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Basing on the findings from the study it was concluded that contact time for lectures for block-release (part-time) programme is not adequate. A number of factors were cited as compromising the adequacy of contact time for block-release at the selected university which include, the adoption of the cohort system, clashes on the timetable, lack of teaching learning venues to mention but a few. This observation corroborates Higher Education Authority's (2012) finding that block-release lecturers on campus are condensed with activities such as lectures and seminar presentations among other things. This is what was revealed by the participants in this study as compromising contact time for lectures. Thus, Pollard et al., (2012) observe that for block-release students, time available for class-based learning is limited hence should be used to the best effect

Another conclusion made was that quality of work produced by students and lecturers during block-release sessions is compromised. A myriad of factors were cited by the participants as militating against the quality of work which include inter-alia traditional teaching methods employed by lecturers, work-loads for lecturers which exert pressure on them so that they do not have enough time for and with students and the unavailability of the necessary resources needed for the implementation of the block-release (part-time) programme. To Culter (1999), from an educational standpoint, quality is about delivering what was promised. It is about focusing the school's efforts and resources on the learners (Culter, 1999). Quality education is seen by Chinapah (1997) as, "a process of ensuring that a pupil who enters an educational programme exits with the requisite standard of competences or outcomes set." to ensure effectiveness of the block-release programme the sampled university needs to address issues that hamper quality of work for block-release (part-time) students.

On teaching and learning resources, it was concluded that the programme lacked the requisite resources to promote teaching and learning during block-release sessions. Padmanabhan (2001) highlights the importance of resources in teaching and learning thus he asserts that the adequacy of teaching-learning resources determines the educational system's efficacy. He further elaborates that scarcity of critical resources that include among others libraries and physical facilities constrain educational systems from responding fully to the needs of learners. Padmanabhan (2001) suggests that to raise the quality of education, its efficiency and productivity, learning materials should be provided adequately. It therefore implies that for the university under study to improve the block-release (part-time) programme, it should address the issue of resources.

From the findings of the study a number of strategies were suggested aimed at improving the block-release programme. Thus, the study concluded that the selected university's management was not supportive of the block-release and called for a paradigm shift if the programme is to be a success. Based on findings of previous studies (Pollard et al., 2012; Okongo et al., 2015., King, 2008 & Hightower et al., 2011) it was concluded that the sampled university's management should ensure flexible opening times for facilities and services to allow students access out of normal hours, commitment to the block-release programme by according it the importance accorded to conventional programmes, safe learning environments and sufficient facilities, professional development of lecturers, appropriate assignments and work load for both lecturers and students. Quality assurance department and programme coordinators should also make sure that the block-

release (part-time) programme is implemented according to ministry regulations and standards set by the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE).

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study the following recommendations were made:

- □The University should ensure that the Block-release (part-time) programme for the department of education be slotted between January and February or mid-July to mid-August when conventional students are on vacation to minimize the challenge of teaching venues and student's accommodation
- □The University should facilitate staff development programmes on modern teaching methodologies.
- □The Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development through the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) should give universities, the guidelines on implementation of block- release (part-time) education programmes.
- □Management and programme coordinators in universities should monitor and supervise the implementation and performance of the programmes closely to ensure effectiveness
- □Management and programme coordinators should ensure that the relevant infrastructure that is, appropriate lecture venues and accommodation during the study block, are available to sustain student learning.
- □Programme coordinators should ensure that the relevant teaching-learning resources and services required at lecture venues are available to facilitate effective implementation of the programme

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