

Interrogating Students' Engagement in Academic Work in a Selected University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The extent to which students' attain learning outcomes and the overall quality of a qualification is dependent on the extent to which the student is engaged in academic work inside and outside the lecture room. The study sought to establish the extent to which students were engaged in academic work in a Zimbabwean university. The study followed a mixed methods approach, in which a case study design was utilized. Data were solicited from students in five selected faculties in the one selected university. A convenient sample of 110 students participated in the study. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed with the aid of the SPSS statistical software package version 21. Qualitative data were analysed using content analysis method and presented through verbatim quotations of the respondents. The study found that tasks related to passing examinations were allocated more time and those deemed to not be directly important in passing examinations were not considered important. It is concluded that examination-focused learning played a crucial role on determining time spent on tasks. Recommendations were made.

Keywords: Students, Academic work, Engagement, Learning outcomes, Quality education

1. Introduction and Background

Research in higher education teaching and learning has witnessed student engagement as a buzz word (Krause, 2005; Ndudzo, 2013). Other scholars argue that the quality of one's qualification obtained in a university is dependent on the extent to which the individual was academically engaged in the studies. Christenson, Stout and Pohl (2012) argue that students should actively participate in academic activities in order to achieve learning outcomes.

Lysne, Miller and Eitel (2013) explain that student engagement is a term that refers to time, energy and resources students spend on activities designed to enhance learning. Hu and McComick (2012) explain that the concept of student engagement originates from Astin's theory of involvement and the quality of effort exerted by students. Astin's 1984 theory identifies students' involvement in academia, campus life, organisational and faculty activities as of grave importance to their educational achievement (Price & Baker, 2012). The theory focuses on behaviours in which students engage in traditional forms of academic, social and academic experiences. It focuses largely on the physical behaviours in which students participate in campus life and interact with faculty and peers as they engage in activities like competitions, performances and studying (Price & Baker, 2012). Astin argues that the quality and quantity of students' involvement is directly related to the developmental growth of their experiences (Price & Baker, 2012).

Student engagement is a critical endeavour which every educator must strive to achieve. Lysne et al (2013) are of the view that student engagement is crucial in capturing student interest to ensure that learning occurs. Hu & McCormick